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Writing Southern theory from the Global North. Notes on informality and regulation

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AFTERWORD

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by Marco Cremaschi and Laura Lieto

Introduction

Marc Augé contrasts the ville-monde – an urban space where social, ethnic, cultural, and economic differences become apparent and visible – to the world city of global businessmen, platform tourists, and star architects. In the ville-monde «misery and opulence rub each other»[1]. As many other ville-monde, Naples and Rome feature a complex and layered ecology, strongly affected by non-capitalist relationships of solidarity, tolerance and self-provisioning shaping places and communities; they cannot be regarded as marginal or subaltern cities, and yet they are not compliant with dominant urban models.

The ville-monde is growing increasingly heterogeneous and mixed, weakly regulated and unproductive according to mainstream, top-tier standards. The cases of Rome and Naples confirm this trend of increasing heterogeneity at all levels: the mingling of multiple narratives concerning cycles of economic reprise and decline; the clashing interplay of political discourse and policy issues; the inefficient overlapping of the responsibilities of national and local government; the instability of all of these processes over time. This noticeable incoherence has always caused interpretative problems for both historians and social scientists that investigated how economic and political institu-

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[1] M. Augé, *La Vie En Double. Ethnologie, Voyage, Écriture*, Paris, Payot, 2011.

tions shape the socio-material process of city building, and how actors and agents from all sectors and scales form around different issues and agendas.

Urban scholars have often studied both cities as a complex assemblage of institutions, actors, and social organizations that combine divergent economic models, cultures, and rationalities within a highly informal organization of both economic and societal processes.

The issue is often how to make sense of seemingly dysfunctional redundancies. Standard urban scholarship tends to adopt a presumed normal (Western) model, and to describe informality, inequality, and corruption as dysfunctions. All these aspects represent slack in the system, materially consistent but theoretically irrelevant.

A neo-Marxist critique has successfully overturned this view. Since the 1970s, urban political economy has challenged the legacy of the Chicago School, addressing two main issues in particular: *a*) decision-makers and economic powers jointly produce land as a commodity, which by definition involves both state and market institutions; *b*) territorial scales affect the action of both institutions and economic powers. Scholars have therefore increasingly considered not only actors but also external factors such as hazards, shocks, and political turbulence displaying different magnitudes and scales.

Eventually, the perspective concerning informalities and exceptions has been overturned: the dark side of cities appear as the actual normative standard[2] as opposed to the pathological «endpoint of modernity»[3]. For instance, the slum is not a generic «dysfunctional space» but the fearful accomplishment of modernization.

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[2] O. Yiftachel, *Critical Theory and Gray Space. Mobilization of the Colonized*, in «City», vol. 13, nn. 2-3, 2009, pp. 240-256.

[3] V. Rao, *Slum as Theory: The South/Asian City and Globalization*, in «International Journal of Urban and Regional Research», vol. 30, 2006, pp. 225-232.

Reconsidering theory-making has been a recent concern for some scholars in the area of urban studies. Repositioning requires «an expansive understanding» of these cities[4]: overwhelming generalizations fail to account for the increasing diversity of cities' spatial organization. At stake is the capacity to explain not only the functional coherence but also the juxtaposition and coexistence of diverse arrangements, the assemblage of different orders, and temporalities. At first we make a descriptive use of assemblage[5] to emphasize the composite, apparently incoherent yet historically meaningful state of a collection of different practices and things.

Scholars influenced by postcolonial concerns[6] recently advanced similar claims. This calls for a theoretical repositioning dealing with a plurality of different Souths, the old ones, which have never been entirely understood within the «modern» white, protestant, imperialist condition; and the new ones suspended between colonialism and dependent developmentalism. This theoretical shift also seems to capture distinctive features of cities from a Southern European perspective (expanding on the noteworthy contribution by Chakrabarty[7]).

Notoriously, Mediterranean cities escaped the fate of Fordism and somehow preserved traditional features against the modernist imperative of neglecting the past. Oddly enough, postmodernism reassessed some of the spatial and social features that modernism condemned as regressive[8] as

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4 *Ibidem.*

5 S. Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008.

6 A. Roy, *The 21st-Century Metropolis: New Geographies of Theory*, in «Regional Studies», vol. 43, n. 6, 2009, pp. 819-830.

