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Contemporary process of urban regionalization: the case of the Veneto Region

Laura Fregolent and Luciano Vettoreto

Department of Project and Planning in complex Environments
University Iuav of Venice – Italy

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1. Introduction

The subject of this paper is the Veneto region, which lies to the North-East of Italy and has a population of about 5,000,000. It is well known to scholars, as it is emblematic of an economic-productive structure (the “Third Italy”, the industrial districts) that has been very successful in terms of economic growth and incomes. This production structure used to be associated with a specific social formation, based on the family as the fundamental unit, on informal networks of mutual aid and support, a high degree of consensus and very modest social conflicts, strong work ethics, individualism and self-reliance. Over time, income growth and the consequent demand for housing goods and services have caused a very large urbanization, which settled outside of the many urban centers (small, medium, and medium to large cities such as Venice, Padua, and Verona). After an initial phase featuring the “urbanization of the countryside” and a strong growth of suburban settlements, the growth of services became also very evident (especially commercial services like medium and large shopping malls), so much so that the central area of Veneto appeared to scholars as one large urban sprawl.

This huge growth brought significant environmental damage; together with business globalization and internationalization processes, this has caused profound changes in the organization of the economy (and society), in a way that appears in some way to be post-metropolitan, and has questioned radically the development model, while at the same time possible alternatives have been emerging from some areas and situations. These changes are the subject of our reflections.

2. From urban diffusion to urban regionalization

By “urban regionalization” we mean the formation of large city-regions (cfr. Amin, Thrift, 2002; Brenner, 2014) which, differently from the descriptions of the last century (Geddes, as a most authoritative and largely original example), are not based specifically and predominantly on the physical-conurbative dimension (with all their properties: density, distance, gradient, etc.), but rather determine a “space of flows” of people, information, goods, and ideas on a regular basis (Castells, 1996; Hall, 1997; Soja, 2000).

The explanation for the formation of urban regionalization is normally sought in changes in the organization of the economy, including in relation to new information technologies. Sociological-cultural interpretations have attenuated over time, but still provide relevant interpretive cues. For example, John Friedmann’s (Friedman, Miller, 1965) urban fields (from the 60’) are in fact organizations of living models defined not so much on an economic basis, but rather as the ability (or inability) to choose one’s “neighbors” based on cultural affinity, as part of a radically pluralistic framework, leading to the formation not of enclaves but of socio-cultural archipelagoes, connected by investments in transport infrastructures and travel modes, which would mitigate spatial inequalities. Though concerned with other aspects, Melvin Webber (Webber, 1964) also tends to think along similar lines.

Obviously, the contemporary urbanization process are quite different from those described in the 60s, mainly because the globalization processes.

The phenomenologies of city-regions, which have very strong and noticeable results on the built physical space (a formidable building expansion not necessarily supported by an expansion of services, at least in some significant areas of Asia or Africa), are traced back in literature (drastically reducing the field) either to monocentric forms (particularly evident in the urbanization of vast mega-city regions (Scott, 2001) in rapidly developing and urbanizing economies) or to polycentric urban regions (the central cities of Belgium, the Randstad, the Rhine Ruhr, etc.) in contexts more characterized by an urban tradition historically established over centuries (in Europe, at least since the middle Ages, in Italy, at least since Roman colonization), which includes the presence of polynuclear urban “armatures”.

Polycentric urban regions (Hall, 2009) would consist of no fewer than twenty physically distinct but functionally related cities grouped around one or more major cities, these being at the same time local

situations (where people carry out most of their daily lives, promoting local and specific practices and identities, etc.), enlarged urbanity/urbanization situations (hubs having access to major infrastructures, primate cities, not locally available equipment and services, etc.), and global situations (contributing to and involving the competitive ability of the urban region, or mega-city, in various ways, shapes and forms).

The Italian case (including Veneto and the North) (Perulli, 2010; 2012) definitely belongs to the polynuclear development type (which in general brings up specific questions regarding government and delays decisions on issues such as sustainability. What would be the most appropriate model from the point of view of environmental costs? Monocentric or polycentric? Concentrated or spread out?).

