

Rome. Revive the sense of community

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Abstract: In the last twenty years the city has progressively dispersed in a vast territory, becoming a city with very low densities incompatible with the urban dimension. The city went on its own, both spontaneously, with the abusive, but also when it was “planned”. For example, it was decided to distribute alleged centralities that would never have been served by an efficient public transport service. What city has Rome become? A city that has experienced a dispersed expansion and has produced settlements in which more and more residents are attracted. Now, around the ring road, immediately before and immediately afterwards, one million Roman citizens live, if not more. Almost a third of the population lives there.

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In June, 2018, the newspaper *Il Foglio* an article by Salvatore Merlo bore the title “Inept Capital, Infected Nation”.¹ The title obviously was a parodistic reference to another, the famous title which *L’Espresso* in 1955 gave to an inquiry by Manlio Cancogni,² “Corrupt Capital, Infected Nation”. It seemed to me that both the title and the article in *Il Foglio* introduce a diminishing of the nature of the question, ineptitude in place of corruption. While in the fifties one denounced, in fact, the infectious diffusion and transmission from Rome to the national territory of corruption, today the pathological doubt is ineptitude. In any case, from 1955 to now, a relationship between Rome and the rest of the country may be established, a relationship based on one disease: Rome exported corruption, while now it exports incompetence. In any case a nation is rapidly infected one it comes in contact with its capital. In any case, one may ask oneself, whether Rome is still a capital and

1. Salvatore Merlo, *Capitale inetta, nazione infetta*, *Il Foglio* 25 giugno 2018.

2. Manlio Cancogni, *Quattrocento miliardi*, “*L’Espresso*”, 11 dicembre 1955, pagina 3. Il titolo in copertina era “Capitale corrotta=nazione infetta”.

whether, inasmuch, it mirrors this country. If, that is, in Rome there is evidence of phenomena which may be traceable, to a greater or lesser extent, in the rest of the country. Turning back to the topic of ineptitude, it is obvious that this referred to the Roman administration, and moreover, the vast consensus obtained in 2016 did not repeat in the 2018 political elections, nor in the municipal elections in two densely populated municipalities. In both of these elections Rome went against the prevailing trend of the rest of Italy, as if the Roman incompetence were not an element over which Italy had lingered and reflected upon. Following this reasoning it is possible to go on to ask oneself what is the consistency today of the image of Rome and whether there is still an evocative force which buttresses its role as capital. If Rome had been chosen as capital not simply due to its central geographical location or being the junction of railroad lines, but rather because in it a powerful function of fusing of a nation community could be discerned, it is then necessary to verify whether these reasons are still active. Rome was chosen to be the capital more due to its own past rather than its own present. In 1870 its history had been reduced to a faded memory. And now? Today, are the images of Rome and the representations it produces fitting to those of a capital city?

The moods which are easily identifiable in the public debates indicate that the overall reputation of the city in the rest of Italy has never been as low as it has been in the last few years. I can think, just by way of example, of the effect created by the association of two terms like mafia and capital (tr. note, the expression “mafia Capitale” was a slogan against the corruption in Rome), two terms which a court ruling has juxtaposed indelibly. To have spoken of a specific mafia that operates in the capital city and is accompanied by gangs of the ‘ndrangheta or camorra, operating for decades in the city, has created in the collective imagination of many Italians a drastic diminishing of the city’s reputation.

To what then should correspond, instead, the image of a capital city? Lucio Barbera referred to some sites in the capital city, its historical center, its cultural heritage, to which one could add its religious contours. I ask whether these elements continue to work. For a city to be a capital it must have symbolic sites to which one can refer. Over the years, however, with respect to the imaginative power of the central and historical center’s archaeological area, of the renaissance and baroque Rome, among the symbolic sites of Rome the café of a service station in Corso Francia has appeared where the group around

Carminati used to meet. A site that even film and television shows have made emblematically popular and more powerful, symbolically, than what Magliana meant in the seventies, having become famous for the gang of the same name (tr. note: “banda della Magliana” was the name of a criminal organization founded in Rome in 1975)

But there is also another aspect. Besides the fading away of the symbolic form of the capital-city coincides the question: is Rome a city? Is there a city that sustains this role of capital?