7 D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009.

8 L. Leontidou, *Postmodernism and the City: Mediterranean Versions*, in «Urban Studies», vol. 30, n. 6, 1993, pp. 949-965; S. Annunziata, *Oltre la Gentrification*, in A. Lanzani and S. Moroni (eds.), *Città e azione pubblica, riformismo al plurale*, Roma, Carocci, 2007.

key competitive tenets. Southern Europe has been sometimes explored as a suspended theoretical entity between North and South[9].

We suggest that urban theories neglect the views of urban scholars from the Mediterranean countries and the Global South[10] equally. On the contrary, some analogies are worth exploring. Scholarly research on Mediterranean cities increasingly deals with informality and acknowledges the structural role it plays in the processes of economic and urban development[11].

The previous waves of research focused on the economy and informal relations, showing the importance of activities and relationships regulated neither by the state nor by the market. Starting from here, it is possible to consider «a multidimensional "continuum" between more formal and more informal neighbourhoods»[12]. Following this approach, we focus on the «discrepancy between the regulative system and its implementation».

Informal norms are part of the societal and political evolution of certain social groups on the margins of industrial development, although different degrees of informality in both political and economic relations are also relevant in dominant capitalist systems. In Western Mediterranean cities, informality has been a key element in the local policymaking. Far from disappearing in urban societies, informal builders are multiplying and

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[9] J. Allen, J. Barlow, J. Leal, T. Maloutas and L. Padovani, *Housing and Welfare in Southern Europe*, vol. 16, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2008.

[10] S. Parnell and J. Robinson, *(Re) Theorizing Cities from the Global South: Looking Beyond Neoliberalism*, in «Urban Geography», vol. 33, n. 4, 2012, pp. 593-617.

[11] M. Cremaschi, *L'abusivismo meridionale: realtà e rappresentazione*, in «Meridiana», vol. 9, 1990, pp. 127-153; M. Cremaschi, *La régularisation des «borgate» de Rome: solidarité banlieusarde ou individualisme propriétaire?*, in A. Bourdin, M. Casteigts and J. Idt, *Mutations sociétales et évolutions de l'action publique urbaine*, Paris, PUCA-La Decouverte, 2020; L. Lieto, *Place as Trading Zone*, in A. Balducci and R. Mäntysalo (eds.), *Urban Planning as Trading Zone*, Dordrecht, Springer, 2013, pp. 143-157; L. Lieto, *Things, Rules and Politics. Blurring the Boundaries Between Formality and Informality*, in L. Lieto and R. Beauregard (eds.), *Planning for a Material World*, London-New York, Routledge, 2016, pp. 26-41.

[12] U. Altrock, *Conceptualising Informality: Some Thoughts on the Way Towards Generalisation*, in C. McFarlane and M. Waibel (eds.), *Urban Informalities: Reflections on the Formal and the Informal*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2012, pp. 171-193, 187.

diversifying[13]. As the conflicting nature of the informal fades (at least in part), they assume more cultural connotations and identities that cannot be equated with class conflict and differentiated lifestyles. Among other things, a resolutely conservative identity and communitarian components have gained ground.

Informal housing and politics in Rome

Urban scholars often cite Rome as an exception among models of contemporary urbanization[14]. The urban development of Rome is striking for one apparent contradiction: though a leading, modern, and comparatively affluent European capital, it is also a city of enduring informal developments.

Informal housing developments in Rome spread after WW1 during an age of unparalleled demographic pressure and by 1962 already accounted for half a million illegal dwellings. Selected as the capital of Italy in 1871, the city reached one million inhabitants in the 1930s, its population doubled for the first time after the WW2 and reached three million by the mid-1980s (including the metropolitan belt[15]). During the following twenty years, the informal sector accounted for about 40% of the entire housing production[16].