Our first hypothesis is that in Europe, and especially in Italy, a latecomer as far as the industrial revolution and economic development, a widespread urban armature, which formed until a few decades ago the focus of civic and economic life, particularly in the north-central regions, has retained a key role, albeit with largely new forms and functions, and reproduced a set of differences within a changed economic framework. Thus, there is no big city versus small town in a polycentric city-region, but rather quite a variety of models (we do not yet know how many “types” of city or forms of social life). At the two extremes are Milan, the global hub, and the small-medium cities network, which often have high cultural assets and provide economic and administrative services, with sociality expanded over a greater area, redefining the ancient functions of medium and small centers (up to 20,000 inhabitants). In between, a set of differences that produce complementarity: university campuses, the production of knowledge and technology transfer (Padua), tourism and culture cities, almost globally monopolistic (Venice), advanced transport and logistics cities (Verona, Venice), service centers for local systems (Treviso), cities producing in creative ways (Padua, Venice), etc.

Our analysis of the contemporary city brings up some issues. For example, global development processes generate more inequalities than in the previous urbanization cycle, and these inequalities are clearly visible in a spatial context. If we assume that global city regions are where development and innovation take place, our assertion appears well justified. After all, it is well known that places of great change, for example, modern industrial revolution or Fordist cities, did generate such phenomena. These phenomena have been well documented since the nineteen forties through the concept of metropolis, which used to express interpretative and regulatory instances of economic development, social integration, etc. Several structural features of a metropolis were recognized, especially in the US: the central location of jobs, a specialized social geography that was however evolving towards a uniformity of cultures and practices, the typical pattern of a downtown with suburbs, relationship flows and their specialization, the reference model of family and neighborhood life, etc. A spatial model for the social order of the modernization.

That kind of metropolis, so well described into the conceptual frame of the modernization, is gone. In its place, there seems to be a post-metropolis, a space without limits and with extremely diversified social and spatial models of order subject to continuous assembly and disassembly processes, leading to a progressive loss of meaning for terms such as city, countryside, suburbs. A fractal city, extremely heterogeneous, with constantly changing centers and peripheries.

From the above picture, we can draw the following assumptions:

- The Veneto region is no longer knowable through its administrative boundaries, perhaps only for dialectal differences. External similarities are more relevant and visible. At times, these similarities draw spatially contiguous patterns, as in the case of the Verona-Mantua-Trent corridors, or the 'urban' area (for building and demographic growth and location of functions) that goes from Venice to Milan. Or, with situations where there is no geographical proximity, such as the Via Emilia. Internal differentiations are more visible (mountain economy and society, or of ancient Polesine latifundia) or large macro differentiations (in comparison with the South). These similarities (which are sometimes far more than similarities, or forms of imitation or emulation) define “relational spaces”, with diversified forms of interaction, in terms of interactions among businesses (with organizational models that tend to be non-spatial), collective actors (movements and/or groups of individuals that are active over environmental or ethic and moral issues), institutions and organizations;
- The recent urban history is not that of a capital city, clearly dominating its territory (like Milan, or Rome, for example). The (mainly physical) urban history is that of a growth on a urban armature, with a very long history (in many cases, from Roman colonization). The urban diffusion is not a recent phenomenon, differently from the well-known sprawl or suburbanization processes, but has a strong historical base;
- The third Italy is over, and with it also the boundaries that defined it. The district economy structure (sometimes organized according to specific internal hierarchies) appears substantially diluted. Relations

between businesses are changing in scale and meaning. New dualisms are taking shape, relations between businesses and territories are being radically redefined. What happens on the side of society is still largely unknown, although the progressive marginalization of consistent and independent “small businesses” appears quite evident;

