THE METROPOLITAN QUESTION IN ITALY¹

Antonio Calafati

1. Introduction

After more than 20 years of failed attempts, with the approval of law no. 56/2014 the institutionalisation of Italian metropolitan areas finally began. The construction of the corresponding political-administrative organisations is currently in progress and in due time they may be expected ‘to start to govern’. Yet much uncertainty remains about the substantive effects of the metropolitanisation model that Italy has chosen. Key organisational questions – the new actors’ policy fields or the appropriateness of the boundaries, among others – remain unsettled, and there are doubts concerning whether the emerging governance systems are appropriate to address the pressing territorial challenges that the Italian metropolitan areas are going to face as a consequence of the European integration and globalisation (European Commission-DG Regional Policy, 2011).

The paper highlights some conceptual inaccuracies and explanatory failures that have marked the policy and scientific discourse that has consolidated in Italy around the ‘metropolitan question’ since the late 1980s. The shortcomings of this discourse have contributed greatly to delaying the metropolitanisation process – the critical importance of which is largely acknowledged in Europe (Eurocities, 2011; 2013). They also explain the inadequacy of the normative framework recently introduced – i.e. law no. 56/2014 –, which continues to underestimate the institutional and political obstacles to a substantive metropolitanisation.

Four main sections make up the paper. Section 2 briefly summarises some elementary questions that have characterized the discourse on metropolitanisation that started with law no. 142/1990, and led to law no. 56/2014. Section 3 addresses the critical issue of the nature and position in the Italian urban system of the 15 cities that, according to the legislator, are ‘metropolitan cities’. Section 4 outlines three methodological missteps that, according to the interpretation put forward in the paper, have led the Italian policy and scientific discourse on metropolitan areas astray. Section 5 points to the political obstacles to the institutionalisation of

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territorial interdependences and to the inadequate consideration that they have attracted. The concluding remarks stress the importance of ‘learning by monitoring’ (Sabel, 1994), and of being open at national and local level to revising the institutional framework.

2. Law no. 56/2014 and the institutionalisation of Italian metropolitan areas

2.1 A long overdue institutional change

The institutionalisation of Italian *metropolitan areas* began only very recently with approval of law no. 56/2014. Yet this topic has occupied a prominent position on the Italian public agenda since 1990, when an extensive meta-institutional change (law no. 142/1990) opened the way to a profound bottom-up reform of local government. And The Italian scientific community started to address what appeared to be a critical policy issue (Bartaletti, 1991; Camagni & Lombardo, 1999; Costa & Toniolo, 1993; Martinotti, 1999a). Yet, differently from what was to be expected, this change in the national normative framework did not produce any effects on the ‘local’ institutional framework for a long time – notwithstanding the fact that it was repeatedly amended in the subsequent years. Still in 2013 one could only contemplate a complete failure: not a single case of institutionalisation of metropolitan areas had occurred or was in progress.

This situation changed in 2014. The national normative framework for the metropolitanisation process was again reformed with law no. 56/2014 (‘Disposizioni sulle città metropolitane, sulle Province, sulle unioni e fusioni di comuni’). From the perspective of the institutionalisation process, this law was a breakthrough: because it set the boundaries of metropolitan areas, and because it established a rigid timeline for adopting the statutes and appointing the political organs, the institutionalisation process started very rapidly.

The fact that the institutionalisation process of metropolitan areas started promptly does not mean that (a) metropolitan institutions are operational and (b) the societal effects of the institutionalisation are already manifest or will be manifest in the near future. There is a tendency to conceive normative or meta-institutional change – like the introduction of a law – as being rapidly followed by social change. Yet, this is an unwarranted assumption. In this specific case, as Figure 1 shows, there is a long way to go before the meta-institutional change introduced to set in motion in Italy a metropolitanisation process produces visible societal effects: political bodies need to be elected, bureaucracies need to be set up, and policies need to be designed and implemented.

Furthermore, one has to take into account the issue of the long-term nature of policies pertaining to the policy field of metropolitan authorities. In formal terms, the emerging metropolitan political-administrative organisations will be entitled to take three types of policy decision: a) changes in the formal norms constraining local actors' behaviour; b) allocation of resources (budgeting), in terms of either redistribution or direct use; c) acts of 'moral suasion' through negotiation and persuasion. These are by nature structural policies, whose effects may require many years to unfold to their fullest extent.

