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CAPITAL, TERRITORY AND THE RHETORIC OF
COMPETTIVENESS

1. Introduction. – Capital has a crucial role in territorialization processes, a role which has gradually grown through history becoming more and more central and pervasive. This happened because if in the past capital's territorializing effect was a reflection of a physical appropriation of the geographical space and of its re-signification, more recently, thanks to the evolution of capitalism, territorialization (Turco, 1988; 2002; 2010) has become a strategy to control, guide and enhance the process of capital accumulation and to strengthen its control over society. In this paper my attempt is to explain how and why this happens, focusing on the effects this phenomenon has on places and their development trends. I will do it by drawing inspiration from the reflections made by Harvey in his publications and especially in his latest volume. According to him, the relationship between capital and geographical space is an essential moment to grasp the nature itself of capitalism and of its “contradictions”; capital, in fact, «literally creates its own space and time as well as its own distinctive nature.» (Harvey, 2014, p.99). This statement certainly has a more general content, but throughout the book it represents the interpreting landmark for a more accurate reflection on the relationship between capital and place, or more precisely, between capital and landscape, as the conceptual category which Harvey more often refers to is precisely the one of landscape. Capital represents itself precisely in landscape and it is in the latter that the capitalist device takes form, influencing the individual and collective action and showing its total hegemonic power. It is a transformation capacity supported by Neo-liberalism (Harvey, 2005) which is its epistemological foundation; a

foundation that the economic crisis has not undermined, but has rather even strengthened (Peck, Theodore, Brenner, 2012). Urban spaces are the clearest example of the interactions between neoliberal practices and capitalist interests (Swyngedouw, Mouleart, Rodriguez, 2002; Brenner, Theodore, 2002) and that's precisely where the rhetoric of competitiveness plays at full its function as a support to capitalist "territorialization".

2. *Capital and territorialization practices.* – The initial question we try to answer to is about the reasons that would push capital to shape the geographical space through specific practices of territorialization. Well, the first answer, the most immediate, comes from the definition of capitalism which is defined as «any social formation in which processes of capital circulation and accumulation are hegemonic and dominant in providing and shaping the material, social and intellectual bases for social life.» (Harvey, 2014, p.7). If this is the "social" dimension of capitalism, only can the territorializing agent be capital. It, by holding its control on the geographical space, needs to adapt it in functional, symbolic and planning terms, representing itself in and through it. The functional adaptation of the geographical space is for capital an unescapable practice as it allows it the appropriation, before, and the exploitation, afterwards, of the material and immaterial heritage of places. It is worth noting that adaptation is not "functional" to the improvement of local community's welfare, but rather to the attainment of capital's goals. In other words, not only aims it at appropriating the surplus value produced by labor, but also at taking control over the "territorial capital" built up over time by local community. This appropriation may be achieved through two distinct strategies: on the one hand, what could be termed as a strategy of "oriented consolidation" of the processes of accumulation, in which capital activates a device allowing it to take advantage from economic benefits and to reproduce, at the same time, the territorial conditions that favor its accumulation. On the other hand, in what we might define as a strategy of "systematic exploitation" capital appropriates territorial capital without worrying about its reproduction. The latter often

tends to prevail on the former one due to both the difficulty of maintaining an effective control on the territory and its resources, and the more rapid returns as well as the significantly lower costs. By quoting Joseph Stiglitz, Harvey points out that there are «two ways to become wealthy: to create wealth or to take wealth away from others. The former adds to society. The latter typically subtracts from it, for in the process of taking it away, wealth gets destroyed.» (quoted in Harvey, 2014, pp.132-133). The damage, however, is not only in the theft and/or destruction of local resources, but in the radical transformation of the context carried out by capital so as to fully benefit from the economic exploitation of its resources, thus altering the identity markers and the relational fabric which is the essence of place and the crucial asset of its potential for development. In fact, when “appropriation and exploitation” of local resources do not require local communities’ involvement, the activity of capital takes the form of a simple spoliation, limited in time and space, and there is no interest in operating unnecessary costly interventions for reterritorialization. Capital’s behavior is there purely predatory and is made possible by the control that it directly or indirectly plays on place, even before that on its resources. The case is very different when capital, although undertaking a systematic exploitation of places where it acts, has an interest in that they maintain or even increase their ability of producing wealth. In these cases, local community needs to become an integral part of the capitalist device and the functional adaptation must be coupled with a symbolic and planning one, the only ones that can ensure a re-signification of space.