Hausmaniann-like renovation works started at the end of the XIXth century; the Fascist regime pursued the same aim and targeted the working-class inhabitants of the historic centre for displacement. The government forced the urban proletariat to relocate to «temporary neighbourhoods» on

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13 C. Mcfarlane, *Rethinking Informality: Politics, Crisis, and the City*, in «Planning Theory & Practice», vol. 13, n. 1, 2012, pp. 89-108; A. Loukaitou-Sideris and V. Mukhija, *Reading the Informal City: Why and How to Deepen Planners' Understanding of Informality*, in «Journal of Planning Education and Research», vol. 35, n. 4, 2015, pp. 444-454.

14 P. Perulli, *The Urban Contract: Community, Governance and Capitalism*, London, Routledge, 2016.

15 L. Benevolo, *Roma dal 1870 al 1990*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1992.

16 M. Cremaschi, *L'abusivismo Meridionale…*, cit.

the rural fringes of the city not yet regulated by plans and directives. Explicit support of informal self-construction loosened the sometimes the authoritarian ban: these outer settlements, neither proper urban neighbourhoods nor rural villages, took the name of «Borgate» (plural, for townships).

Beyond these «official» *Borgate*, transient and small shack settlements mushroomed in fringe areas closer to the city centre: for instance, built along the ancient Roman aqueducts. Like slums everywhere, poor immigrants built shacks by recycling building materials, resisting local government and police pressure to demolish, and eventually consolidating into stable neighbourhoods.

Increasingly after WW2, immigrants built «formal» houses on plots of land illegally subdivided by landowners, mostly in the outer urban ring. The housing shortage, poverty, and manual abilities of inhabitants (often construction workers themselves) are among the usual explanatory factors[17]. Urban regulation toughened starting 1967. Informal building and non-compliance continued, however, and some of the middle classes accessed informality to achieve homeownership and comfort cheaply. Still informal (or illegally built) developments, yet no longer «poor».

Urban scholars scrutinized Rome for a long time trying to understand this surprising combination of formal and informal sectors. Social history and cultural study, as well as the literary and cinematic movement of Neorealism, contributed to this effort with a «heavy» ethnographic account of the peripheral neighbourhoods of a «stupendous yet miserable city»[18]. A dense intellectual interpretation (and a Gramscian understanding) on the part of historians produced a few theoretical attempts to understand Rome's urban condition, profoundly influencing social science debates. On one side, sociologists mostly developed the cultural aspects

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[17] *Ibidem.*

[18] J.D. Rhodes, *Stupendous, Miserable City: Pasolini's Rome*, Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press, 2007.

of marginalization, borrowing the Dickensian image of the «two cities»[19]: urban growth places classes, geographies, and cultures in opposition to each other: in the city centre, the rentier bourgeoisie, and the bureaucrats; in the suburbs, the workers and above all the precarious sub-proletariat omitted from the capitalist model. On the other, an emerging neo-Marxist critique identified a coalition of builders' interests that supported the right-wing majority as the driving force of postwar urban development and conceptualized the Roman *Borgata* as the urban alternative to the industrial conflict[20].

As the cradle of the first urban protest movements, the *Borgata*, in turn, influenced the trajectory of left-wing parties. It is also possible to recognize in Rome the anticipation of Lefebvre's «right to the city». Lefebvre often visited the city and the communist leaders. In the post-war years, Rome was not an industrial city: public companies, urban facilities, or building firms provided most of the jobs. Activists and social researchers jointly turned to the urban dimension to understand social relations: the city, not the factory, transformed the masses into a people. More assertive in the 1950s, at the time of the «discovery» of daily life and the first critical revision of Marxism, collective mobilizations became more radical from the 1970s onwards.

