



Citation: C. Barilaro, C. Cirelli, T. Graziano, L. Mercatanti (2020). The Centre-Periphery Dialectics in Eastern Sicily Retail System. An Exploratory Research. *Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana* serie 14, 3 Special Issue: 147-153. doi: 10.36253/bsgi-1000

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

The Centre-Periphery Dialectics in Eastern Sicily Retail System. An Exploratory Research

La dialettica centro-periferia nel sistema commerciale della Sicilia orientale. Una ricerca esplorativa

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Abstract. This paper aims at scrutinizing from an historical perspective the deep transformations shaped by retail spaces and new consumption patterns challenging long-entrenched dichotomies, such as the centre-periphery one. In particular, the exploratory research explores the territorial reconfiguration of the main Eastern Sicily metropolitan areas, Catania and Messina, from the lens of the retail geography, namely after the diffusion of new suburban retail formats which have completely upset deeply-rooted relations between urban core and suburban rings.

Keywords: centre-periphery dialectics, urban sprawl, suburban retail format, historical centre, Sicily.

Riassunto. Questo lavoro mira a esaminare, da una prospettiva storica, le profonde trasformazioni prodotte dagli spazi di vendita al dettaglio e i nuovi modelli di consumo che sfidano dicotomie a lungo trincerate, come quella centro-periferia. In particolare la ricerca esamina la riconfigurazione territoriale delle principali aree metropolitane della Sicilia orientale, Catania e Messina, dalla prospettiva della geografia commerciale, ponendo attenzione al periodo successivo alla diffusione di nuovi format commerciali della periferia che hanno sconvolto le relazioni profondamente radicate tra il nucleo urbano e gli stessi anelli suburbani.

Parole chiave: dialettica centro-periferia, espansione urbana, format commerciali suburbani, centro storico, Sicilia.

1. Introduction

Over the last decades, shopping has become one of the major driving forces which have been reshaping city morphology, functions and hierarchy, by fostering unprecedented relations between the urban core and suburban rings (Barata-Salgueiro, Cachinho 2011). As Crewe puts it (2000, 275) “retail geography has come to occupy a central position within social-scientific research” insofar as places, spaces and practices of consumption are embedded within new theoretical and methodological frameworks of economic geography (Crang 1996). This is principally due to the fact that “not only is shopping melting into everything, but everything is melting into shopping [...] Shopping is the medium by which the market has solidified its grip on our spaces, buildings, cities, activities, and lives. It is the material outcome of the degree to which the market economy has shaped our surroundings, and ultimately ourselves” (Leong 2001, 129).

As a matter of fact, the huge increase in the number of suburban retailing formats out of the USA, where they firstly emerged in the 1950's, has been recently concurring in transforming traditional urban dichotomies, such as those between urban centres and peripheries, inserted in the wider chancing landscapes fostered both by urban sprawl and urban shrinkage.

The impressive transformation of consumption practices, retail spaces and related territories also concerns *peripheral* economies, where new *shopping experiences* have been recently affecting old-established territorial structures and relations. This is the case of Sicily, where over the last decades consumptionscapes have been increasingly altered by the emergency of new retail formats, which have completely reshaped local territorial hierarchies, particularly in the eastern part of the island. In this context, the two main metropolitan areas, Catania and Messina, have underwent on the one hand an evolution towards the growing commodification of historic centres, increasingly swallowed up by fast fashion formats and commercial desertification; on the other hand, their peripheral areas have experienced a socio-economic and even territorial transformation due to new suburban retail formats. The remaining Sicilian eastern provinces have shown a growing functional autonomy in terms of retail services: Siracusa historic centre has been recently classified as one of the most commercially *resilient* in Italy, with low rates of shop closures (Cirelli, Graziano 2019), while its consumptionscapes have been increasingly catered to a cosmopolitan tourism target, as it also happened in Ragusa. According to the data retrieved from Confcommercio database, in Siracusa the

decrease in retail business in 2018 was of 7%, the lowest of the whole island, while food and tourism businesses registered the highest increase, equal to 56%; in Ragusa the decrease in retail businesses was of 10%, while the food and tourism businesses increased of 51%.

In Catania and Messina metropolitan areas new centre-periphery processes have emerged both in terms of new urban centralities and its relations with surrounding areas. Urban sprawl does not only entail the hyper-growth beyond urban administrative boundaries, but also the decentralization of activities, population and services in the urban fringe, to the point that suburbs traditionally regarded as peripheral have become the new centres of retail and services, often substituting the old historic ones. Thus, centrality is no longer a matter of physical localization, but it has become the outcome of a multilayered process where traditional spatial parameters have been replaced by new social and economic patterns (Cirelli et al. 2015).