Figure 1 – The Institutionalisation of Italian metropolitan cities

At the time of writing, for most metropolitan cities the statute has been approved. Yet in no case have all the political bodies envisaged by the law been appointed or elected. Moreover, the corresponding bureaucracies are not yet operating. As a result, metropolitan cities authorities are very far from being in a condition to design or implement relevant policy actions.²

2.2 The risk of being an irrelevant reform

Even though law no. 56/2014 represents a breakthrough from the perspective of the institutionalisation process, there is a risk that it may not prove a relevant 'tool' to promote effective metropolitan governance. Four main issues should be considered to assess the risk that this law may in the end lead only to a nominal institutional change.

² Metropolitan governance takes different forms in different countries (Ahrend & Schumann, 2014).

First to be considered is the significance of the *list of cities* for which the question of institutionalising the corresponding metropolitan areas is being raised (see Table 1). Law no. 56/2014 confirms the list of cities already identified by law no. 142/1990 and expanded by subsequent national and regional laws. These cities are: Roma, Milano, Napoli, Torino, Palermo, Genova, Bologna, Firenze, Bari, Catania, Venezia, Messina, Trieste, Reggio Calabria, Cagliari.³ As discussed in greater detail in Section 3, this list is rather incongruous if judged from the perspective of the ‘metropolitan paradigm’.

A second issue concerns the boundaries of the metropolitan areas. Law no. 142/1990 did not predefine the *boundaries*, giving local governments the authority to draw the boundaries of metropolitan areas through a negotiated decision. By doing so, it acknowledged the importance of a *bottom-up* decision process and the importance of introducing place-specific institutions grounded in ‘local knowledge’. Differently, in the case of the recent law no. 56/2014 the decision was taken by the State, which established that the boundaries of the extant Provinces would be the boundaries of the metropolitan cities. But in most cases, provincial territories are very far from being ‘functional urban areas’ – as the ‘metropolitan paradigm’ would require (Bartaletti, 2009; Martinotti, 1999b).

A third issue is the extension of the policy fields of metropolitan city authorities (Ahrend, Gamper, & Schumann, 2014; Boudreau, 2010; Dente, 1993). How large and relevant will be their policy fields? The statutes approved to date have not settled this critical question. There is a potential political conflict with the regional government and with the municipalities belonging to the metropolitan areas that has not been addressed so far. It may happen that the emerging metropolitan authorities will be actors just as ‘weak’ as the former provincial authorities were in the policy fields that, according to the metropolitan paradigm, are the key ones. The regulation of spatial and economic development in particular may remain outside the policy fields of metropolitan authorities in Italy.

The fourth issue is the relationship of the metropolitanisation model being implemented with the challenges that metropolitan areas will have to face in the next decade and beyond. The implications for Italy of the failed implementation of the 1990s reform of local government were of utmost importance. The ‘territorial revolution’ – brought about by the rapid industrialisation and tertiarisation of the Italian economy since the 1950s – required a change in the spatiality of the policy-making process. Italy has paid a price for having continued to be governed locally by inadequate institutional settings for such a long time (Calafati, 2009a). Yet during the past two decades the challenges for the European cities have radically

³ Five of them (Catania, Messina, Palermo, Cagliari and Trieste) are to be instituted within the normative framework of the Regions (with ‘special status’) to which they belong.

changed (European Commission, 1997; 1998; European Commission-DG Regional Policy, 2011). The question can be raised as to whether the metropolitan model envisaged in law no. 56/2014 is backward rather forward oriented: is it adequate to deal with the specific types of disequilibria that European metropolitan areas are going to face?

3. The metropolitan areas in the Italian urban system

3.1 The identification of Italian metropolitan areas

In Italy the metropolitan question entered the public agenda with a focus on 15 cities. As already pointed out, this list is highly problematic from at least two points of view. First, as discussed in the next sub-section (3.1), these cities are so profoundly different in their size and territorial organisation and the size and territorial organisation of their contiguous territories as to raise doubts about the logic of having selected them against the background of (a) the ‘metropolitan paradigm’ and (b) the features of the Italian urban system. Second, many Italian cities, which have experienced territorial development trajectories and intermunicipal integration processes that require metropolitan governance, are not in the list of cities that, in accordance with law no. 56/2014, are being turned into metropolitan cities. Indeed, there are many cities in the Italian urban system that would require metropolitan governance more urgently than some cities for which the metropolitanisation process was set in motion by law no. 56/2014.

