

Step by Step

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The process of the socio-urban restructuring of the historical centre of Naples went through a first phase at the beginning of the 90s. The objective was and still is to bring the city into the European norms which envisage the displacement of the most marginal categories of the population from the historical centres to the periphery in great part made up of suburban dormitories. The poor, immigrants and marginalized are an obstacle to the creation of a city on display and attracting tourists, and thus money, and that becomes the headquarters of institutions, companies, etc. In short a place emptied of all pre-existing historical and cultural heritage, a place under huge surveillance and militarised where capital can proliferate and expand with the least possible obstacles.

In Naples this transformation is going much slower than in the rest of Italy and Europe because of the heavy involvement of criminal organisations in the territory of the city and the massive presence of that social marginality that lives at the limits, sometimes largely crossed over, of legality, but its advance seems relentless. The crucial years during which the advance towards a massive “gentrification” took a decisive turn were 1993 and 1994.

During the first, Antonio Bassolino was elected the Mayor of Naples, who, in the middle of the *Mani pulite* operation [“clean hands” – huge investigation into corruption at the highest levels of the Italian society – triggered the implosion of the main political parties], represented the man of change, who would “step-by-step” give new life to the so-called “Neapolitan renaissance”. The second was the year of the notorious G7.

The programme of the Mayor at the time was mainly based on the revalorisation of the historical centre, with all its adverse consequences. It was notably possible thanks to funding, spread out here and there, that the then-government had scheduled for the organising of the international meeting of the “great 7 of the world”.

The squares would be turned again into ancient marvels free from cars and street vendors, the historical buildings would be restored, the public transport reorganised and strengthened and the streets invaded by all sorts of uniforms for the policing imposed by capital. That year the pillars were build for the project that would make Naples a destination for hordes of tourists attracted by the beauty of the place, which, over the course of years, would radically change the social and cultural structure of the city.

The objective has been fully reached; today we find ourselves in a situation where whole buildings are used as Bed&Breakfast at the expense of those who are looking for accommodations

for a decent price, where small shops are disappearing replaced by supermarkets, bars, pizzerias, fast-food, pastry and ice-cream shops, restaurants, all these places where tourists can satisfy one of their primary needs: to stuff themselves. Where hundreds of cameras control even the most remote spots of all the neighbourhoods of the city. Where thousands of tourists “graze” in the city streets preventing the locals of moving around even on foot. Where the forces of order have increased exponentially, including a massive presence of soldiers armed to the teeth, posted to places considered key points. And where public services (transport, health, etc.) have reached again the nightmare levels of the 70s.

It goes without saying that the rise of rents, the generalised lack of comfort, the always more restricted and militarised social spaces will displace a considerable amount of people away from the city centre. It seems evident that we are living (or maybe it is more correct to say surviving) in a place that in a troubling way resembles a maximum security prison, in a sterile and empty place where any social, non-conforming political expression is impeded and repressed by force.

In this context of progressive transformation the cultural, artistic and even political associations have been integrated, and have played a dominant role in almost all Italian cities. They represent a real vanguard on the issue of regeneration (in a direction that the author of this text considers authoritarian) of degraded neighbourhoods, of dilapidated and chiefly central zones. That is, of all those places that don’t produce a profit and where the established order scarcely takes root. They start with the micro to arrive at the macro: they open an alternative bar to which soon dozens are added, they organise tours of local cultural interest, they invite some sort-of-famous artist to give a touch of colour to a place otherwise considered shabby, they clean up some parks, they demand to install some new lampposts and the cards have been played. Under the pretext of avoiding degradation and abandonment another part of the city is submitted to the logic of control and economical exploitation.

It is evident that the realising of this outcome has also and above all been made possible thanks to a difficult and cumbersome social pacification that cannot only happen “with the force of arms”. Those in power have understood that the “social forces”, the “well-meaning soul” of society have to get involved in the management of public affairs, or at least pretend to do so, to have free rein in its decisions (with the criminal system, an agreement under the table will do).

Since more than twenty years, the municipal administrations have put in a slow-paced but relentless effort in that direction. The keyword is: recuperation. Not only urban, but above all social.

Every change, obvious or not, of the society in an authoritarian direction takes place in parallel with the sociocultural transformation of the citizens who are part of the economical and productive processes. Where ignorance, religion, misery don’t come about, politics does: the one with a capital ‘P’. Active citizenship, participative democracy, bottom-up decision-making are the battle cry that power, self-declared “enlightened”, uses as lubricant to pass measures that increasingly limit the space of political action.

The average citizen feels included and principal actor in the decision-making mechanisms that govern the living together and, for that reason, become themselves controller and oppressor of all behaviour that goes beyond the rules that they think they have contributed in setting out.

Concepts such as conflict, rebellion, radical opposition to power have been almost totally eliminated or, at least, totally diluted by society.

Erstwhile revolutionaries present themselves today as an integral part of the political decision-making process. Power is not seen any more as an enemy, as something we have to defend our-

selves from or against which we should fight. Today it is considered as the privileged interlocutor for the management of the public things. One doesn't storm the Winter Palace any more, now one politely knocks on the door. Collaboration and supposed active participation are considered as tools of political struggle, even not in terms of a radical transformation of society, but in a reformist sense of it. All this without questioning the existence of the statist political system.

Today one actively undertakes a electoral campaign, one presents oneself at the elections for the municipality (someone even succeeded [from the social centre *Je so' pazzo* came the electoral list *Potere al Popolo!*]), one becomes collaborator of the ruling city councillor and at the same time one plays the role of firemen in the context of (few actually) popular struggles.

When one doesn't manage to reach directly to the vital organs of power, the strategy of bottom-up organising is implemented. Consultations, associations, citizens assemblies of so-called liberated zones (meaning more or less unofficially linked to the current Mayor De Magistris) grant themselves a leading role and a privileged contact to bring to the attention of the political class all those entities that believe they can transform a "fake" democracy into a real democracy, directly in the hands of the citizens.

To make this concept even more clear, we transmit one part of a pamphlet distributed in the middle of March on the occasion of a citizen assembly where it is clearly stated that: "We are in an election period: the promises are not kept and the words lose their meaning. For that reason, at a time when many speak about participation, we challenge everyone to break with this democracy and to build a new one, real and radical, through real mechanisms of involvement of the inhabitants of the territories. Not substitute the institution but to overrun it by participative and collective processes... In June there will be municipal elections and all these machinations are nothing more than an electoral campaign in favour of the current Mayor De Magistris who claims the title of the revolutionary, attentive to social demands of his underlings. It is not an accident that the last polls show a marked advantage to his "anachronistic" adversaries.

For miserable political calculations, years of struggles have been sold out with the purpose of creating some leeway in a comforting institutional framework. A new political class has emerged made up of windbag militants, who will give a fresh face to the deformed and detested one of the current ruling classes. They will be our next enemies."

Nothing more to add...

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