This paper aims at evaluating the impact of new retailing spaces and patterns in the two metropolitan areas of Eastern Sicily, Catania and Messina, in order to scrutinize to what extent they have reshaped local territorial hierarchies. The paper is based on an exploratory secondary research approach, drawing both on the review of existing literature on the specific place-based case studies and the analysis of recent data, retrieved from institutional sources. In so doing, the paper can provide significant insights into past and current dynamics shaping centre-periphery relationship, apart from fresh reflections about the post-Covid potential evolution.

2. Catania

As the traditionally most vibrant commercial centre of Eastern Sicily, Catania has historically boasted a rich and variegated retail offer. The city maintains still today its commercial vocation and continues to play a relevant role as an attractive pole not only in the surrounding area, but for a wider territory involving the whole eastern Sicily, although Siracusa and Ragusa/Modica have recently gained a growing functional autonomy in terms of retail services and functions.

Over the last years, the transformation of centre-periphery socio-economic relations in the metropolitan area of Catania is a relevant example of how new retail spaces can challenge old-established territorial hierarchies, particularly in a geographical area marked by sharp contradictions (Cirelli 2007; Cirelli 2008).

From the seventies onwards, the city experienced the evolution of the relationship with the neighbor-

ing municipalities, where a demographic increase was registered owing to the population flows coming from the city centre. In a first phase, this involved the simple redistribution of the population, whilst the main administrative and service functions remained concentrated in the main urban core. Catania, in fact, remained a highly attractive pole and services centre for a broad catchment area, whereas the neighboring municipalities were confined to the function of *dormitories*. The main consequence was the increase in commuting rates and, therefore, congestion and saturation. Although some municipalities already had a relative functional autonomy, at least as far as lower rank commercial services were concerned, it was Catania the main attractive pole of the local urban hierarchy, due to the huge amount of higher-level services (Cirelli et al. 2016).

Classified as a metropolitan centre in the eighties, due to its demographic weight (about 500,000 inhabitants, except the hinterland), the city went on in following the main trends of centrifugal counter-urbanisation, although this demographic decentralization was not followed by a contemporary production delocalisation, economic diversification or decentralization of governance functions. In spite of the ever-lasting demographic decay, the centre of Catania remained for many years the main pole of retail, services and economic activities. From the 1980's onwards, public-private partnerships, the improvement in infrastructural networks as well as the europeization of territorial governance have triggered out the shift of the commercial function towards suburban areas, particularly in Misterbianco, a nearby municipality where a dense integrated retail areas emerged since the late 1980's.

Throughout the 1990's, suburban areas were punctuated with large retail chains ranging from Cash and Carry Metro (18,000 sqm), located in Misterbianco, and Auchan (73,000 sqm) located in a peripheral by highly accessible neighborhood of Catania.

It was in the late 2000's that new suburban retail formats began spreading in Catania metropolitan area, with a variegated set of multifunctional shopping centres and large-scale monobrand retail spaces (i.e. Conforama, Ikea).

Meanwhile, the consumptionscapes of the historical centre have underwent an increasing process of retail desertification, fostered by the growing number of closures of family-run businesses and the parallel "invasion" of fast fashion and franchising format (Cirelli et al. 2016).

Over the last two decades, the controversial relationship centre-periphery has been undergoing a process of reconfiguration, principally due to a peripheral retail

overgrowth with the emergence of new consumption spaces, such as shopping malls, articulate around large supermarkets chains, and big-scale monobrand retail shops.

As a consequence, the territorial hierarchy has been reshaped by a reticular system of interaction between Catania and the municipalities situated along the first suburban ring. Overlapping exchange flows among the several urban centers punctuating peri-urban and suburban areas have fostered the growing tertiarization of territories previously dependent on the centripetal attractiveness of the main urban centre, which now have been experiencing increasing rates of retail functional autonomy.

For decades the historical centre lost its residential attractiveness, while maintaining the functional-commercial one. It was with the emergence of suburban retail formats that the long-lasting relations among territories, consumption practices, local communities and retail spaces were completely upset, by shaping a completely new geography of consumption.

The development trajectory of these new commercial spaces mainly followed the North-South direction. Directed in a first phase towards the foothills, in a second stage the trajectory was oriented to the South and South-West of the city, within or in the proximity of two districts, the fifth and the sixth, in which there was a greater population density as well as strong territorial imbalances due to social and economic disadvantages (Cirelli et al. 2014).