A metropolitan area emerges as a ‘territorial fact’ when the degree of *territorial interdependence* between a city and its hinterland increases beyond a certain threshold. The entire area – the city and its hinterland – qualifies as a ‘functional urban area’. Within the boundaries of the functional urban area one observes ‘high’ densities of flows of information and commodities and a high ‘mobility’ between the ‘dwellings’ and the focal points of social and economic life (Bartaletti, 1991; 2009; Martinotti, 1999a; 2001).

Which algorithm to use to identify the boundaries of a ‘functional (intermunicipal) urban area’ is a vexed question. One has to accept to perform this operation following different procedures, which lead to (relatively) different results (Bertuglia & Occelli, 1993; Karlsson & Olsson, 2006). Since law no. 142/1990 was passed, a number of exercises have been conducted with the aim of identifying Italian functional urban areas, and also those functional urban areas that may qualify as ‘metropolitan areas’ (Boatti, 2008; Bundesinstitut für Bau- Stadt- und Raumforschung BBSR, 2011; OECD, 2012; Veneri, 2009).

Law no. 56/2014 takes the boundaries of the former Provinces as the boundaries of the metropolitan cities. But in most cases, the provincial territories of the 15 cities under consideration are not functional urban areas (Bartaletti, 2015; Calafati, 2014). This contradicts the principle that metropolitan areas must be designed on the basis of functional urban areas.

Since provincial territories are not functional urban areas, one cannot rely on them to explore the interdependences between Italian major cities and their contiguous territories. In this paper, being a preliminary exploration, the choice is made to use 'local labour systems' as identified by Istat as unit for analysis to explore territorial interdependences at the metropolitan scale.

Local labour systems constitute the territorial units gained through the most notable exercise of identification of functional urban areas conducted in Italy in recent decades (ISTAT, 1997; 2005; 2015; Istat-Irpet, 1987). They are functional urban areas smaller in land and population than the functional urban areas generated by other procedures. Yet the category of local labour system is a useful proxy of the category of metropolitan area in Italy. It is an appropriate starting point to discuss some critical questions in regard to the metropolitanisation process. From now on, in this section, which addresses empirical issues, 'metropolitan areas' are identified taking that specific type of functional urban area that Istat has named 'local labour system'.

3.2 Differences in size and territorial organisation of metropolitan cities

Italian metropolitan areas – the 15 metropolitan areas indicated in law no. 56/2014 – exhibit striking differences both at the metropolitan scale and at the scale of the pivot city in terms of population, land and density.

Besides, the high diversity of Italian metropolitan areas emerges on considering their hinterlands. This diversity is very evident when looking at hinterlands in static terms. In Figure 2 the local labour systems of the 15 cities under consideration are clustered with respect to two basic features of their hinterlands – namely, population density and the share of the hinterland's population in the total population of the local system. In the first quadrant (upper right) one finds metropolitan areas (Milano and Napoli) with highly densely populated and 'weighty' hinterlands. In the third quadrant (lower left) one finds metropolitan areas characterized by scarcely populated and low densities hinterlands. In the second quadrant (bottom right) one finds metropolitan areas whose low densities hinterlands make up a high share of the corresponding metropolitan areas' total population.

Table 1 – Metropolitan areas, pivot cities, hinterlands and Metropolitan cities: basic data