- The Veneto region does not appear as a homogeneous “urban sprawl”. The small and medium cities of the Po valley are not becoming homogenized. Perhaps partly because of housing models and building types, this still looks like a radically plural territory. Not because it is made of morphologically recognizable parts, this would be trivial; in fact, the mountains do look different from the foothills, which look different from the Po delta region, etc. This is not the point. The dynamics of globalization (and Europeanization) do not produce any kind of uniformity (even against intentions, as in the case of various European programs). Rather, globalization seems to produce an area of differences and tensions (so that even the distinction between micro and macro becomes questionable), which redefine in a radical way the framework of the “ideal type” of independent small business. There are no more areas (at least in the center-north) that are immediately identifiable with a society-economy-territory equation;
- Northern Italian society (Veneto, Lombardy, Friuli, Emilia) can no longer be represented as a unit. Just as the industrial triangle model declined, so did the post-Fordist organization patterns of district type small/medium businesses. The conditions are over, the times have changed radically. The Veneto territory appears immersed in a space of relations (from geographical proximity to global ones) that seem to define partially autonomous spaces and, in lieu of uniformity and standardization, a diversity of patterns and practices of socio-economic organization that may be even antithetical to each other, without a clearly visible “social cement” (as it was in the last century).
- This heterotopic (cfr. Foucault, 1984) character seems to connote a non-metropolitan “Veneto” that is perhaps now post-metropolitan.

2.1. The spatial effects of “urban regionalization” processes: Built environment in the central area of the Veneto Region

The Veneto region presents forms of anthropization distributed within the square that become more dense around the polycentric structure and with two significant variations to the north and south of the square, these being the foothills area and the still heavily agricultural Rovigo area (Secchi, 1996; Indovina, 2009; Fregolent, 2005; Fregolent *et al.*, 2012).

The impermeabilization index also shows average values spread throughout the most urbanized area, that is the central belt; read together with the percentage variation rate of surface areas between 2000 and 2006, this data shows a trend toward built area growth that is still strong in the early 2000s.

Starting in the 70s, central Veneto appears as the expansion of a polycentric system and manifests a close functional integration among medium and small sized centers; it is characterized by a strong residential approach, low-density construction in particular, and also by a consistent, homogeneous, and undifferentiated distribution of small and medium sized businesses, and well served and easily accessible commercial areas located along the main connection lines and close to connection hubs.

During the period of 1980-2000, the built environment registered an increase of 38.10% with an increment of population of only 0.83%. Similarly, in the period 1998-2009, the growth of urbanization was equal to 27.04%, and the population increased by 10.05%. Even if the growth rate in the first phase is higher than in the second, we have a constant and positive trend of significant land consumption. The main characteristics of the areas, as illustrated, will be described in more detail in the next sub-sections.

At the beginning of 1980 the urban structure is articulated in: the compact city of Padua, and the hinterland of Venice (Mestre), the other two main cities of the Region, Treviso and Vicenza (that present different classes of densities), and then the smaller cities of Bassano, Thiene, Castelfranco, Mogliano Veneto, Montebelluna, and Cittadella. This network of cities and towns forms the polycentric structure that deeply marked the region, and to which the smaller towns, particularly those closer to the main cities, should be now added.

In the 1980s, the “sprawled city”, “*città diffusa*” (Indovina *et al.*, 1990; Indovina and Savino, 1999; Indovina *et al.*, 2004), manifested the phenomena of intense growth and fragmentation of the built environment, while the municipalities at the North and West of the boundaries of the “*città diffusa*” area started to show urban dispersion characteristics.

Between 1980 and 2000, we observed an intensification of the urbanization process in the municipalities close to the boundaries of the study area that had the most significant increase in their built-up land, with percentages from 50% to more than 200%. Their population grew too, although not with the same intensity registered by the built environment. However, this happened in almost all municipalities of the area, except in the major cities that showed a loss of residents in favor of the smaller municipalities. The central Veneto region has had very intense dynamics of dispersed growth since the 80s, which lasted until the early 2000s, although with different trends, intensities, and manifestations during this period. We referred to the socio-economic factors of these dynamics in the introduction.