The retail system of Catania, therefore, has recently developed towards reticular and polycentric consumption models and practices, aligning itself with other experiences in Italian and European cities. The strengthening of entertainment in shopping experiences as well as the new retailscapes catered to multifunctional consumers have fostered the proliferation of large-scale commercial and entertainment "parks", often accused not only of "killing" central retail areas, but also of concurring in eroding public space by a growing privatization (see Chiodelli, Moroni 2015 for an original reflection about it).

Even without ascribing the crisis of the city center retail exclusively to the emergence of suburban "gigantic size" retail, it is unquestionable that in recent years the economic structure of urban retail in central areas has weakened considerably (Cirelli et al. 2014). In the last decade, in fact, the commercial offer of the historic centre and the central area has aligned itself with the dictat of fast fashion, registering a proliferation of franchise stores and major low-cost clothing brands, levelling down the whole commercial offer. Furthermore, the dif-



Figure 1. Piazza Cairoli in the 1940s with the De Dominicis store and the XIX century Chiosco. Source: private collection.

difficulty of accessing bank credit, the growing competition with e-commerce, rising levels of urban unsustainability in central areas, due to congestion and traffic, have accelerated the fate of the neighbor's shop, forced to succumb to the big chains or to tourism-oriented services.

Data retrieved from *Confcommercio* (Association of tourism, services and retail businesses) database highlights the constant decrease in the number of new retail businesses opened over the last 15 years in Catania, together with the increase in shutdowns. Apart from the number of activity cessations, in the last 15 years several retail spaces have been transformed in food and tourism-oriented businesses (restaurants, bars and accommodation) to the point to increase of +43% in 2018, while the number of retail businesses decreased of -14% (Cirelli, Graziano 2019).

Nowadays the commercial crisis has reached a global scale, due to the Covid-19 pandemics which has further increased an already existing tendency to decline in the historical centre and the hyper-growth of suburban retail formats, whose supply is not sufficiently supported by an adequate demand. The phantom of demalling is at stake, insofar as numerous retail spaces inside many shopping centers remain empty for long periods after activity cessations.

3. Identity crisis and new retail dynamics in the City of the Strait

In the aftermath of the 1908 earthquake, the Messina reconstruction project completely redesigned the urban pattern. Retail, which until then had been the foundation of the productive system, moved to the southern edges of the historical area, where the new city was growing. The concentration of shacks in this area led to the development of economic and commercial activities triggered by the reconstruction itself. *Piazza Cairoli* (Fig. 1) and *Viale San Martino* became the main urban axis, acquiring a new centrality not only from the commercial point of view, but also from a social, cultural and recreational perspective (Ioli Gigante 1986, 145-146).

This configuration remained until the second war conflict, after which Messina was not able to highlight its economic specificity and the administrative function became the main source of income (D'Angelo 1999, 8). The retail distribution system moved towards increasingly large and highly specialized areas. This allowed Messina to express its economic and cultural supremacy towards Calabria. *Piazza Cairoli*, architectural square, soon became the *living room* of the city and together with the road axes that branch off from it, will be

enriched with numerous and elegant shops; *viale San Martino* was punctuated with shop windows hosting varied and elegant retail facilities.

At the end of the last century, the decline in commercial functions in the central area of the city and the increasingly significant presence of the Chinese community in the economic and social fabric redesigned its commercial landscape, while the birth of new urban polarizations along the Tyrrhenian coast of the Peloritani Mountains¹, able to express commercial liveliness, strongly compromised the attractiveness of Messina.

The economic and cultural changes occurred in Messina in recent decades have resulted in a spontaneous reorganization of the retail offer, marked by the advancement of large retail chains or the phenomenon of franchising and the emergence of online shopping: a weak and incomplete innovation process.

The southern urban suburbs of the city are dotted with new small and medium-sized retail centres, also Chinese, due to the increase in housing density following the low value of real estate income property, which was followed by an expansion of commercial activities. In particular, the Tremestieri area became a multifunctional hub, an important link between the motorway and the port. The namesake shopping center built in the area - the first in Messina - represents the only experience of medium-sized extra-urban polarization². Its commercial offer and attractiveness, however, is intended to serve only the most immediate needs of local users³.

In this process of economic standardization, the urban image of Messina was modified: the new low-profile architectural geometries⁴ transformed *Piazza Cairoli*, hiding its elegance and weakening the fragile territorial identity. The historic shops of the city and the iconic places - where before there were privileged places of commerce and strolling - closed⁵; some old-established territorial structures move to streets near the centre to save on rent; others change their intended use⁶. On the

other hand, as witnesses of a recent past, some important shops remain⁷ together with the nineteenth-century liberty style *Chiosco*, famous for the *salt lemonade*.

