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# THE RESILIENCE OF SMALL INDUSTRIAL CITIES: REFLECTIONS ON THREE EUROPEAN CASE STUDIES

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## Abstract

In the current global economic and cultural context, large cities play an increasingly significant role, having become the main centres of knowledge and creative activities in developed countries and the greatest concentration of production and services in developing ones. Focusing on the more developed countries, several studies (Sassen, 1991; Glaeser, 2012) confirm the growing attraction ability of metropolitan areas; as a consequence, small cities located in the periphery often experience marginalization processes and identity crisis. However, despite these complex trends, there has been, especially in Europe, a renewed interest in "local" dimension and in development models that emphasize the small size and a closer relationship between economy and territory. Along this direction, small cities can find a new centrality in the socio-economic discourse, for example in terms of sustainable development, quality of life, social capital, natural and cultural resources, connection with larger cities (Knox and Mayer, 2009; Van Heur and Lorentzen, 2012).

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on this issue, especially on small cities characterized by a history of strong industrial specialization, analysing different reactions towards economic changes and different abilities in defining new development models, in continuity or alternative to their economic and social history. This paper also tries to contribute to the analysis of these questions by adopting the concept of resilience as the main analytical tool, since it seems more appropriate than other notions (e.g. competitiveness, creative cities, cultural economy, embeddedness etc.) to analyse the current transformation of small cities.

Following the evolutionary approach, resilience is here defined as the dynamic capacity of a system to react to events and changes, to emphasize its distinctive resources (economic, social, cultural, environmental) and promote new development trajectories (Martin, 2012; Pike *et al.*, 2010), also with the contribution of local actors and institutions (Boschma, 2015).

This definition of urban resilience has led to the construction of an analytical system aimed at the interpretation of the development of small cities and their reactions to internal and external changes. More precisely, four steps are identified: a) the *history analysis*, that is the longitudinal analysis and the reconstruction of the development phases of the city, which may have determined specific urban characterizations and influenced the future trajectories;

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b) the *event analysis*, that is, the identification of some events and some "fractal" elements, that caused the destabilization of the system and the transition from one trajectory to another; c) the *contextual analysis*, that is, the analysis of tangible and intangible factors, which have contributed to the dynamic ability to resist the decline of the system, to restructure itself and to develop new projects and new narratives for local development; d) the *institutional analysis*, that is the recognition of the role of local actors and institutions, which are the protagonists and main interpreters of development dynamics for local economies and, in particular, for those of the small cities.

This methodology of analysis has been applied to small cities with a significant industrial past, that are facing production and identity crises and have been rethinking their development models in recent years. In particular, the paper examines three case studies: 1. Sochaux-Montbéliard, in Eastern France, the historical city of Peugeot, where the industrial activity continues to be relevant to the local economy; here, the city is trying to build a new relationship with the big company and to define other sustainable development projects; 2. Ivrea, located in North-Western Italy, developed around the Olivetti company, after the decline of the large company, is moving towards a development path which include local industrial heritage, high-tech activities, tourism and new connections with Turin; 3. Pontedera, in Central Italy, the city of the famous Vespa and Piaggio, is answering to job cuts and to productive downsizing through the insertion of new cultural and technological contents in the old industrial spaces.

These case studies show different routes, solutions and strategies that represent useful stimuli for the scientific and political debate on the subject.

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