In order to participate in the “capitalist project”, local community must feel part of it and share its objectives and activities; it has to become an integral part of the capitalist device. The ways in which capitalist territorialization coming from outside operates have so deeply changed over time. Coming back to the classification proposed by the geographer Angelo Turco (2010, p.54), the practice of “domination”, typical of colonialism, has been largely replaced by that of “appropriation” – emblematic expression of neo-colonialism – and

by an even more insidious and pervasive one, “acculturation”, where the symbolic control of space plays a crucial, pivotal function.

An example that illustrates this point is precisely the concept of territorial competitiveness and the role it performs in the relationship between capital and place. It is a concept with a strong evocative power and a performative influence on the geographical space which very effectively shows what role language can play in structuring the geographical space¹.

3. The myth of competitiveness. – In order that place and its local capital become part of the capitalist device two contextual conditions are required: on the one hand, an institutional system ensuring the legitimacy of capital’s control over local heritage, and on the other hand, a political project - a “territorial” one in governance propaganda - justifying the device itself, highlighting its direct and indirect benefits for the community, by using a precise rhetoric of power aiming to prove its social utility and the indispensability of its action. The political project which was usually identified with the very purpose of development until a few decades ago has begun to make a more and more explicit reference to the objective of competitiveness since the ‘90s. It is a concept borrowed from the business economy which becomes a constant reference point in the definition of development policies at different institutional levels in a few years.

Applying the concept of competitiveness to a place means considering it as a company which is, in a nutshell, a socio-technical system producing additional wealth through the combined use of the resources which are available to it. This means that a territory, like a company, can produce wealth if it is able to combine in an efficient way the resources at its disposal and/or those which it can attract from the outside. The parallel seems to work, but there are two

¹ «The symbolic power of the word is decisive in shaping the symbolic set of a territory and we can say that not only is the latter made up linguistically, but each configuration process of territoriality connects to some fermentation in language, which anchors in discursive or narrative models» (Turco, 2010, p.55).

fundamental differences concerning the different “subjectivity” and the objective guiding its action. In the capitalist company subjectivity lies with the entrepreneur and he operates according to a profit logic which rests on a systematic appropriation of a share of the value produced by labor. Competitiveness is measured through the market, regardless of entrepreneur’s fairness, as the ability to meet in a more efficient, effective and qualitatively adequate way the demand’s needs. With regard to the territory, on the contrary, not only is there not a subjectivity (Pollice, Urso, 2013) which could be comparable to the capitalist entrepreneur’s one, but the objective, which cannot be identified with the only wealth production at all, cannot be achieved through the mechanism of appropriation of surplus value as it is in capitalism. Despite this obvious contradiction, economists and experts have considered competitiveness as a «natural law of modern capitalist economy» (Kitson, Martin e Tyler, 2004), gradually trying to accredit it as an indicator for regional development.

Initially, in fact, the concept of territorial competitiveness was used to indicate the economic performance of the only productive dimension of place, so as to be associated with labor productivity. In Porter, for example, the link between productivity and competitiveness is very tight: the main goal of a nation is to increase its citizens’ quality of life, but this objective can only be achieved through the growth in productivity levels (Porter, 1998; 2001). Krugman, too, who strongly disapproves the concept of territorial competitiveness, stresses that «Productivity isn’t everything, but in the long run it is. A country’s ability to improve its standard of living over time depends almost entirely on its ability to raise its output per worker» (Krugman, 1994, p.9). The predominantly economic dimension of territorial competitiveness also emerges from the definitions which are largely focused on the attractiveness of places, such as that proposed by Storper (1997, p.20) who defined competitiveness as the «ability of an (urban) economy to attract and maintain firms with stable or rising market shares in an activity while maintaining or increasing standards of

living for those who participate in it». In Storper's definition the reference to productivity is implicit, as firms may have stable or increasing market shares, coupled by a simultaneous increase in profits, only in case of either increasing levels of productivity or permanently above those achieved by competitors.

Finally, it is worth noting that the improvement in the standard of living enjoyed by people operating in this economic fabric – «who participate in it» – is nothing but a consequence of the redistributive effects on income and is functional to the reproduction of those territorial conditions underlying companies' production outcomes. It is only in the last decade that the concept of territorial competitiveness, though within the same interpretive approach, has assumed a more socio-territorial connotation. In Meyer-Stamer's (2008, p.7) definition competitiveness is meant as «the ability of a locality or region to generate high and rising incomes and improve the livelihoods of the people living there».