				Metropolitan areas (LLS)			Pivot cities			Hinterland			Metropolitan Cities (ex-Provinces)				
		<i>T</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Land</i>	<i>Density</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Land</i>	<i>Density</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Land</i>	<i>Density</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Land</i>	<i>Density</i>	
1	Roma	RO	2	89	3777308	3886	972	2863322	1285	2228	913986	2601	351	121	4321244	5352	807
2	Milano	MI	2	174	3839811	1840	2087	1324169	182	7273	2515642	1658	1517	134	3176180	1579	2012
3	Napoli	NA	2	58	2577709	802	3213	989111	117	8434	1588598	685	2319	92	3127390	1171	2670
4	Torino	TO	2	112	1779532	2467	721	902137	130	6930	877395	2337	375	315	2297917	6830	336
5	Palermo	PA	1	18	908752	1156	786	678492	159	4270	230260	997	231	82	1275598	4992	256
6	Genova	GE	2	31	691442	911	759	596958	244	2451	94484	668	141	67	868046	1838	472
7	Bologna	BO	2	40	870441	2509	347	384202	141	2730	486239	2368	205	60	1001170	3703	270
8	Firenze	FI	2	18	715196	1206	593	377207	102	3683	337989	1103	306	44	1007252	3514	287
9	Bari	BA	2	20	747832	1592	470	322751	116	2778	425081	1476	288	41	1261964	3825	330
10	Catania	CT	1	22	710085	648	1096	315576	181	1745	394509	467	845	58	1115704	3552	314
11	Venezia	VE	2	19	613953	1178	521	264534	413	641	349419	765	457	44	857841	2462	349
12	Messina	ME	1	6	265133	300	884	241997	211	1146	23136	89	261	108	648371	3247	200
13	Trieste	TS	1	6	235700	212	1113	204849	84	2425	30851	127	242	6	235700	212	1113
14	Reggio C.	RC	1	12	222090	464	478	184937	236	784	37153	228	163	97	559759	3183	176
15	Cagliari	CA	1	42	514871	2460	209	154019	86	1800	360852	2375	152	71	560827	4570	123

Source: our calculations on ISTAT data

T = Type of metropolitan area (1=regional; 2=national)

N = Number of municipalities in the metropolitan areas (LLSs)

Figure 2 – Metropolitan areas' hinterlands: density and size.

As Figure 2 shows, the metropolitan areas of Reggio Calabria, Messina and Trieste have very limited territories and populations (see Table 1), as well as very small hinterlands (compared to the pivot cities) characterised by very low densities (they all belong to the third quadrant in Figure 2). Furthermore, there are a number of metropolitan areas (Bari, Bologna, Cagliari, Catania, Firenze, Torino) with relatively large hinterlands, although characterised by very low densities. In contrast, the metropolitan areas of Milano and Napoli exhibit markedly different territorial organisations. Their corresponding pivot cities are very large and have remarkably large hinterlands with very high densities (incomparably higher than those of the other metropolitan areas considered).

The high diversity of Italian metropolitan areas emerges not only by looking at hinterlands in static terms. It is also apparent when one considers hinterlands from a dynamic perspective, i.e. by looking at the evolution of hinterlands over time. Figure 3 shows the populations of the first-ring municipalities in 1951 and 2013. One observes strikingly different trends consistent with the patterns of Figure 2. In the cases of Firenze, Milano, Napoli, Roma and Torino, processes of hinterland urbanisation have clearly taken place. In the cases of Bologna, Bari, Palermo and Venezia these processes have been much less strong. In the case of Genova, in fact, hinterland urbanisation has not taken place (in accordance with the city's long-term economic and demographic stagnation).

Figure 2 – *Population dynamics in the first-ring municipalities*

The way in which the category ‘metropolitan area’ has been used in the policy discourse in Italy has generated much uncertainty as to its substantial meaning. To use this category indiscriminately leads to underestimate the profound diversity in terms of size and territorial organisation of the territory to which the Italian policy discourse on metropolitanisation refers. Ultimately, it has given rise to a meta-institutional change that does not address the relevant spatial, political and social disequilibria.

3.3 Inconsistencies in the list of metropolitan areas

There is a further key problem in regard to the list of cities considered: it is inconsistent. First, a number of cities of most importance in terms of metropolitan areas’ total population – and with relatively large hinterland populations – are not in the list.

Figure 3 – The metropolitan areas in the Italian urban system (*) (*) Only metropolitan areas (LLSs) with less than 1,000,000 inhabitants

A striking example is Bergamo, with a hinterland population of about 700,000 units and a land area of 881 km² governed by 122 municipalities. The metropolitan area of Bergamo is larger in terms of population than those of Bari, Firenze, Catania and Genova – cities that have been included by the law in the list of metropolitan areas. Moreover, it displays greater political-administrative fragmentation. This suggests that there would be much to gain from its institutional integration (according to the standard way of conceptualising intermunicipal integration).

