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Dilemmatic Moments & Collective Future-Making: Imagining Turin After a Fiat-Chrysler Merger?

By Luigi Russi*¹

Summary

This paper endeavors to articulate an inherent tension animating discourse about the future. Following socio-legal theorist Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, it is suggested that future-making as discursive activity contains both ‘an inscription of anticipation and an anticipated inscription’, in the sense that it oscillates between the disclosure of unpredictable imaginative spaces – on the one hand – and the enclosure in claustrophobic narrations motivated from past experience – on the other. In light of this, the paper attempts to excavate this ambiguity of future-oriented talk, by leveraging findings from qualitative fieldwork carried out in 2011 through a mix of archival research and interviews, in relation to discourse about the future of the city of Turin (Italy), in anticipation of carmaker Fiat’s move of its headquarters away from Turin: an eventuality that actually materialized following the company’s January 2014 merger with Chrysler.

1. Introduction

Future horizons have a deeply ambivalent quality. On the one hand, futures – in the plural – are an invitation to escape. On the other hand, however, the future – in the singular – can, if tamed from the standpoint of the present, come wrapped in a shade of inevitability. This paper seeks to explore this ambivalence between the freeing and enclosing tendencies of fu-

ture-oriented imagination, using the debate around the possible move of automotive industry Fiat away from its hometown Turin as a case-study and example.

Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2010, 21) counter-intuitively locates one of the defining features of (critical) discourse in its absence. Critique, in the etymology of the word, is connected to the making of a decision (Harper 2016), and decisions entail discriminative choices that route concerted

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activity in this direction – not that – and thereby structure what practical trajectories might be pursued, as collectives craft their futures in joint action. In this sense, critical discourse can be understood as words spoken at junctures of productive ambivalence, what Shotter calls ‘organizational moments’ (Shotter 2011): namely, instances where the unfolding of collective social forms can be sensed at its joints, and directed towards becoming something different from what it might have been up to that point. Talk that occurs at such junctures displays, therefore, a curiously heuristic character that – like a prosthetic stick – alternates between following the lead of tracks it ‘finds’ (think of a blind person going along with the grooves of tactile paving), and negotiating open space (picture the same blind person swinging their stick about – and other bodies moving out of their way in response – as he/she actively traces open space by his/her passage in an unmarked direction). This talk uttered at ambiguous organizational moments – which is, in my understanding of it, what Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos labels as ‘critical discourse’ – is both an immersion into and an escape from the object of critique, i.e. from the ‘structured’ social form it springs from, while simultaneously trying to push it in hitherto unforeseen directions: critique therefore presupposes the oscillation between these two positions. As a consequence, as one tries to locate it as immanent to its object or as external to it, all one is left with is a fist of air; hence its absence. Due to its constant oscillation, then, critique is never fully present before the eyes of the observer, but always absent, as it departs for the inside (if one focuses on the outside) or for the outside (if one focuses on the inside).²

² Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos originally makes this argument in the context of Niklas Luhmann’s

Fiat (acronym for Fabbrica Italiana Automobili Torino, i.e. Turin Italian Automobile Factory) was created in the city of Turin in 1899 by businessman Giovanni Agnelli (Betts 2010). In recent decades, Fiat has gone through a series of ups and downs until coming under the leadership of CEO Sergio Marchionne (The Economist 2008a). Marchionne, in a bid to increase the economic viability of Fiat’s business, has sought to streamline production by – among other things – entering an important strategic alliance with struggling US carmaker Chrysler in 2009 (Roth 2009; The Economist 2008b). After the acquisition of an initial stake, however, talks of a possible merger have started to surface, and – in connection with those – Marchionne contemplated the possibility to move the headquarters of Fiat to Detroit (Griseri 2011), which would have broken a connection to the city of Turin that runs so deep as to even lend the final letter to the brand name (the ‘t’ in the Fiat acronym). Indeed, a merger between Fiat and Chrysler was eventually carried out in January 2014, and

social systems theory which, in a nutshell, contends that a multiplicity of separate realms of human communication have emerged in the contemporary world, such as politics, law, and so on. Each of these realms, for Luhmann, elaborates its own peculiar rationality and description of the world. For Luhmann, in other words, observation of the world can only occur as through a cracked lens, with each splinter providing its own deforming take on the object of observation. This descriptive fragmentation makes any adoption of a particular perspective just as relevant as any other, given the lack of an overarching rationale to make sense of the world, and therefore prompts a constant oscillation within and without a given perspective, to see the world through its canon, but simultaneously to escape from it, in order to situate the latter in the context of a multiplicity of possible perspectives and to make sense of its limits, understood as limitations on its ability to offer a complete description of reality. See further Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2010, 25). On Niklas Luhmann’s social systems theory, see also Moeller (2006) for an accessible introduction.

it brought with it the transfer of Fiat's legal headquarters from Turin to the Netherlands, paralleled by the move of the company's fiscal seat to London (Malan and Cianflone 2014).