The core explanatory element is still in the ability to produce wealth, but this is explicitly defined as a territorial, not merely economic, capacity while its social effects are emphasized. The fact that competitiveness gradually tends to be interpreted as a territorial product is even clearer in the definition more recently given by Dijkstra, Annoni and Kozovska (2011, p.4) for whom regional competitiveness is «the ability to offer an attractive and sustainable environment for firms and residents to live and work». In reality, the scientific debate tends more and more to focus on the determinants of territorial competitiveness, while the level of productivity becomes an indicator for it, what Gardiner, Martin and Tyler (2004) define as «revealed regional competitiveness». However, competitiveness and productivity are in fact synonymous, so that in *Global Competitiveness Reports* prepared by the World Economic Forum competitiveness is still defined as the set of «institutions, policies and factors that determine the level of productivity of a country» (Schwab, Porter, 2007; Schwab, Sala-I-Martin, 2012).

The academic debate seems to agree that place competitiveness shows itself through a productivity level of its system of companies higher than competitors' one and that it derives from internal conditions, such as technological or organizational efficiency, but also from the specific conditions of the context, i.e. from the vast set of material and immaterial resources that make up territorial capital; a capital from which companies can constantly and freely draw.

However, it must be pointed out that as the benefit that a company derives from the use of local resources – especially intangible ones – is often difficult to measure, so the costs of using itself are not always quantifiable; not to mention that there are crucial resources, such as social capital, whose exploitation has no negative effects, but, if properly used, these are even positive and incremental.

The possibility that capital can directly and indirectly contribute to increase territorial capital is not in doubt, but the chance for this to happen and to balance the negative effects deriving from the use of this capital is very low, or even null; and this is because capital acts according to a profit logic postulating the externalization of costs and the internalisation of benefits. What is more, capital does not worry about the reproduction of territorial capital, since a possible process of territorial impoverishment nullifying or reducing localized benefits could be solved through investment outsourcing. Capital's interest in the territory is much greater before the investment and aims at encouraging public stakeholders to put in place the interventions needed to adapt its infrastructure, this allowing a greater return on investment.

Moreover, by creating a justification for public intervention – usually associated with job creation – it tends to build a social consensus around it and the governmental activity, reinforcing, by this way, its leadership. The alliance between the state and capital, the support of the capitalist device, thus tends to strengthen; the role of the former, however, is not only to create the local conditions ensuring the reproduction of capital, but also to support its

expansion process. How? Firstly, precisely through that share of public spending that is directed at creating the conditions for the reproduction of capital.

The interventions to adapt tangible and intangible infrastructures of place are in fact entrusted to private firms, namely to capital, and this becomes a new opportunity for investment, profit and, therefore, accumulation. Given that public spending is largely supported by the taxation of labor, large part of the wealth that was previously engaged as remuneration of the workforce returns to capital. All this happens while territorial capital, on the contrary, runs the risk of a progressive impoverishment. The objective of regional competitiveness is still achieved since place was able to attract investments, by improving its infrastructure, and this lead to an increase in the gross domestic product and employment rate. It is, indeed, a contradiction widely acknowledged by scholars disapproving territorial competitiveness who do not seem have fully understood all the consequences of a neoliberal approach (Benner, 2004) which is likely to increase the gaps (Cheshire and Gordon, 1996) and reduce the levels of social cohesion. The effectiveness of a territorial development model, however, cannot be measured but in terms of a sustainable improvement of local community's standard of living, where for sustainable we mean both an improvement that does not negatively impact local resources allowing future generations to enjoy a similar level of well-being (intergenerational equity), and a widespread improvement in the levels of well-being, coupled by a redistribution process of wealth (intra-generational equity). Well, a growing territorial competitiveness is not able to ensure a sustainable improvement in the level of local community's well-being and, besides, it tends to negatively impact the welfare of competing territories, too, given that, as mentioned, competition is not a zero-sum game. An example of the effects on local community can be seen in property prices. An increasing regional competitiveness makes in fact real estate prices grow, but this increase not only mostly benefits real estate's owners for speculative purposes, but negatively

impacts poorer classes, reducing their capacity of buying a property and improving their living conditions.