Later on, the discussion of the relationship between urban informality and the lagging modernization will help to broaden this perspective. Comparison with developing countries, in particular, allows us to understand the similarities and differences between Rome and the «global slum»[21], with similarities in terms of the trajectory of urban development, but differences in income levels and the proximity between «abusivismo» and the formal sector. Eventually, a more radical interpretation emphasized the autonomy of social practices, *à la* Michel de Certeau, even if the interweaving of prac-

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[19] F. Ferrarotti, *Roma da capitale a periferia*, Bari, Laterza, 1970.
[20] G. Berlinguer and P. Della Seta, *Borgate di Roma*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1960-1976.
[21] A. Clementi and F. Perego, *La metropoli «spontanea». Il caso di Roma*, Bari, Di Donato, 1983.

tices in the political devices, which play the role of mediator in relation to the norms, is recognized[22].

Besides, informal developments pressured planners and policy-makers to adopt progressive measures and partially to innovate.

First, plans had to confront the sociological interpretation of the work-ing-class suburbs, and the urban struggles: successive waves of regulariza-tion policies are proof of a continuous and fruitful exchange[23]. Left wing and parish activists and a large neighbourhood coalition claimed more social housing, schools, gardens, and public transport. The «progressive» regime set up in the mid-1970s by a left-wing government facilitated the dialogue between planners, activists, and researchers.

Secondly, innovative instruments were conceived and implemented. Ur-ban plans recognized the presence of informal buildings (in 1962, 1983, and 2009) *ex-post*, detailing an urban renewal plan for each zone and promoting the upgrading of sanitation, facilities, and public space. Urban planning lent the models (plan, projects, and calls for tenders) whose implementa-tion required a long time, however, until the end of the 1990s. The aim was to control urban production in reverse, a sort of «backward planning».

Finally, the evolution of the regulatory mechanisms in the light of a grow-ing individualization of aspirations and ways of doing things as well as of ideological models of public action[24]. National laws legalized ownership, but delays and limited public investments hampered the upgrading pro-gram. In the meantime, the post-war economic boom had brought about a

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[22] P.L. Crosta, *Anomalia e innovazione: come si coniugano nelle politiche pubbliche e private di produzione del territorio*, in «Archivio di studi urbani e regionali», vol. 17, 1983; A. Clementi and F. Perego, *La metropoli «spontanea»*…, cit.

[23] A. Coppola, *Esclusione sociale, movimenti urbani e poteri locali. 1945-89. Il caso delle borgate romane*, in M. Cremaschi, *Tracce di Quartieri. Il legame sociale nella città che cambia*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2008.

[24] A. Coppola, *Inganni e fallimenti della retorica del recupero. Interpretazioni critiche delle politiche dell'a-busivismo a Roma*, in M. Carta and P. La Greca (eds.), *Cambiamenti dell'urbanistica. Responsabilità e stru-menti al servizio del paese*, Roma, Donzelli, 2017.

new sense of wellbeing and optimism. Even more importantly, the political space restructured along with the patterns of informal organization.

In recent years, the commitment toward collective good declined while claims for individual wellbeing grew, affecting the nature of policies. From the 1990s, this objective shifted to integrate the investment capacity of informal builders in a joint program with the local government, encouraging private developments through land bonuses[25]. Linking legalization and household investments led increasingly to the depoliticization of the regulatory process. This non-regulation, or regulation dictated by «privatized» interests[26], became the reference for urban strategies.

The long history of Rome addressing informal housing consolidates a few approaches that were consistent with a parallel tackling of illegality and crime:

– a normative stance, where the planners and policy-makers defend a system of public rules and an abstract notion of the public interest. Consequently, they assume that legality consists of conduct that complies with rules. Legal regulation is therefore appreciated as the prime prerequisite for a social system to function, even though informality tends to contrast practical behaviour with abstract norms;
– a sociological approach, where solidarity and collective values compensate for individual greed and illegality in a sort of zero-sum game. Social regulations are an important prior condition for development, as shown among others by A. Sen. If the effect of poor regulation is evident in the processes of economic development; its effect on social development is even more incisive. Confidence, a certain degree of order, the stability of expectations, and certainty of the rules are components of social regula-

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[25] H. De Soto, *The Mystery of Capital*, London, Basic Books, 2000.
[26] E. Altavilla and B. Pizzo, *Embedding Illegality, or When the Illegal Becomes Licit: Planning Cases and Urban Transformations in Rome*, in F. Chiodelli, T. Hall and R. Hudson (eds.), *The Illicit and Illegal in Regional and Urban Governance and Development: Corrupt Places*, London, Routledge, 2017.