A second notable case is that of the metropolitan area of Padova, whose population is similar to those of Genova, Firenze, Catania and Bari. The case of Padova is also significant because it is contiguous to – and closely integrated with – the metropolitan area of Venezia, forming what is often referred to as the ‘Venezia-Padova metropolitan region’ (Corò & Torre, 2015; OECD, 2010; 2015). Also notable are the cases of Como – with a hinterland population of about 460,000 units and a land area of 581 km² governed by 99 municipalities – and that of Busto Arsizio – with a hinterland population of about 550,000 units and a land area of 519 km² governed by 52 municipalities.

As Figure 4 shows, from the ‘metropolitan paradigm’ perspective, in terms of key territorial parameters there are at least 17 Italian cities for which the forms of metropolitan governance would be much more significant. It also highlights that cities of minor importance in terms of metropolitan area’s total population – and with relatively small hinterland populations – are included in the list of territories to be turned into ‘metropolitan cities’. Striking examples are the cities of Messina, Trieste and Reggio Calabria.

4. The Italian debate on metropolitan areas

4.1 Three methodological missteps

The ambiguity surrounding the notion of metropolitan area in the policy discourse is partly linked to the inability of the scientific community to converge on a shared conceptualisation of the Italian territory. Since the late 1980s, different scientific disciplines – including urban planning, economic geography, regional economics and urban sociology – have been involved in the discussion on Italy’s changing territorial organisation (Calafati, 2009b). The emergence of a shared conceptualisation would thus have required an interdisciplinary dialogue, which has not taken place. Instead, constrained by academic boundaries, the scientific community has produced a conflicting discourse on metropolitan areas, marked by three main methodological missteps.

Firstly, it has not been acknowledged that the institutionalisation of metropolitan areas could be effectively addressed only by framing it within the larger question of the institutionalisation of intermunicipal systems at all territorial scales – large, medium and even small⁴. Secondly, it has not been acknowledged that the institutionalisation of metropolitan areas was a process to be distinguished from the institutionalisation of the *city de facto* – this latter being a process much more important in terms of effects on the spatial allocation of resources and on the governance of spatial development. Thirdly, it has not been recognised that metropolitan areas do not necessarily constitute ‘territorial facts’, for they may also be ‘territorial projects’.

4.2 *The territorial integration of intermunicipal systems at all scales*

In the late 1980s the existence of the metropolitan areas of the major Italian cities, such as Milano, Torino and Napoli, was unquestionable. The sheer population increase in the municipalities located in the first and second ring of the major Italian cities was a sign of the ongoing metropolitanisation process. Other large intermunicipal territorial systems – Firenze’s and Venezia-Padova’s metropolitan areas, for example – had consolidated. But what was equally important – and very relevant from a policy perspective – was that, overall, the process of intermunicipal territorial integration was a widespread phenomenon also manifest at lower territorial scales. A large number of small- and medium-sized intermunicipal systems had emerged (Calafati & Mazzoni, 2008; Martellato & Sforzi, 1990).

Law no. 142/1990 did not address *only* the metropolitan areas question – that is, the institutionalisation of territorial integration regarding the largest Italian cities. In fact, it addressed the institutionalisation of *all* forms of territorial integration manifest at various territorial scales. Consequently, law no. 142/1990 contemplates norms intended to enable merger – as well as cooperation – among contiguous municipalities *of every size and at any scale*.

This broader perspective on territorial integration – beyond the focus on metropolitan areas – has been directly stimulated by the ‘industrial district research programme’. The spatiality of industrial districts – as defined in the neo-Marshallian paradigm – comprises various municipalities. (Becattini, 1987; 1994; Sforzi, 1987). When law no. 142/1990 was passed, the first map of the Italian territory in terms of intermunicipal systems – ‘local (labour) systems’ – had already been drawn by Istat and Irpet jointly (Istat-Irpet, 1987).⁵ It was widely

⁴ In fact, as law no. 142/1990 envisaged.