Similar reflections could be developed on productivity gains which, despite largely deriving from the exploitation of local resources – including the professionalization of the workforce – usually cause a less than proportional increase in wages. This happens not only due to capital's tendency to appropriate productivity gains – even when attributable to work – but also for competitive reasons which oblige to invest part of these benefits in the search for further increases in productivity; a research which is not necessarily carried out locally and, by consequence, have direct effects on the local context.

Moreover, capital, pressured by the need of increasing productivity levels, by using the rhetoric of territorial competitiveness, urges the State to implement further interventions on place making location advantages increase, benefiting from this in terms of productivity and indirectly recovering a share of the amount paid to workers as income distribution. What effectively summarized by Harvey is therefore confirmed: «Capital strives to produce a geographical landscape favourable to its own reproduction and subsequent evolution.» (Harvey, 2014, p.146).

The geographical context where capital's territorializing power becomes more widespread and pervasive is the city. Capital's interest on the city, as privileged place of accumulation, has always been high², but over the last few decades it has even been increasing, especially in more developed regions where cities have been affected by a real process of “productive reconversion”. It is a process that in the first place can be read as the result of a redefinition of the international division of labor which forced them to move from a Fordist to a post-Fordist economy. Harvey argues, however, that it is a process led by capital itself in its ongoing expansion³. Actually here Harvey draws on some

² «Urban agglomerations are in effect constructed spatial environments favourable to collectively sustaining particular sets of productive activities.» (Harvey, 2014, p.149).

³ «The building of a geographical landscape favourable to capital accumulation in one era becomes, in short, a fetter upon accumulation in the next. Capital has therefore to devalue

reflections he developed in the past (Harvey 2003; 2005) about the specious use of urban development projects to absorb surplus capital and avoid crises of over-accumulation. These projects are in fact an efficient way to defer in time and space the use of the surplus, since they usually require large amounts of capital and labor. The connection is to what Harvey describes as space-time fix⁴.

In the current economic system cities may acquire or consolidate a leading position within the national and international networks only by exploiting the most abundant factor of production in an intensive and oriented way, what has always distinguished cities and that, to date, is the critical factor of knowledge economy: the richness and variety of the relational fabric. This is a quality which is in turn closely linked to “culture” as a locally produced phenomenon and as an essential foundation of the relational fabric. If this interpretation is accepted, the development and dissemination of culture-led urban policies is to be directly or indirectly attributable to the goal of city repositioning within the international economic scenario.

City “cultural” repositioning is not merely a matter of production, but invests the whole social dimension in a deep and pervasive way, because it is precisely within it that the competitive advantages the city needs consolidating to make effective its repositioning are produced. Nevertheless, many of the experiences

much of the fixed capital in the existing geographical landscape in order to build a wholly new landscape in a different image. This sparks intense and destructive localised crises. [...] capital creates a geographical landscape that meets its needs at one point in time only to have to destroy it at a later point in time to facilitate capital's further expansion and qualitative transformation.» (Harvey, 2014, p.155).

⁴ Capital develops what Harvey calls ‘spatio-temporal fixes’ to the capital and labour surplus absorption problem: «A certain portion of the total capital gets fixed literally and physically in and on the land for a relatively long period of time. But ‘fix’ also refers metaphorically to how long-term investments in geographical expansions provide a solution (a ‘fix’) for crises of overaccumulation of capital. [...] The organisation of new territorial divisions of labour, of new resource complexes and of new regions as dynamic spaces of capital accumulation all provide new opportunities to generate profits and to absorb surpluses of capital and labour. Such geographical expansions often threaten, however, the values already fixed in place elsewhere. This contradiction is inescapable. Either capital moves out and leaves behind a trail of devastation and devaluation (for example, Detroit). Or it stays put only to drown in the capital surpluses it inevitably produces but cannot find profitable outlets for.» (Harvey, 2014, p.151-152).

up to date fully or partly prescind from local community's involvement and focus on interventions over the cultural infrastructure. Besides the excessive emphasis on physical investments rather than on intangible ones, they produce gentrification which has opposite effects in terms of social cohesion and of strengthening of the urban relational fabric. Cultural regeneration, dropped from a democratic planning and a social ideology, thus becomes another expression of that neo-liberalism enslaving the city to the logic of the global market (Oosterlynck and Gonzales, 2013), in which competitiveness is not aimed at improving local community's welfare, but the mere production of wealth for the benefit of the international networks and the economic actors engaged.