Until 2000, the built up area consolidated and thickened itself around the main urban centers, and also around the built-up area of medium and small size centers that were progressively assuming a more stable form. A significant number of urban areas classified as small urban cluster increased, formerly classified as urban sprawl or spread built environment, especially along the main roads connecting the principal centers of the area studied.

The phenomenon of thickening along the Venice-Padua line is quite evident, and in the 2009 threshold we will more clearly recognize a continuous urban area connecting the two main cities. The municipalities of the first urban belt, especially around Padua, but also around Vicenza, Treviso, and Venice, became part of the urban fabric of the cities.

The intensification of building activity, and the evident densification of the urban growth, was parallel to an intensive increase of the sprawled areas, along the secondary roads. Actually, two different developments were occurring: densification and compactness of existing urban form, and progressive sprawled development. We distinguished a uniform trend of growth in most of the municipalities that increase from 0 to 50%, with the exception of some small towns, located along the Treviso-Vicenza line, that increase from 50 to 100%. These last municipalities experienced a great expansion of industrial zones, and are located in a favorable geographical position, close to mobility infrastructures.

After 2000 the process of densification continued. The incessant urban development was evident along the road from Treviso to Vicenza. The municipalities of the first and second belt of Treviso became part of the main city and this new conurbation was gradually consolidating and involving medium and small size municipalities located along the main roads.

A similar trend took also place along the road from Padua to Venice. It was already evident in the previous phase, but it definitely intensified in 2009, not only around the main centers where a process of thickening occurred, but in general along the area crossed by this road. Even if we did not register the same trend of growth as in the previous phase, it is possible to observe an intense building activity, particularly in the industrial zones.

Comparing the three different historical thresholds, we saw a gradual strengthening of a polycentric metropolitan system through the identification of new urban functions in the peripheral belt of the main urban centers, and a consequent and progressive densification around the main centers and along the main roads that crossed the area.

In the last twenty years, a process of urban densification around the centers of the polycentric system took place, accompanied in the last ten years by a process of filling in the open spaces, gradually making the study area more similar to a low-density city (Indovina *et al.*, 2006).

The analysis of urbanization processes helps us to recognize the different forms of urbanization and to follow their evolution. The area is denser and more compact around the main cities and surrounding areas, and along the mobility infrastructure; the ribbon sprawl along the secondary roads has been strengthened and has created small urban clusters; the compact centers have expanded and incorporated previously isolated urban portions; the urban sprawl, so evident in the first threshold analyzed, decreases and becomes small peripheral clusters. In addition, even if new centralities such as “street-markets”, large infrastructure nodes, and areas of shopping malls that characterized the sprawling system have not become the main polarities of the urbanization processes, they have nonetheless become “catalysts” for mobility and family activities, leading to practices of social life and causing substantial changes in land use and in traditional public spaces.

Given that land consumption has reached high values, that significant transformation projects affecting large areas (especially for services and residential) are under construction (although partially blocked by the economic crisis), and that plans will continue to go along with expansion policies, one of the hypotheses from which we started in our analysis of the Veneto case was to assume that the used/total agricultural surface ratio is increasing and that therefore a process of greater involvement of the agricultural sector is occurring, including from the economic point of view.

3. The Industrial Districts Society and the Urban Regionalization

What appears to be observed is a radical explosion of the district model into a plurality of paths, and the end of many small and micro-businesses that contributed largely to the success of the model and primary ethical aspiration of “having your own business” in the “closed” districts and thanks to national monetary policies. All of this obviously had significant social impacts, from many points of view: a very open and intense upward social mobility; an almost nonexistent classical conflict between capital and labor; individual action dynamics naturally leading to competition, but within rather structured collective action and shared regulatory guidance; the role of the family as a basic provider of welfare services; inequalities perceived based on the ability to be independent (craftsman/entrepreneur, home ownership, mobilizing the family in case of need); homogeneous political orientations linked to Catholic values; etc.