⁵ Long before, Irpet had conceptualised the territory of the Toscana Region in terms of intermunicipal systems (IRPET, 1978).

agreed that the unit of analysis to be used to describe and explain territorial performances was the intermunicipal system (Crouch, P Le Galès, Trigilia, & Voelzkow, 2001; Martellato & Sforzi, 1990; Signorini, 2001).

The implications of this methodological perspective for the institutionalisation of the metropolitan areas, however, were not properly drawn. In particular, it was not understood that the focus on ‘local (labour) systems’ suggested that the metropolitan question should be approached from a different perspective (Calafati, 2002; 2009b). From the perspective of Istat’s map, the best way to conceptualise the territorial organisation of the largest Italian metropolitan areas might be to look at them, firstly, as clusters of local systems. From this it follows that, whatever the boundaries of a given metropolitan area, before its institutionalisation it would have been necessary to institutionalise smaller clusters of contiguous municipalities, and then move on to an encompassing governance framework for the entire metropolitan area.⁶ This stepwise institutional change would greatly facilitate the emergence of effective forms of metropolitan governance in a country like Italy with very high political-administrative fragmentation.⁷

4.3 *The institutionalisation of cities de facto*

The metropolitanisation process can be divided into two processes. On the one hand, there is the phenomenon of *territorial coalescence* between a large city and its contiguous municipalities. Territorial coalescence, often involving the formation of conurbation, generates the so called ‘cities *de facto*’. On the other hand, there is *territorial integration* between a large city and the municipalities of its hinterland generated by the intensity of home-to-work and home-to-leisure flows. This type of territorial integration generates the metropolitan area.

The distinction between territorial coalescence and territorial integration may be difficult to detect in some cases; but in many others it is self-evident and cannot be mistaken. And indeed, the second misstep taken in the scientific debate has been to confuse territorial coalescence with territorial integration. This led the discussion far away from what was – and still remains – a crucial question in Italy: *redrawing the boundaries of major cities* on the basis of the territorial coalescence of the city with its contiguous municipalities (Calafati, 2009a; Calafati & Veneri, 2013; Sforzi

⁶ I have recently adopted this methodological perspective in a study on the metropolitan areas of Napoli (Calafati & Mazzoni, 2017) and Venezia-Padova (in a study I conducted on behalf of OECD (2015)).

⁷ Political-administrative fragmentation is very marked in Northern Italy in particular. The metropolitan area (LLS) of Milano counts 174 municipalities, while that of Torino counts 112 municipalities.

& Martellato, 1990). The question is one altogether different from that of the identification and institutionalisation of metropolitan areas.

The expansion of the boundaries of a city as a consequence of territorial coalescence between a large city and its contiguous municipalities has been a very common occurrence in European urban history. It is possible to argue that *since* the Industrial Revolution – and the ensuing rapid urbanisation – the history of European cities has been marked by the tension between the city *de jure* and the city *de facto*. In Italy, one can find very many examples of city *de facto* emerging as a consequence of a specific pattern ('territorial coalescence') of spatial and relational development. Very many municipalities in the first ring of the largest Italian cities have turned into 'neighbourhoods' of the corresponding cities *de facto*.

Redrawing the administrative boundaries of major cities has not been an issue in the Italian policy agenda in the past decades. However, instances of territorial coalescence of the major cities with their contiguous municipalities have very frequently and extensively occurred. In the case of Napoli and Milano, the corresponding cities *de facto*, both with about 3,000,000 inhabitants, are among the largest metropolises in Europe (OECD, 2012; 2013).

4.4 Cities and metropolitan areas as 'territorial projects'

The third methodological misstep of the scientific discussion on metropolitan areas has been the inability to integrate the 'objective and the 'normative' perspectives on metropolitan areas. In fact, within the scientific debate on metropolitan areas, the concern for the boundaries has assumed two opposite and conflicting forms.

On the one hand, some scholars – geographers and regional scientists in particular – have focused on *objective* boundaries. This perspective has given rise to a strong research interest in the 'best' algorithms to use in identifying the objective boundaries of inter-municipal systems. On the other hand, other scholars – urban planners, in particular – have focused on *normative* boundaries to be defined considering political and strategic concerns emerging from political negotiations among the local authorities of contiguous municipalities. This perspective has given rise to a focus on 'territorial projects' that generate the 'best' boundaries for inter-municipal systems still to emerge in their specific form. Both perspectives are incomplete and lead to biased conceptualisations of the territory. In contrast, an integration of both perspectives would produce a conceptualisation of the territory grounded on the actual features of the territory and also dynamic – that is, incorporating the political and planning dimensions.