tions as important as the legal and juridical system. Social regulations are decisive components of a locality's performance[27];

– an institutional-historicist approach, that considers illegal conduct in relation to the capacity of sanction by institutional agents. This delves into an implicit principal-agent model, for which informal actors progressively encroach upon markets and institutions. In this vein, critical scholars have pointed to the contradictory dualism of state policies: the resort to authoritarian repression combined to the promotion of «proprietary individualism»[28]. Form this point of view, the legitimacy of regulation originates in political strategy.

We may agree that legal, social, and political regulation form a sort of triangle. To be able to work, a legal system requires strong and effective social regulation, without which it would be a paper castle. Moreover, public policies must underpin the processes of social regulation which are in difficulty and which instead are the prerequisite of the reassertion of legality.

In Rome, as well as in other Italian regions, trials have disclosed connections between informal practices and illegal activities, in particular the mafia. The construction industry and the management of the cement industry has often been the hinge that connects informal urbanization to the mafia. The link is rarely direct, however; yet, the lack of effective regulation benefits both. More precisely, criminal organizations have produced a vicious circle in their favour. By eroding social regulation, they hinder «the development of attitudes marked by market acquisitiveness […] and discourage... productive investments»[29]. Destroying social regulation, crime organizations consolidate a certain connivance to the detriment of legal competitors. In this way, the lack of confidence spreads incrementally and penalizes compliant conduct in a vicious circle.

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[27] C. Donolo, *Disordine. L'economia criminale e le strategie della sfiducia*, Roma, Donzelli, 2001.

[28] P. Barcellona, *L'individualismo proprietario*, Torino, Boringhieri, 1987.

[29] R. Catanzaro, *Il delitto come impresa: storia sociale della mafia*, Padova, Liviana, 1988, p. 207.

On the other hand, without social regulation, an abstract legal system cannot take effect. Lack of confidence increases the production of «dysregulation»[30], which is of a contradictory «partial order», the average result of which is less satisfactory for the contracting parties, and progressively more insidious. Dysregulation is a hypertrophic characteristic of legal systems that crime organizations exploit to strengthen their power as intermediaries. Illegal interests permeate these situations through twofold pressure: at the public level through their accomplices; and at an illegal level by having recourse to threats and intimidation.

Naples. Informal housing as gray space

As the biggest city of Southern Italy, Naples embodies and reinforces, for some reasons, the characteristic under-development so familiar in post-colonial studies addressing economic marginality, lack of social capital and poverty as consequences of colonial regimes. Although nothing like a colonial regime was ever established in recent history (throughout its millennial history, though, Naples has been dominated by several foreign powers, leaving their traces in the layered urban fabric of its historic centre), Naples reveals a few, structural traits more similar to large urban formations in the Global South than cities in the Global North.

From major target of state-led industrial policies after WWII to a «renaissance» city in the early 1990's struggling with massive industrial decline and trying urban regeneration led by a new municipal leadership with very uncertain results[31], Naples today is an urban region in which interesting dynamics of innovation and investment deal with global restructuring processes without fully relying on a rich territorial capital – manufacturing skills, cultures, business and social organizations, cultural heritage, and landscape[32]. Re-

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[30] C. Donolo, *Disordine. L'economia criminale...*, cit.

[31] A. Belli (ed.), *Competenze in azione: governo del territorio, innovazione e sviluppo metropolitano a Napoli*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2017.

[32] P. Frascani, *Napoli. Viaggio nella città reale*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2017; M. D'Antonio (ed.), *Napoli oltre la crisi*, Napoli, Guida Editori, 2016.

sponsible for that are the low capacity of political regulation and the structural weakness of local administration[33], while a widespread informality in many economic sectors (starting with international tourism, at its highest right before the COVID-19 lockdown) largely compensates this lack of governmentality.