Everything appears to be radically changed. The profound changes in the economic structure and its governance, the arrival and settlement of alien cultures brought by migrants but also by exposure of the younger generation to greater access to universities and social networks, the formation of extravagant heterotopias (hyper-modernity and hyper-tradition), the significant increase in the elderly population and the depletion of traditional family capital, the gradual loss of importance of enlarged family as the cell of the social order and welfare, the differentiation of the economy and the new emerging figures in “post-agricultural” agriculture (agri-food exports doubled in recent years), the services to companies and households (between public and private), new global firms (like Benetton) have produced transformations of absolute importance.

These transformations are certainly associated with “urban regionalization”, but elude empirical observation for the most. In any case, we can acknowledge some evidence and suggestions:

- a) The data collected allow us to state that no particular differentiations seem to exist in Veneto compared to Lombardy, for example. Using municipal per capita income data cross-referenced with or added to other structural and physical variables (for example: income and manufacturing), it is clear that the places where income is produced/acquired are linked to infrastructure networks and where these networks intersect;
- a) This statement is supported substantially (but this requires further study) also when considering (as statistics reports) foreigners and young people. Dynamic contexts, with higher per capita income, young population, and foreign presence are the places just mentioned. These are therefore relevant situations, which we still cannot say whether or not they are the embryonic stage of radically new social formations;
- b) In these situations, and at this scale, social heterogeneity seems the rule;
- c) Urban regionalization processes follow lines fairly “determined” by their historical backgrounds (not only physical ones), mobility systems and their hubs, and transformational dynamics in the economy (and society) that are to a certain extent exogenous. Regionalization seems neither the cause nor the effect of inequalities, but inequalities certainly have a spatial base;
- d) The Veneto region does not present only inequalities related to income, both internally and with respect to the outside. Without trying to debate the size of the inequality, we cannot in any way disregard the housing situation in the Veneto case. The Third Italy and North-East model generations invested incomes, savings, assets, and properties old and new mainly on housing (house, furniture, productive and non-productive private outdoor spaces, transportation, etc.) in a fundamental way, that is perhaps symbolic even before being economic. With the result that if we introduce parameters such as living space per capita (or tenure status) to the measuring of inequality, the Veneto area begins to show differentiations of some significance with respect to the Milanese urban region and, in part, to the linear urban region of via Emilia.
- e) It should also be said that the effects on the social structure (for example, even just in terms of inequality in income distribution) of the economic restructuring, the decline of small micro-businesses, the up-and-coming figures from the high value-added manufacturing export sectors, the major restructuring and innovations of the ‘post-rural’ agricultural sector, the many types of tourism, the presence of migrants, and so on, are not yet clear. Our entirely circumstantial impression is that of an unpacking of the traditional social formation, both with respect to values and approaches/opportunities, making the classical distribution of inequalities along a continuum a very complex task. Rather, there seems to be a situation of many social formations coexisting in the same spatial dimension while at the same time expressing increasingly differentiated cultural and political orientations;

- f) Some general phenomena are apparent, including in Veneto: an increasing number of households experiencing hardship, issues of access to certain citizenship rights, also related to mobility, differences between Italians and foreigners in educational performance, very strong social cages among natives and between natives and foreigners, reduced consumption, and the progressive depletion of upward social mobility processes, despite the fact that the unemployment rate is holding up, including for young people. This next to a considerable diffusion of computer technologies in households (67%, versus 65% in Lombardy) but not in businesses as a whole.
- g) Naturally, in order to analyze the relationship between inequality and regionalization, after looking at the “big picture” above, would require an investigation on a different scale, with different types of information. We know that average incomes per capita are found in urban nodes and infrastructure hubs, and that there is a significant correlation between infrastructure (mobility and transport) and average income per capita. But we know nothing (if not from other sources, often informal, ad hoc, journalistic) of urban social geographies and spatial divide phenomena on a social, ethnic, and generational basis. For this, we should work directly on census sections. The cities of Veneto present complex contexts made of homogeneity as well as heterogeneity, rapid changes, and spatial conflicts.