An exclusive focus on objective boundaries is unwarranted. The territory is a continuously evolving social construct, strongly influenced by political choices. In this regard, the way in which Istat has promoted its map of the Italian territory in terms of 'intermunicipal (functional) systems' (local labour systems) has contributed greatly to the methodological rigidity of the 'objective boundaries approach'. The refusal by Istat to address the normative dimension of intermunicipal clusters has reinforced the positivist attitude, widespread among regional scientists, according to which the problem is to find the 'right' algorithm to identify the 'true' boundaries – which indeed do not seem to exist as such. In Italy in particular, as a consequence of the *disordered* and *dispersed* spatial development manifest since the 1950s, a strictly inductive approach to the boundaries issue may lead to puzzling results.

Yet the normative approach fostered by urban planners has never been able to offer an alternative. At the time when economic geographers and regional scientists were producing conceptualisations of the Italian territory in terms of intermunicipal systems generated by algorithms, urban planners were very much engaged in promoting the 'larger urban zone paradigm' ('paradigma dell'area vasta') as a tool for the regulation of spatial development at intermunicipal territorial scale and also to assess the social impact of projects of territorial transformation (Fregolent, 2006). The emphasis on planning at intermunicipal level was the consequence of the emergence of the 'dispersed city' (or 'city-territory') (Indovina, 1990; Lanzani, 2011; Lanzani & Pasqui, 2011; Munarin & Tosi, 2002; Secchi, 2005). Yet planners underestimated the usefulness of boundaries as devices to set up an effective regulation system: boundaries are social constructs necessary for an effective policy making process. The voluntarily and piecemeal cooperation envisaged by the 'larger urban zone paradigm' did not produce any significant policy results. In fact, intermunicipal spatial planning did not take place.⁸

5. Political obstacles to the institutionalisation of intermunicipal systems

In Italy the failure to institutionalise territorial integration has been the outcome of political factors as well – and not only of a disordered and disciplinary-marked scientific debate on the Italian territorial organisation. The inertia of local actors – regional governments and pivot municipalities, in particular – largely explains the delay in the institutionalisation process of metropolitan areas. By giving local actors the authority to define the boundaries of metropolitan areas and start the

⁸ Indeed, this paradigm relies on a model of the public agent that is empirically wrong, particularly in regard to the *reasons* for intermunicipal cooperation in spatial and economic planning.

metropolitanisation process, law no. 142/1990 made a bottom-up reform of local government feasible. Yet, local actors did not seize this opportunity: they did not set in motion the expected institutional change.

Regional governments in particular bear precise responsibility for the delay in the institutionalisation process of Italian metropolitan areas. They did not take the necessary step of drawing the boundaries of the metropolitan areas (law no. 142/1990, art. 17, comma 2). And consequently they never empowered the municipalities that had to start the negotiations with the other concerned actors that would lead to institutional integration. Yet major cities, too, have their fair share of responsibility because they did not use their political influence to raise the question of the stalemate in the institutionalisation of their metropolitan areas.

At first sight, the inertia of local actors in regard to the institutionalisation of metropolitan areas in the 1990s and 2000s is a major political paradox. According to the rationale of law no. 142/1990, local actors would have benefited greatly from an institutionalisation of metropolitan areas. Yet they never showed interest in it. The entire story may appear paradoxical if one considers that in the late 1990s and 2000s a marked shift to 'regionalisation' and 'municipalisation' characterised the Italian political system. This paradox may be yet explained by considering the consequence that the institutionalisation of metropolitan authorities would have had on the existing balance of local power between regional and municipal powers.

On the one hand, the institutionalisation of metropolitan authorities would have challenged the power of regional governments. In Regions such as Piemonte, Lombardia, Veneto, Toscana, Campania and Lazio, metropolitan areas would have been large enough in terms of population and total employment to become unquestionably the most important political players, greatly reducing the power of the corresponding regional governments. This conflict is still unresolved after law no. 54/2014, and it will emerge again as soon as the metropolitan authorities start to operate and the issue of allocation of policy fields between regional governments and metropolitan cities has to be addressed.