With the benefit of hindsight, the window of uncertainty that rumors of the planned merger and move generated (in the time antecedent to the merger actually being carried out) offers a fascinating case in point to illustrate precisely the ambivalence of critical discourse as Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos describes it: namely as self-conscious, 'deliberative' talk striving to afford an orientation at such dilemmatic junctures.

To be more specific, the possibility of a non-Turin-centred Fiat and – consequently – of a non-Fiat-centred Turin ignited comments of different sorts from local journalists and politicians, ranging from the disastrous to the proactive. This collective future-directed search was compounded by the concomitant occurrence – at the time in which fieldwork for this paper was being undertaken in 2011 – of a mayoral election: a process that orchestrated an atmosphere of intensified collective inquiry into the questions that a future looming with uncertainty (but, perhaps, also with creative potential) insistently threw open. It is precisely this atmosphere of agnosticism about the future of Turin, in connection to Fiat's anticipated departure, that offers a pregnant exemplification of the constantly shifting perspectives that characterize critical discourse according to Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos. On the one hand, in fact, the future is sometimes imagined in the singular, not as futures, but as mono-cultural future, tamed and colonized by an all-thematizing present and presence of Fiat that univocally pre-selects the path for further development. At other times, however, as discourse about Fiat becomes one of possible

futures, new possibilities for institutional imagination are disclosed, even as non-Fiat horizons are uncovered. These two ways of relating to the future, with Fiat acting as the pivotal kernel around which imagination unfolds, exemplify this oscillation within and without the Fiat universe in deliberative inquiry around the future of the city.

Imagination as Gravitation: Fiat-Polarized Futures

The main thread in Fiat-polarized futures is, as anticipated earlier, an all-encompassing presence of Fiat. In these types of discourses, Fiat is understood as co-essential to the city of Turin, to its role for the local economy, and even for the national economy. So, for instance, Bocconi (2003) looks with apprehension to the launch of Fiat's new products after a period of financial turbulence. Bocconi hopes, in fact, that this launch will be successful, allowing Fiat's business performance to take off once again. The reason behind this is that Fiat is not – in Bocconi's opinion – simply identified with Turin, but it is rooted in the whole of Italy. It is a true 'campione nazionale', a national industrial champion capable of raising economic expectations in all of Italy. Italy – not just Turin – rises and falls with Fiat.

Tropea (2011a), writing on the newspaper *La Repubblica*, wishes for Fiat's management to remain in Turin, criticizing the plans of Fiat CEO Sergio Marchionne to move the headquarters of Fiat away from Italy and from Turin. Without Fiat – Tropea contends – Turin would simply have no future (in the singular). It would become a 'città-museo', a museum city, lost in perennial commemoration of the vestige of its glorious past.

Writing again in February 2011 on *La Repubblica*, he finally discloses the object of

his fear:

Nobody can miss the fact that without Fiat, or with a scaled down Fiat presence with little but symbolic value, the force of attraction of the city and its hinterland would be very limited. Were this to occur, Turin would risk entering the shadow which Detroit already entered a few years back and which it has not yet managed to exit nor will it exit within a reasonably short time. (Tropea 2011b)

The mention of Detroit implicitly introduces the problem of post-industrialism. As the word itself conveys, post-industrial identities are born backward-looking, licking the scars of a glorious past that is no more³, and point as next step to a roadmap of engineered ‘transformation’ for the city to remain attractive even after having been left by its ‘prince’ or – as the mayoral candidate that was eventually appointed in 2011, Piero Fassino, put it – to acquire a ‘pluralist vocation’ from a previously mono-cultural identity (Romanetto 2011). Notice, however, how ‘transformation’ in connection to a ‘post-industrial’ imagery brings into question the content of the city’s future, without necessarily relinquishing the enclosing linearity of the architectonics that channel it into a recognizable form. This future is still ‘normed’, ‘mandated’ and ‘made necessary’ by the fall of an inertial trajectory, the striation of which is not in question: rather, it is merely a matter of figuring out ‘substitute’ materials, with which to fill the same mold.