4.2. Changing Economy and Processes of Urbanization

Addressing the issue of the effects of urban regionalization on the local economic systems requires special attention. In general, international statistics are about the relationship between economic growth and construction investments, and it is true that “Veneto's economic miracle” has contributed significantly to regional construction with its peculiar forms of organization. Substantial parts of the increase in income were undoubtedly invested in the landscape or landscapes of the urban sprawl, generally by individuals. What we see as an urban sprawl is the product of an economic model (the Third Italy or later the North-East) that got into crisis starting in the 90s, which deepened starting in the 2000s, and became radicalized with the economic crisis from 2009 onwards. The question arises whether an area structured this way (with a long series of problems that have been part of the public agenda for some time: lack of infrastructure, issues and contradictions between development and environmental and landscape resources, very high rates of land consumption; low energy efficiency of the building system as a whole; etc.) can be adapted to the changed economic environment (and its needs) or if it is an economic, social, and functional burden for an increasingly important segment of businesses (globally networked businesses, innovative medium-sized businesses with high value-added production, emerging economies with tourism, agriculture and agri-food industries) which is largely non-spatial (when not tied specifically to the territory).

This inertia of the territorial structures (localized places of residence and economic activities) is hardly malleable and adaptive with respect to a profoundly changed economic and social picture.

Statistical information points to a clear distinction between the '70s/80s and the 1990-2011 period. The first period saw the birth and consolidation of the small business economic system (and a relatively homogeneous social formation, with shared normative habits and values). Business locations were decentralized, based on general principles (geographic proximity with other like businesses that can generate agglomeration economies, significant spin-off phenomena, much tighter relationships within local systems than between local systems and the outside, low costs and initial investments, etc.). Despite differences (which certainly existed), the development model was quite functional. Traditional elements (role of the family as the basic social unit, sharecropping families with craft skills and the ability to organize and manage the division of labor, systems for the accumulation of savings, a deep-rooted propensity to “have your own business”) were transferred onto the manufacturing businesses, however, in many cases without progress toward more advanced forms of management. “Raising” a business and “raising” a family followed similar concepts: self-organization, the role of the family, reuse of property, etc. This produced a wide range of ways to represent the self through where one lived, and against a background of normally sober lifestyles, based on tight-knight social relations. During this phase, the cities lost population (real estate markets had something to do with it, but were not the only cause), while suburbanization advanced, at first mainly residential, and later on including large retailers and traditional services following the growing demand for goods and services.

The economic picture started changing in the '90s, and only in part as a product of territorial structuring becoming increasingly a negative externality. The development model was radically redefined and put an end to the myth of the Third Italy and the North-East. The economic picture, made up of many phenomena

and experiences, broke up irreversibly the closed-in districts, in a variety of ways, from the economic marginality and gradual demobilization of large parts of the manufacturing sector that could not keep up with market dynamics, to global (but not necessarily large) networked businesses, no longer bound by geographic proximity, but rather based on cognitive and organizational proximity, and relating to rare and qualified services (marketing, international legal assistance, design, management models) in the “North system” centers, especially Milan.

At this point the sprawl slows down, due to the effects of the crisis on incomes and the effects of the local finance crisis on public investment. Some cities in the North have actually seen an increase in their resident population (with more substantial increases for other urban populations), thus showing a trend reversal, which can be explained by several factors: the presence of migrants, the growth of businesses in various service sectors, an ever increasing housing availability due to lower demand, etc. The new element, which can only be recognized through reports and researches at the “micro” level, is the progressive trend toward cities having a much greater role in supporting business development, where cities diversify mainly in terms of specialization and complementarity (the most obvious ones are perhaps between Padua – universities, research and development, health, ICT and Venice – tourism, performing arts, culture, logistics, transport).