On the other hand, the institutionalisation of metropolitan authorities would have challenged the power of the municipalities, too. It is useful to recall that municipalities in Italy – even very small ones – have the authority to allocate and manage property rights on real estate and infrastructure building. And also to be stressed that in Italy allocation of land use rights has been the main source of political legitimization and consensus building at municipal scale since the 1950s. Municipal governments have maintained (and progressively increased) control over allocation of land use rights – and, paradoxically as it may appear, also planning the location of industrial sites has not systemically emerged as an

intermunicipal policy field.⁹ With the substantive institutionalisation of metropolitan areas envisaged by law no. 142/1990, hundreds of municipalities would lose the power to manage land use rights.¹⁰

A great limitation of law no. 56/2014 – but the same can be said in regard to law no. 152/1990 – is that it entirely neglects the question of incentives – cost-benefit configuration for a *substantive* institutionalisation of metropolitan areas. Apparently, law no. 56/2014 is equipped to go beyond this limitation since it literally imposes the establishment of metropolitan authorities. However, a close reading of the law reveals that local authorities may easily circumvent the imposition by law of constructing a shared governance and, hence, maintain much of their autonomy in crucial policy fields such as land use. Law no. 56/2014 does not force city authorities to engage in effective policy coordination, even in the most relevant fields of spatial and economic development. It gives the municipal authorities of the metropolitan area the freedom to decide the policy fields subject to concerted government, and the policy fields subject to municipal authority.

This opens up the scenario of an institutionalisation of metropolitan governance in Italy that is only nominal: all the relevant policy fields will remain under the control of the municipalities and of the regional governments. Notwithstanding law no. 54/2014 – and also because of its inadequacy – Italy is still very far from achieving effective metropolitan governance.

6. Conclusions

Given the features of the Italian territory – and the forms that territorial integration has taken in the hinterlands of Italian major cities – the institutionalisation of metropolitan areas is to be considered a crucial step towards increasing Italy's development potential. Yet, scant scientific attention has been paid to the reasons why there are no operating metropolitan areas after so many years since the importance of institutionalising metropolitan areas was given formal acknowledgment (law no. 142/1990). Also underrepresented in the scientific debate is the prospect that the metropolitan cities under construction on the basis of law no. 54/2014 may emerge as very weak political actors, and the

⁹ This is an issue of utmost importance for a country like Italy characterised by (very) small firms in all sectors and very small municipalities in terms of land and population. The consequence has been an unparalleled spatial dispersion of industrial sites.

¹⁰ Given this, municipalities contiguous to the major cities have profited greatly from non-institutionalised territorial integration. They have experienced an extraordinary expansion in terms of population and employment as a consequence of territorial integration with the pivot cities. On the other hand, pivot cities have been able to increase the value of real estate, boosting the tertiary sector within their boundaries.

normative innovation may turn out to be an irrelevant change in the regulation mechanisms of the largest Italian metropolitan areas.

Not acknowledged in the current institutionalisation of metropolitan areas also is the fact that institutional change is a process that can be – indeed, ought to be – amended, adapted, adjusted while in progress. Against the background of the complexity of Italy's territorial organisation, the appropriateness of the legal framework introduced to address the metropolitanisation issue (law no. 54/2014) should be assessed on an ongoing basis. Becoming aware of the shortcomings of the metropolitanisation process currently in progress and unravelling the reasons of these shortcomings are steps necessary to make an effective institutional framework emerge. Progressive adaptations only may lead to a governance arrangement appropriate to Italy's largest metropolitan areas.

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SUMMARY

The metropolitan question in Italy

The paper highlights some conceptual inaccuracies and explanatory failures that have marked the policy and scientific discourse that has consolidated in Italy around the ‘metropolitan question’ since the late 1980s. The shortcomings of this discourse have contributed greatly to delaying the metropolitanisation process – the critical importance of which is largely acknowledged in Europe (Eurocities, 2011; 2013). They also explain the inadequacy of the normative framework recently introduced – i.e. law no. 56/2014 –, which continues to underestimate the institutional and political obstacles to a substantive metropolitanisation.