The construction of the debate on the future of Fiat (and of Turin) in terms of facing a scenario of ‘post-somethingness’ seems, in the end, to give the whole discussion a melancholy and – most of all –

³ The difficulty for post-industrial cities in retaining the weight that was associated with their previous industrial past, and the ensuing economic and social problems, are very clearly presented in Shaw (2001, 286–294).

an overly-directed overtone. Fiat’s identity, after all, has already changed over the years, and Turin is – to some extent at least – past the complete Fiat-centredness of city life of recent memory (Ferrari 2011). When Fiat is given the role of lighthouse with the task to illuminate the future, clarity of vision falters as the light becomes weaker, leaving only the house after the light has faded, and a resounding question: house to what? (Campetti 2003, 110).

Imagination as Escape: Negotiating Open Futures

For Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2010, 24) it is instead necessary, in order to reopen the possibility of pluralistic futures, to recover a sense of perspectival openness, of a ‘flat’ horizontality that has been (and is being) channelled in the unfolding of collective practice through time. In other words, Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos encourages deliberative, critical talk to depart from striations that seemingly project forward from the past with an aura of inevitability, as though the future was pre-disposed before collectives that can merely find themselves in ‘it’. Rather, he advocates for a vivid awareness of the indeterminacy – at any one point in the past – of the number of possible ‘presents’, of which the one that is being jointly worked at is in fact getting actualized moment-by-moment, in a movement of creative self-specification (of something previously non-existent), as opposed to the replicative fulfillment of a pre-dicted path. In this way, the present acquires a new – contingent – dimension and loses its urge to monopolize discourse about the future thanks to a newly-found self-consciousness. In this sense, Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos appears close to Shotter’s understanding that the future is not so much like a bridge built pursuant to a plan that dictates how every

stone is to follow the next but – rather – a trajectory that can only become known in the walking of it (like a path through a garden, that gets dug as it is traced): its final shape being open – at every step – to becoming other than it has unfolded thus far (Shotter 2015).

So, for instance, writer Bruno Gambarotta, interviewed on *L'Avvenire* of January 14, 2011 (Ferrari 2011), contextualizes the potential loss of Fiat within a range of other losses, some of which extraordinarily sobering in comparison: 'We Turinese people really enjoy to remember what we have lost: they first took away from us the status of capital in 1864, then the cinema industry, radio, television, aviation, breadsticks'. The loss of the status of national capital, in particular, appears to have been more shocking than a possible departure of Fiat ever could be (Tropea 2011b).

This re-contextualization of Fiat allows to recover possible futures from the folds of an otherwise all-thematizing presence, and sparks institutional imagination in different directions from mere post-industrialism. So, for instance, the (then) first-time mayoral contestant 'Movimento 5 Stelle' – in the programme drafted to support its Turin candidate Vittorio Bertola in the May 2011 elections – seemed to detach the departure of Fiat from the departure of industry from Turin. Specifically, they envision the possibility to incubate:

[I]nnovative and growing industrial sectors, particularly in relation to new energetic and environmental technologies, and to facilitate product innovation by making the traditional sectors of Turinese industry (mechanic, automotive, informatics...) modern and sustainable (Movimento 5 Stelle Torino 2011, 16).

Vittorio Bertola, the 2011 town mayor candidate for the Movimento 5 Stelle, was even more adamant in his support for a Fiat-less – but not post-industrial – Turin, in

an interview with the author of this paper. In doing so, he reasoned through the example of Seattle, a city that moved from being the hub of aviation company Boeing to the headquarters of companies like Microsoft and (something as 'out there' – compared to commonplace images of 'industry' – as) Starbucks, the renowned coffee franchise (Bertola 2011). Precisely the example of Starbucks in Seattle shows, for Bertola, the necessary unpredictability of the possible future economic vocation of Turin, thereby justifying the proposal for an 'ecosystem of innovation', enabling an experimentation with innovative sectors, with a view to let a new vocation spontaneously emerge, outside of rigid external guidance: '[a system] that pushes people to set up a company of whatever sort, and then maybe one of such companies will become, so to say, the Starbucks of the situation' (Bertola 2011)⁴. An ecosystem of this sort would be facilitated by Turin's strong university system, by the adaptability of the suppliers of Fiat that could convert to working for other companies, and even by the space and renewed propensity for economic initiative