The most recent building development (as other studies also show) appears less “areal” than it once was, and more connected with transport infrastructure and hubs, showing the relevance of “territories of circulation” in the new structure; cross-regional developments emerge clearly: from Milan to Venice, from Verona to Trento, Bolzano, Mantua, and the South. Veneto’s economy is diversified and offers many possible development models. From businesses (now medium-sized and growing even during the crisis, to the detriment of smaller ones) acting with great success on the global markets that have peculiar relations with the cities in regard to various functions, like businesses (the case of beautiful and well made eyewear, fashion, apparel, home textiles, footwear, jewelry is exemplary) with weak or no local roots that deal with global cognitive interfaces, to successful agro-food businesses (wine in the first place) that instead cannot be separated from their territory, despite being included in global circuits and networks. This example might show us a new way of understanding the links between local economic systems and urban regionalization, based on skills, human capital, and territorial quality. All this is reinforced by considering the changes internal to agriculture (recovering, in Veneto and many other parts of Italy), with renewed forms of entrepreneurship (often, young graduates) working with advanced technologies and management models. Another possible form of development, and a further mix of practices, where “rural” takes on new, contemporary meaning. Together with multifunctional agricultural businesses, which not only meet productive needs, but also function as leisure for city dwellers, establishing a new (but old) relationship between cities and the countryside according to a post-metropolitan perspective. Tourism also becomes post-metropolitan and generates sophisticated heterotopias: from traditional mass seaside and cities of art tourism, a broad and significant set of initiatives and activations of cultural, diffuse, reticular tourism involving many players and diversified resources has been quite evident for several years, and certainly suggests a possible vision and version of a sustainable territory. Urban regionalization changes radically also the locations tourists choose. No longer just the hotel in Venice or in the historical seaside or mountain resorts, but (partly as packages often organized by global players) in the case of Venice, which is by far one of the most relevant in the world, locations along some main roads and by public transport hubs (even minor ones, travel times being about an hour, less than how long a Brooklyn resident takes to reach downtown Manhattan). Obviously, this is also the product of urban regionalization (and the mobility systems that connect it), which designs diverse “territories” with often contradictory and in some cases consistent uses, and offers a variety of sustainable development alternatives, partly consistent with the European mainstream and partly original, although triggered by ideas, experiences, and practices that circulate through global cognitive interfaces.

5. Conclusion

Veneto: a conurbation, and many forms of development. The conurbation follows, strengthens, and intensifies ancient tracks, but always in a selective manner. However, the conurbation moves increasingly along the new highway infrastructures and focuses on the nodes. These become the new element of a territorial development that is still continuing intensively, alongside the more usual approaches (the still ongoing localization of large commercial distribution activities, and in part of residential areas). In the background (outcome, premise, constraint, cost) of the conurbation getting stronger (although partially along renovated lines), economic and social changes proceed with great strides. The economy becomes less and

less industrial, and marginal elements of the past are found within the industrial sectors (some productive segments of the districts) along with highly innovative and completely trans-regional and trans-local elements (new networked businesses and business networks, often on a non-territorial basis) and innovative elements that still have strong local constitutive roots (some segments of the agro-food industry, for example). This framework produces a landscape of semi-abandoned extensive production areas and very hybrid ex-productive areas, but also a rural landscape that is much more complex than in the past. Not just subsistence agriculture or extensive production, but new methods and forms of agricultural production, in some cases mixed with other functions, with a new relationship between towns and the countryside (between urban populations and the use of new rural spaces). All this happens, of course, within a conurbative (but not undifferentiated) situation, within a poly-nuclear city-region that goes beyond the administrative boundaries, where at each point/fragment one can observe a plurality of organizational forms and practices of the economy and society that can be very dissimilar from each other, in a situation marked by simultaneously occurring differences.

This situation (a city-region without borders, but non-homogeneous, proximity of difference and diversity, traditional productions that become hyper-modern alongside traditional activities not capable of innovation), in a society that seems to hold up under the weight of restructuring albeit generating new forms of inequality that seem to spread geographically rather than localizing (if not – partially – in urban situations) indicates a significant turn in the characters of the urbanization, in which one can acknowledge some ingredient of the Soja's post-metropolis (Soja, 2000).

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