It is an orientation which is confirmed by the very nature of the interventions on cultural infrastructure, increasingly characterized by tendencies toward homogenisation, due to the need to attract transnational segments through the spectacularization of a "global" culture rather than through an authentic reinterpretation of local cultures. The extent to which commodification and spectacularization of place are connected to the capitalist logic is effectively stigmatized by Harvey:

"Cities like Barcelona, Istanbul, New York and Melbourne get branded, for example, as tourist destinations or as hubs for business activities by virtue of their unique characteristics and special cultural qualities. If there are no particularly unique features to hand, then hire some famous architect, like Frank Gehry, to build a signature building (like the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao) to fill the gap. History, culture, uniqueness and authenticity are everywhere commodified and sold to tourists, prospective entrepreneurs and corporate heads alike, yielding monopoly rents to landed interests, property developers and speculators. The role of the class monopoly rent that is then gained from rising land values and property prices in cities like New York, Hong Kong, Shanghai, London and Barcelona is hugely important for capital in general. The gentrification process that is then unleashed is, worldwide, a

critical part of an economy based as much on accumulation through dispossession as on creating wealth through new urban investments.” (Harvey, 2014, p.141).

This is certainly not to bluntly criticize cultural regeneration as a strategy for city repositioning, but only its political and economic specious use over the last decades and the negative effects on the social, economic and cultural dimension of place. What is therefore needed is a non-manipulation of this strategic tool, releasing it from the neoliberal ideology which has hitherto led its development, using, where possible, the same conceptual categories in order to show how these lend themselves to diametrically opposite interpretations and may underlie a new model of cultural regeneration focused on «place» rather than on «market».

Conclusions. – Drawing on the above reflections what clearly emerges is that the relationship between capital and place has become more and more pervasive over time because capital does no longer restrict itself to create its own economic space, appropriating local resources, but it is directly involved in the territorialization processes in the pursuit of goals which have little to do with the sustainable improvement of local community’s welfare. The territorializing activity – or it should be better defined “deterritorializing” due to its very nature – takes place either directly, through investments/divestments in production and interventions for the functional adaptation of the local context, or indirectly, guiding – mainly through the rhetoric of competitiveness – public intervention as well as individual and collective behaviors. Where once capital’s activity was restricted to the control over the territory and its resources through behaviors ranging from coercion to economic persuasion, now, in the knowledge economy, this activity must necessarily involve local communities, making them internalize capital’s objectives and perceive them as an expression of their will, a collective will. The image-objective of a competitive city, jointly conveyed by capital and institutions, quickly asserts itself over the other and

exercise a performative power over reality. Hence, the logic of competitiveness appears to be not only necessary or desirable, but absolutely essential and big efforts are made to pursue it at every institutional level, even giving away, in the name of an ineffable “competitive success”, our own identity and the very principles upon which our civilization lies. We forget that the objectives of social and territorial cohesion and competitiveness, which are the foundation of the EU and the international community development policies, are by definition in opposition. Competition is a game with winners and losers, and tends to increase inequalities rather than reducing them. If competitiveness “might be defined as the success with which regions and cities compete with one another in some way” (Kitson, Martin, Tyler, 2004, p.991), for a region which “wins” there is certainly another which “loses” and it is not worth repeating that free competition produces widespread benefits for all players, because there is no perfect competition and because mankind cannot keep on measuring itself through the economic parameter of productivity.

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CAPITAL, TERRITORY AND THE RHETORIC OF COMPETITIVENESS. – Capital, sustained by neoliberal policies, intervenes in a more and more pervasive way in the process of territorialisation, adapting the geographical space to its own purposes of accumulation. The territorializing action of capital takes different forms, which sometimes coexist within the same space-time context, but the most pervasive one is no doubt the one working through acculturation, because it makes local communities its means of territorialisation. The rhetoric of competitiveness is one of the most remarkable examples of how capital succeeds in its aim.

Supported by a large part of the scientific debate and manipulated by governments at all institutional levels, the myth of territorial competitiveness threatens to enslave place to the logic of capital, compromising in the long run those prospects for development that are instead considered to be as the ultimate goal of competitiveness itself. Cities with their strategic plans and

urban regeneration policies are among the areas where the shaping effect of capital and the contradictions of the capitalist device become more evident.

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