⁴ Bertola's position seems slightly different from that outlined in his official party manifesto. While the latter uses the term 'strategic plan' (Movimento 5 Stelle Torino 2011, 16), echoing the sense that an alternative future for Turin ought to offer a similar linearization to the Fiat-polarized imaginary, Bertola's own voice seemed closer to the vision that has since become a mainstay of design for social innovation. Namely, to facilitate collective creative processes that explicitly embrace (rather than absorbing into a pre-drafted plan) instances of contradiction, tension and agonism (Hillgren, Seravalli, and Emilson 2011) as part of an open-ended inquiry striving for reflexive self-correction through the attainment of productive articulations of problems and possibilities (DiSalvo et al. 2011). The ambiguity highlighted here is consistent with the finding – presented in the final section of this paper – that deliberative discourse is rarely ever classable exclusively as past-directed or future-disclosive, and generally oscillates between the two: breaking out of linear plots only through experience of their confining striations.

that a dynamic generation of thirty and forty-year olds could find outside of the imposing, top-down environment characterizing Fiat and its subsidiaries: all of this is not – for Bertola – beyond the reach of the city (Bertola 2011).

The attempt at re-opening future-oriented imagination by the Movimento 5 Stelle, and of his former mayor candidate Vittorio Bertola, was not an isolated one. So, for instance, Turin-based trade union Confederazione Unione Sindacale di Base Piemonte equally stressed the need, were Fiat to leave Turin, to think about ways to nurture the productive capabilities that have grown locally over time, and even came to propose a nationalization of Fiat's factories in Turin (Confederazione USB Piemonte 2011, 2), once again assuming that the end of Fiat ought not to mean the end of industry in Turin.

Imagining an industrial future for Turin beyond Fiat is, in other words, the distinctive trait of visions of a Fiat-less city that are not enclosed by an all-encompassing horizon that forces the equation between industry in Turin and Fiat. Even in the absence of Fiat, the notion of a productive vocation that can be cultivated in innovative directions, and will not invariably be lost, remains. In the remarks of a journalist: 'tertiary Turin, turistic Turin, olympic Turin' (Campetti 2003, 109) are not normally juxtaposed – in Fiat-polarized future scenarios – to another possible industrial Turin, but – somewhat more depressingly – to a 'Fiat-less Turin' (Campetti 2003, 109), 'hope capital' (Campetti 2003, 110) of Italy. The different type of Fiat-less imagination described in this section, instead, pushes itself at the edge 'where improbability, unanticipated surprise and elusive contingency bubble' (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2010, 23) by breaking the equation between Fiat and industry in Turin, and uncovering a re-

newed sense of agency through which a still-indeterminate future might collectively be brought to life (as opposed to it looming like a curse uttered by a corporate CEO). This mode of talk scrutinizes the horizon for distant examples and telling coincidences that bring the imagination of differently industrial futures well within the possibilities of a city that is – one is reminded by reading the various articles mentioned here – the hub of an important cluster of industrial infrastructure and opportunities.

Findings and Concluding Observations

To summarize the foregoing, two types of discourse about the future of Turin without Fiat have been distinguished. On the one hand, discourse about the future can be enclosed within the Fiat universe so that, as the latter progressively fades, the specter of post-industrialism and the urban decay of cities like Detroit comes to mind; along with the urge that a Fiat-less trajectory fulfill the same demand for linearity and predictability, distinctive of the kind of future that Fiat's permanence could have guaranteed. On the other hand, a new understanding of the present as still unfinished form, and continual unfolding through past contingency, has the benefit of freeing collective imagination from the looming spectre of futures pre-determined in their shape and merely waiting to happen. A dwelling in the present that resonates with its brimming contingency turns it, instead, into a springboard for assembling the future. Hence, new possibilities become attainable in this way like, for instance, the availability of Fiat-less, yet not post-industrial, visions of the city, woven into a narrative where Fiat is then – ultimately – only a travel companion in Turin's longer and enduring industrial journey.

It is interesting to juxtapose these consider-

ations to Barbara Adam's distinction about ways of relating to the future. On the one hand, a 'reading of patterns, recognizing significant coincidences, understanding synchronicity and establishing a-causal connections to unlock the future' (Adam and Groves 2007, 9) of pre-modern flavour while, on the other, 'classical (Newtonian) scientific prediction' (Adam 2005, 4), which is 'wedded to the principle of linear causality and projects into the future past patterns of repetition' (Adam 2005, 4). These two ways of understanding the future, one less hung on pre-determined (causal) possibility, the other attempting to look forward by fixating backwards, appear to describe the two types of imagination this paper has sought to explore.