The majority of studies on the present socio-economic condition of Naples clearly converge on various forms of a state shrinking after decades of publicly funded industrialization and intensive public housing programs (especially after the massive earthquake in 1980).

While new developments strive to stabilize in a context that official markets do not consider as reliable and secure as continental cities, informality occupies spaces and opportunities left behind or simply unattended by formal policies, ranging from illegal organizations to practices of self-provided welfare. In such a process, new subjectivities emerge and expand at a distance from the state orbit, sometimes compensating for its absence (as in the case of solidarity networks, a strong feature of Naples' social capital), sometimes subverting social order and economic relations with violence and intimidation (camorra).

That is the case of two widespread forms of informality in Naples which both deal with housing: one concerns public housing estates, and the other short-term rental homes for platform tourism. These two cases are being developed in two different research projects – a EU funded Hera JRP on Public Housing and Public Space (PuSH project), and a National Interest Research Project on platform capitalism (Short Term City project).

As for public housing, the focus is on Naples' Eastern periphery, where massive public housing projects have been established after the huge earthquake in 1980.

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[33] A. Belli (ed.), *Competenze in azione…*, cit.

From their inception, these neighbourhoods have seen a concentration of low-income tenants and urban poor, featuring high levels of unemployment and school dropouts, illegal squatting, and crime-related issues. Likewise, their quite rigid modernist design, based on a car-oriented urban model and the sharp distinction between public and private space, has proved unsuitable for families – especially early tenants who moved in when the estates were completed in mid-1990s – coming from Naples' historic centre to relocate in the outskirts. These people were used to sharing a street culture that typically blurs the boundary between public and private and were forced to adapt to a completely different way of life and estranged material environment.

Once a fertile farmland, the East of Naples has been transformed, with the advent of public housing, into a large state-led bedroom community. The new estates have been dropped down in a former rural community and never achieved the kind of functional and social integration that makes a city worthy of such a name.

After almost three decades, the physical condition of these neighborhoods is quite precarious: the City, which is the owner of both buildings and open spaces, should manage the estates and take care of public services (waste, transport, maintenance), but – given the financial distress of the local administration – most of these tasks are left largely unattended.

Peculiarly, some of the neighborhoods are punctuated with ruins – mostly dilapidated public buildings and playgrounds. Ruination and decay are not necessarily a matter of vandalization and violence by the local population, but often the leftovers of public projects that have never been realized or completed – this is what we call the traces of state withdrawals. The main example is one of the estates in Eastern Naples, Lotto O, where the partial demolition of the neighborhood's main school complex to build a new socio-educational facility, that the Municipality has never delivered, left behind an impressive form of discarded material, exposed to all kinds of irregular and illegal uses.

Under such pressure, the need for quality public spaces often leads to «gray spaces» of action and decision-making in which informality and formality become entangled[34]. Interesting forms of publicness arise and resist the entropic pull of distrust and segregation – such as community clubs in former garages, safe playgrounds around religious icons, gathering points in the transitional spaces between private and public property – in places that were not meant, at least in the formal design, to function as such. People reinforce their ties of trust and bring about their practical creativity to create (even temporarily) spaces where things can be collectively managed. At the same time, public authorities «turn a blind eye» to irregularities and anomalies and often collaborate to reach formal arrangements for space management that are not perfectly working «by the book» but are specifically designed to meet specific demands and organizational arrangements.

The second case deals with informal alterations to apartment buildings in Naples' historic centre due to the massive flow of Airbnb tourists. Unlike the projects example, here gray spacing deals with both the inability and political reluctance of formal institutions to provide regulatory framework to effectively address a novel process of urban transformation. The multiplication of individual actions on properties, both in terms of fast turnovers of users and material reorganization, is a wide-spreading process in Naples since the Airbnb boom began in 2015. This process is scarcely regulated, and for two main reasons: one concerns the high extractive capacity of properties that perform quite badly on the traditional real estate market, but extremely well on the tourist sharing economy; the other concerns the pressure of touristification in terms of the rapid adaptation of properties to a constantly growing tourist demand (until the COVID-19 lockdown started in early March, of course). Both reasons reflect the strong consensus, within homeowners and extensively the local business community gravitating around Airbnb tourism as a novel and broadly accessible economic

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[34] C. Mcfarlane, *Rethinking Informality: Politics, Crisis, and the City*, in «Planning Theory & Practice», vol. 13, n. 1, 2012, pp. 89-108.

opportunity in a context, as mentioned above, that is constantly striving against economic marginality. From this perspective, a certain amount of laissez-faire on the part of local government was to be expected: apart from the city earning tax from each platform transaction, no other revenues have been coming in from the short-term rental economy.