In the last twenty years has gone progressively scattered over a vast territory, becoming a city territory with extremely low population density incompatible with its urban dimension. The city has gone on its own, whether spontaneously through unauthorized construction, or even when “planned”. It has been decided, for example, to allocate certain presumed centralities which were never to be served by an efficient public transportation system. What kind of city has Rome become? A city that has experienced a dispersive expansion and has produced settled areas which attract ever more residents. By now, around the raccordo anulare (ring junction encircling Rome) live a million, if not more, Roman citizens. Almost a third of its population lives there. They are Romans who travel back and forth with their cars every day, that do not have an efficient transportation system and whose rights to the city are suffocated. The dispersion and absence of services is neither a characteristic of a city nor, even less, of a capital.

Naples, emblematic city of an unhealthy growth in the second half of the twentieth century, maintains a compact and consolidated urban dimension and, even if with enormous difficulty, is able to provide relatively acceptable conditions for its citizens, even though not with the best management or administration. There is no comparing the subway that services Naples with the one in Rome. The housing dispersal in Rome has had repercussions on the political representation and therefore on the functioning of democracy, and the level and strength of the latter. The studies which Walter Tocci writes about in his book *Non si piange su una città coloniale* (One does not cry over a colonial city) are extremely useful in understanding how zones where more than a million Romans live there are mainly mechanisms of local oligarchs.

Despite this, Rome is nonetheless a city that surprises, it is a city whose political moods sometimes follows impetuous rhythms, particularly in the outer, denser, areas, furthest from the city center, with outcomes that go beyond the historical suburbs.

We must come to know, travel and connect these zones. The inconstancy of political moods is shown also in the last electoral rounds in the municipalities. Among us is Giovanni Caudo, who has just been elected president of a municipality that begins more or less in the center of Rome, but that ends well outside of the ring junction, and has marked a net trend reversal with respect to what seemed to be a consolidated orientation from a political perspective.

I close this discourse not as a chronicler, but as a resident and citizen of Rome, speaking of an infrastructure which could finally function, whose gestation and realization required two decades: a bicycle lane which crosses the Balduina neighborhood overlooking the rail tracks that lead to Viterbo. I remember the assemblies we held in Balduina – Walter Tocci participated as vice mayor – where we disputed doubling the railroad the passed between the buildings. We managed to achieve that a section of the tracks would be enclosed to realize the structure. This intervention is in line with the proposal to physically unite, to compact in a dense chainmail, a zone of Rome which goes from San Filippo Neri to Monte Ciocchi, from whose heights one can see all of Rome (where the famous scene in “Roma città aperta” was filmed). The Balduina is a residential quarter, an example in the literature of the urban speculation of the 1950s and 1960s, which still bears the signs in the holes that from time to time open up due to the excess loads of the buildings. This new bike lane infrastructure allows us to look at our neighborhood differently, to observe and discover it from other points of view. The bike lane is the only true public space realized in this zone, where the only existing piazzas are enormous parking lots or are not true piazzas at all; it is an infrastructure that connects many parts of Balduina on foot and permits an estranging look upon a neighborhood that seemed to offer nothing to say, and instead regains much being observed from another perspective. Then it is a place to meet, to walk one’s dog, to go cycling etc... The problem is that this infrastructure, achieved after twenty years of work, is kept in humiliating conditions. The care of plants is absolutely indecent and only thanks to the initiatives of some local inhabitants the grass is cut and the waste bins are emptied.

And this is the point: Rome is a city in which even when there manages to be an infrastructure built that reanimates the community spirit, this is allowed to deteriorate ignominiously. And this, I ask myself, whether it is a condition worthy of a city, but especially of a city.