What is even more interesting, however, is that – instead of it being a question of exclusivity of either one or the other mode of future-oriented talk – an oscillation between the two can be observed, making it possible to firmly distinguish the two only in theory, since these appear to be woven together inseparably in actual discourse around the future of Turin and Fiat. So, for instance, Campetti (2000) sometimes appears to gaze in despair at the breaking down of the link between Fiat and Turin, which would leave the latter an empty capital of hope. At other times, however, the same author zooms out of the Turin-Fiat association, undertaking a move that allows him to conclude that, the day this relationship is broken, 'the city of Turin will resume its march in the quest of a different future, one that will hopefully be freer and more plural' (Campetti 2000).

Causal, deterministic narratives, therefore, need not always be as starkly opposed to indeterminate narratives that are drenched in a deep sense of contingency. The case of Vittorio Bertola provides an illustration

of this. In fact, he recounts how the experience of Fiat carried by the generation of thirty to forty-years olds which he belongs to – along with many of his fellow members of the Turin chapter of Movimento 5 Stelle – has been that of a constantly decaying productive reality following hiccupping patterns of growth and recession (Bertola 2011). This, he pointed out in the interview, affected his outlook on Fiat's eventual departure from Turin: the divorce being, after all, a necessary, almost desirable⁵, one; the writing having been on the wall all along. And this 'prophesized' anticipation drawn out of past experience explains the more moderate emphasis placed on the economic loss that a post-Fiat Turin would suffer, in comparison – for instance – to the winning town mayor Piero Fassino, who – by virtue of his age, in Bertola's reading – might have been more inclined to cling to an image of Fiat as the pulsing heart of Turin's economy⁶. A divorce that

⁵ Bertola explained – referring to anecdotal evidence from personal acquaintances – that, in Fiat's industrial policy, thirty to forty-year olds are often regarded as the expendable ones, unlike the older generations of fifty-somethings or the younger generations of low-cost interns, that usually 'make the cut' (Bertola 2011). A departure of Fiat from Turin – always according to Bertola – might force this dynamic generation of in-betweeners to take risks and reinvent itself (with positive spillovers for Turin's productive vocation) by removing the suction exerted by a company like Fiat, where thirty to forty-year olds fail to receive the freedom to innovate they deserve.

⁶ Interestingly enough, this difference is reflected in the respective electoral programmes of Piero Fassino (who was eventually elected town mayor of the city of Turin) and Bertola: the former boldly stressing his commitment to keeping Fiat in Turin (see Comitato Insieme per Torino 2011, 5), the latter looking beyond Fiat, towards the exploration of the city's productive capabilities towards other, more sustainable sectors (see Movimento 5 Stelle Torino 2011). Although this direction has not been specifically explored in the research underpinning this paper, the above appears to suggest how generational politics might have played a role in the shaping of the different candidates' electoral manifestos, par-

has been a long time coming, therefore, puts Turin in the condition of having to rediscover itself, and this occasion in turn propels ‘thinking outside the box’, by imagining a future for Turin as one that allows further cultivation of its industrial core through the promotion of an ‘ecosystem of innovation’, in which the conditions are present for the next vocation of Turin to emerge following the unpredictable, non-linear dynamics of entrepreneurial success; an ecosystem that appears possible through the fleeting juxtaposition of distant examples and the experience of the unexpected as it has unfolded elsewhere.

The above examples, by showing the inter-wovenness of different approaches to the future, illustrate the oscillation, which makes critical discourse over a certain status quo unlocatable, as it needs to imbue itself with the sense of despair and melancholy (or necessity) coming from a rigid causal, backward-looking approach to enclosing the future and use this as a stepping stone to think outside of rigid categories taken from the past, and claustrophobic causal pronouncements.

What the future of Fiat and of Turin will be, this paper cannot ever claim to disclose or know. What it appears to show, however, is that imagination about such future unfolds through a constant movement inside and outside of the Fiat universe, the latter acting as the pivotal kernel of projected narratives: some enclosed in a universe that fades out in a grim shadow, others sitting outside, bubbling with improbability and gasping for that hope that only an awareness of the contingency of the present and of the indeterminacy of the future prompts to look for.

ticularly considering that - as Bertola himself shared - twenty-five to forty-years olds formed the target electorate of Movimento 5 Stelle (see Bertola 2011).