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Knowledge and action in the 'structural' interpretation and representation of territory

Enrico Gualini

From a planning theory perspective, the new Territorial Plan of the Province of Naples offers material for reflection not only in virtue of its significant substantive choices, but also of an epistemological subtext focussed on the knowledge-action nexus in planning. Along this reflection, some key issues of contemporary planning theory might arise: the role of categories of the interpretation of territory as principles of structuration of relevant knowledge; the link between cognitive and normative functions these categories perform in defining 'structural' determinant of territory; the link established between these functions in formulating strategies and action orientations; and the question of how this can frame institutional action rationales in a subsidiarity-based and multilevel environment. Moving from the competencies defined by regional Law 16/04, the provincial plan identifies one of its key functions in the definition of 'structural dispositions' of the provincial territory. This notion, common to recent Italian disciplinary debate and practice, is seen here as a combination of two distinct cognitive operations: as 'structural interpretation', intended as the identification of territorial 'invariants' which define the conditions for transformations, and as 'strategic framing', intended as the formulation of visions and ideas of action and transformation. Accordingly, it is recognized that the 'structural dimension' bears more than a mere function of empirical recognition, but also a normative function. As it is said, the structural

interpretation of provincial territory, by virtue of this double mission, which is both cognitive and strategic, becomes capable of bringing forward "a new idea of the territory amenable of establishing the 'firm points' for any discourse on transformation and of nurturing at the same time new visions of the future" (Ptcp della Provincia di Napoli, Relazione, rev. 01/9/2008, Introduzione, p. 5).

In this respect, the formal distinction of the 'structural' and of the 'strategic' function in the elaboration of the plan, as underlined in the plan, may be justifiable in view of differences in formal implications and of the range of actors to be respectively involved. While they formally seen as 'two distinct and complementary moments' (p. 6) in territorial governance, however, it is also significant to remark that structural framing and strategic framing are constitutively connected in cognitive terms.

This may highlight the importance of categories for the interpretation of territory, like the understanding of 'landscape' advanced in the plan, but also the struggle for identifying appropriate definitions of territorial articulations, like specific socio-economic contexts, in the Italian 'territorialist' tradition of geographical studies and socio-economic territorial analysis. It is apparent that such categories bear the meaning of epistemic constructs in which interpretive and strategic frames are co-constituted. Similarly, it would offer significant material for reflection to focus on the significance representations of territory may bear in a context of multilevel relationships in which relationships among levels of territorial planning and governance are increasingly less hierarchical and nested and increasingly defined by subsidiarity-based

interconnectedness, thus also posing the challenge of the adoption of frames of reference that are capable of conveying meaning and to inform action across scales. In such a perspective, categories of territorial interpretation constitute much more than the simply the 'knowledge-base' for evidence-based policies: they become a stake in the production of planning choices.