Until the COVID-19 lockdown was enforced in early March 2020, we have surveyed a number of short-term apartments in which material alterations – even minor in extent – reflect a broader adaptation of the urban fabric to effectively accommodate a growing number of temporary homes. Among the most common alterations is the subdivision of large apartments, the construction of mezzanines, and attic refurbishments, to provide a variety of square footage and accommodation possibilities to meet the demands of an ever-growing flow of tourists. Smaller units, obtained from former large apartments, are often provided with mezzanines to accommodate extra functions; likewise, attics, once used as storage spaces, are transformed into studios.

All these alterations are deeply embedded in the fabric of the historic centre, extensively altered over the centuries as buildings and open spaces have adapted to changing economic, political, and demographic conditions. This building culture is deeply rooted in the city, and blends with a widespread informality, especially in the neighborhoods of the historic centre, where diverse groups – residents, migrants, tourists, students, business people – meet up, adapt and overcome the practical challenges of living with physical arrangements that typically originated for purposes and populations no longer on the scene[35]. To handle the discontinuity are rituals, stories, habits, and affective atmospheres that confront a larger order of social structures and – often defunct – notions of procedures and ways of life. This peculiar building culture is perfectly pairing the transformation of the housing stock in the city centre related to the impressive spread of Airbnb.

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[35] L. Lieto, *Things, Rules and Politics…*, cit.

The normativity of the sharing economy co-exists with different rules partly benefiting from a still broadly unregulated framework, and partly clashing with different normative orders, especially in the field of planning.

All the adaptations and alterations of short-rental apartments are regulated by the city's master plan («Piano Regolatore Generale») and the building code, which set the rules and procedures by which they can be formally approved by the planning commission. Apartment subdivisions and attic transformations are allowed only if normative requirements are met, both in terms of zoning norms and building rules and standards. These norms reflect the planners' idea of preservation of the material and cultural heritage of the city: artifacts can be transformed according to principles of typological coherency and respect for historical distributive patterns both at the individual building and the urban scale[36].

The sharing economy of Airbnb, with its neoliberal emphasis on flexibility and on-demand life style, is a fast and open process: money transactions do not require much mediation or red-tape; the tourist flow has been mostly constant over the last few years, and those who profit from sharing economy needed to adapt their properties as fast as letting opportunities have been coming their way.

In many apartment subdivisions and attic transformations, planning rules have often been ignored, while more compelling rules took over. Urban informality, in this case, is not just about local culture or self-provisioning strategies typical of a Southern context, but becomes an integral and growing part of a global process that becomes entangled in specific socio-material assemblies.

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[36] L. Lieto, *Immagini dello spazio urbano*, in A. Belli (ed.), *Non è così facile. Politiche urbane a Napoli a cavallo del secolo*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2007, pp. 229-266.

Conclusion

Writing *Southern theory* from the Global North, as the examples in the paper suggest, is about the critical pluralization of divisive categories (North/South; colonial/subaltern) that nurtured post-colonial studies in the first place, especially in planning. The classic critique of Anglo-American planning as a strategy for the depoliticization and domination of subaltern contexts, when projected onto historical formations like Rome or Naples, does not apply. Featuring those cities as constituent forms of urbanization, however, we can usefully reposition and rework the critical charge of that binary opposition within the embedded contradiction of state policies and widespread informalities.

Regulation is key to performing this reworking and repositioning, as the field where contradictions and conflicts come more vividly to the surface and become questionable.