The disappearance of traditional stores is offset by the spread of the franchise retail stores, in particular in the sectors of fashion and food (i.e. McDonald's in *Piazza Cairoli*). *Piazza Cairoli*, *viale San Martino* and *via Dei Mille* are full of franchise stores. In order to counter this phenomenon, some *retailers* tried to adapt to the new distribution logic of online sales, developing new strategies to emphasize the consumer shopping experience in the 'real' store.

The proposal to transform a street into a Natural Shopping Centre by the *Millevetrine Association* has recently taken place in *via Dei Mille*⁸, a parallel street to *viale San Martino*, which during the Christmas period becomes a very popular pedestrian area. This project is the first and only of its kind in Messina. It aims to revive quality trade, considering that the pedestrian precinct must involve the main city stakeholders applying the basic principles of *visual merchandising* and *experiential and relational marketing*, also aiming to promote tourism in this area⁹. The debate on this issue is still open (Barilaro 2019, 152-153).

Therefore, the history of Messina highlights the economic, social and cultural limits of this city, which has failed to propose multifunctional shopping centres and new areas of entertainment to contrast the economic desertification of its urban centre, as happened, for example, to Catania (Cirelli, Graziano 2019, 95). The City of the Strait, which with the 1908 earthquake lost its historic centre, is now also losing its urban centre, subject to continuous changes that distance it from its identity. The urgency of systemic commercial policies in order to revitalize the beating heart of the city is evident, maintaining however the residual historical features that are still at least partially visible and interpretable. Messina needs a new visibility, new economic and functional prospects, capable of restoring the economic vitality. Messina needs to build a model that recognises signs of the past to redesign the city of the future.

¹ Especially Milazzo, Barcellona and Spadafora.

² The *Maregrossa Shopping Centre*, recently built in the neighborhood close to the city center, rather than a shopping centre, falls into the category "shopping gallery" (Porto 2019, 181-185).

³ Favorite destinations are Catania (in particular the *Centro Sicilia* in Misterbianco and *Etnapolis* in Belpasso) and Enna (*Sicily Outlet Village* in Agira).

⁴ Poorly harmonious and malfunctioning urban furnishings and ugly metal structures for the tram service, reintroduced after fifty years.

⁵ From 2008 to 2018, 122 historic stores in the central area closed (Confcommercio Imprese per l'Italia 2019). Among these, the *Magazzini Piccolo* exerted an attraction on the municipalities of Aspromonte (Calabria) and the province of Messina, while *De Dominici*, *Siracusano*, *Rinciari* or *Rotino* had a significant position in the clothing sector.

⁶ Perhaps the most emblematic case is the *Odeon Cinema* transformed into a *Zara* franchise.

⁷ High profile stores such as *Iannello* clothing since 1865; the *Casaramona* pastry shops since 1884, *Irrera* since 1910 and *Santoro* since 1912; the *La Motta* jewelers since 1929 and *Gullo* since 1948; the *Bisazza* gift shop since 1888, the *Prinzi* stationery since 1909 (Barilaro 2019, 149).

⁸ In *via dei Mille* there are 86 retail activities with 32 different product categories.

⁹ This would be important, especially in relation to cruise tourism, since shipping traffic within the port is very dynamic, with high growth prospects. In fact, in 2018, about 400 thousand cruise passengers arrived in Messina.

4. Conclusions

The exploratory research has shown to what extent retail spaces, commercial functions and consumption practices are able to completely transform urban hierarchies at the sub-regional level. Although with several differences in terms of urban heritage and commercial vocation, the place-based case studies of Catania and Messina have highlighted the crucial role played by new consumptionscapes in re-shaping long-entrenched dichotomies (core/ring, centre/periphery). The territories of both metropolitan areas have undergone a significant evolution from a first stage of centripetal attractiveness of the historical centre and central areas, followed by a reconfiguration of territorial balances due to a new retail functional autonomy of neighboring municipalities after the diffusion of suburban retail formats. Furthermore, the recent Covid-19 pandemics has been completely reshaping forms, functions and hierarchies of consumption practices and models. During the lockdown, generally e-commerce has increased its territorial diffusion, together with the (temporary?) rediscovery of family-run proximity businesses, often reorganized with home-delivery services. The post-lockdown current phase is more complex to interpret from the lens of retail geography, since consumption practices significantly will depend on several factors, such as the households purchasing power, the reopening of several retail/food businesses, the risk of new restrictions.

As a matter of fact, it is more crucial than ever to scrutinize the relations among territorial development, urban hierarchies, economic structures and consumption practices and spaces at the local level.

In so doing, the paper provides useful insights which could be useful for other researchers, policy makers and institutional actors in order to reconceptualize territorial governance at the local scale, by underlining the even more relevant role played by retail spaces and consumption patterns in moulding new relations and functions.

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