The principal lesson taught by Rome and Naples is that informality is a form of survival and a strategy; a cultural process and a practice of resistance. Never separated from sources of formal authority devising informality as such – there is no such thing as a sharp formal/informal divide – all anomalies, exceptions, irregularities in the city can be rubricated under a new political geography of «gray spaces» in which informalities rise and coexist with new forms of domination and oppressive relations largely exceeding state powers[37]. The paradox already foregrounded in Southern contexts – and that also applies to Naples and Rome – is that the state, initiating gray spacing as a control strategy, ends up being challenged by this very process: energies, innovations, as well as insurgent or illegal powers, are being channeled into alternative projects, out of policy and regulatory frameworks provided by formal institutions.

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[37] O. Yiftachel, *Critical Theory and Gray Space. Mobilization of the Colonized*, in «City», vol. 13, nn. 2-3, 2009, pp. 240-256.

The second, is that materiality matters in how informality unfolds both as a strategy and a remedy to collective problems that are left unaddressed by formal institutions. The vibrant consistency of buildings and public spaces, the accordances of material artifacts which often exceed the formal script of design and planning, provide ground for new socio-material arrangements that challenge the formal order of planning norms and still comply with other normative orders – from embedded cultures to unwritten social norms. Informal socio-material arrangements are never separated from the specific material consistency of places, and this consistency can be conducive of both economic hardship and social cohesion[38].

A third distinctive element is that informality can be a response to processes of slow violence. In a spiraling process of exclusion and segregation, forms of slow violence, like the «state withdrawals» outlined in the Naples' public housing case, at times intensify the hostility and distrust of the «public» in vulnerable communities; at times, they trigger informal practices of practical resistance and social innovation. These withdrawals result in a peculiar form of «slow violence» – a concept coined by post-colonial scholars to address processes of impoverishment and ruination slowly relapsing long after colonial regimes have been lifted[39]. Translated into a non-colonial context, slow violence grows gradually but incessantly over time due to a plurality of ecological and social vulnerabilities that, in contrast to sudden shocks resulting from natural hazards or man-made outbursts of violence, converge after a long-term period, producing chronic degradation[40]. Such degradation mostly affects public spaces and «all things public», meaning all kinds of spatiality in which people get together in safe and comfortable environments to overtly deal with their differences and common concerns. Vandalized playgrounds, abandoned common areas infested with weeds, debris, and scrap, squalid passages with no electric lighting, and perenni-

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[38] C. Mcfarlane, *Rethinking Informality...*, cit.

[39] R. Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2011; A.M. Stoler (ed.), *Imperial Debris. On Ruins and Ruination*, Durham-London, Duke University Press, 2013.

[40] R. Nixon, *Slow Violence...*, cit.

ally out-of-order elevators are common in the slow violence landscape of these public housing estates.

The final point concerns the link between informal and criminal economy. There is no direct derivation between informality and crime. Sectors of the economy are always involved in the growth of the informal. Strong economic interests often infect informal activities. The lack of robust regulations strengthens the link between informal practices and sectors of the illegal economy. In particular, this link is strengthened when the balance between legal, social, and political regulation is loosened. From a Southern perspective, legality appears as a major policy failure in the two cases. Policies followed the Northern approach of either enforcing control of deregulating. The Southern view has shone a light on the interplay between distinct sets of legal, social, and political regulation that proved more fertile in the understanding of urban informality.

To conclude, although the cases of Rome and Naples are far from being representative of the whole country, the arguments and ideas provided in the paper stress the importance, in the «Southern critical theory» agenda, to take into consideration more nuanced and contradictory cases in which the very notion of a South becomes pluralized and blurring. The two Italian cities accounted for here represent a region of the world rising as a «third player» in the North-South historical formation, reflecting and processing contradictions and inequalities of the mainstream, continental Europe's urbanization of capital without necessarily fitting the socio-spatial order of subaltern contexts of colonial domination.

We believe that, from these contexts – provided with a distinctive theoretical and critical potential and standing somehow in between more extreme urban conditions – a new agenda critically engaging with the «Souths» of the world can be propelled and revised according to new problems and demands.

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