Article

Urban political strategies in times of crisis: A multiscalar perspective on smart cities in Italy

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Abstract
European cities are experiencing a mushrooming of a new urban imagery amid multiple types of crisis. In fact, the 'smart city' has become a widely spread vision used by a variety of powerful key actors as well as a top-down urban political strategy that is applied in order to promote new arrangements, models and technologies for almost all policy areas. By using the Italian case as a point of reference, this paper analyses how smart city strategies are institutionalized and embedded in times of crisis on different spatial scales. Therefore, the paper adapts a strategic-relational approach that provides a conceptual framework for understanding the spatial dimension of smart city strategies. It argues that smart city strategies reflect a set of multiscalar political strategies leading to new responsibilities and powers on a local scale, as well as the creation of new state territoriality. Smart cities in Italy are part of metropolitan reforms that strengthen the role of large cities while reproducing existing territorial inequalities. Furthermore, they are used to create new public–private partnerships and new investment opportunities on different spatial scales. In addition, a content analysis of smart city rankings and reports sheds light on the modes of representation of smart city strategies, analysing them as elements of policymaking in times of crisis.

Introduction

European cities are experiencing a mushrooming of a new urban imagery amid multiple types of crises (Schönig and Schipper, 2016). 'Smart cities' are emerging everywhere (Morozov and Bria, 2018; Wiig and Wyly, 2016). The 'smart city' has become a widely spread vision used by a variety of key actors as well as an urban political strategy that is applied in order to promote new arrangements, models and technologies for almost all types of policy areas (housing, mobility, energy, infrastructure, economy, public administration, education, tourism, planning) (Caragliu et al., 2011). In fact, all kinds of European cities – from small ones up to large urban agglomerations – are devising smart city strategies or declare at least that they want to become 'smart' (March and Ribera-Fumaz, 2016). Besides rhetorical statements, an enormous number of projects, conferences, reports, rankings and even standardizations

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mirror the form and materiality of 'the actually existing smart city' (Shelton et al., 2015). This 'smart city boom', which started in the heyday of the global economic crisis (Vanolo, 2014) and has been initiated by various actors, such as multinational (information and communication technology (ICT)) companies (Söderström et al., 2014) and national or European Union (EU) institutions and programmes, has also led to a growing amount of critical research in urban studies that questions and investigates different aspects of this phenomenon (Marvin et al., 2016). Starting with Hollands' (2008) general critique of smart city labelling as a new version of the entrepreneurial city, research has revealed discursive, governmental and power structures behind the smart city imagery (Klauser et al., 2014; Vanolo, 2014), has analysed the role of big data (Kitchin, 2014) or has questioned the general quality of smart urbanism (Luque-Ayala et al., 2016).

Despite that, research on the smart city phenomenon is still at an early stage and is often based on single case studies, as argued by Luque-Ayala and Marvin (2015). Moreover, the discussion sometimes lacks a broader theoretical orientation, as has been noted by Marvin et al. (2016). Linkages between smart city approaches, territorial governance and urban politics, in particular, have barely been investigated. However, this seems an important issue in order to explain and theorize smart cities in different spatial contexts.

Considering the previously mentioned shortcomings, this paper provides a multiscalar perspective in order to understand the conceptual logics as well as dynamics of smart city approaches by scrutinizing the role of strategies, scales and actors. In order to deconstruct the complex interplay of political practices at different spatial scales, I will draw on Brenner's strategic-relational approach (Brenner, 2004) that helps to look beyond city scales and technological issues and puts smart city strategies in a socio-spatial-political context. Empirically, the paper focuses on the institutionalization and implementation of smart city strategies in crisis-ridden Italy, which has been a front-runner regarding smart city initiatives in Europe (Pollio, 2016). By using the Italian case as a point of reference, we will also be able to understand how the smart city as a multiscalar political strategy is combined with and embedded in times of crisis.

The paper starts with a brief overview of the theoretical approach. It outlines the main characteristics of the strategic-relational approach that is applied in order to investigate the multiscalarity of smart city strategies. I then sketch the smart city crisis nexus on a European scale and analyse conceptual issues of smartness as a political strategy. In the following section, I will give an overview of the macro-economic situation in Italy by highlighting the impact of austerity measures on the urban scale and the linkages to smart city strategies. The paper proceeds by reviewing the arrival, institutionalization and selectivity[1] of smart city strategies in Italy in order to understand the impact of smart city strategies on the scalar organization of governance. The last section investigates modes of representation of smart city projects in rankings and reports and links them to policymaking in times of crisis.

The paper is based on empirical data deriving from document analysis and interviews with EU officials and city planners in Italy, together with explorative talks during several conferences and seminars. The document analysis comprises a broad range of national and urban policy papers, legal texts, national rankings and annual smart city reports. The series of qualitative interviews is part of an on-going research project with leading urban planners and key stakeholders on different spatial scales (United Nations (UN), EU, national smart city agencies, Italian city planners and consultants) regarding smart city governance.

Analysing urban politics from a strategic-relational perspective

How does one make sense of numerous smart city strategies, projects and programmes? How does one grasp them conceptually? Starting from an empirical point of view, smart city strategies in many European cities are often introduced by powerful politico-economic actors who use a variety of governmental tools (projects, masterplans, rankings, initiatives and narratives) to promote the smart city imagery (Crivello, 2015; Söderström et al., 2014; Vanolo, 2014). Taking into account this top–down setting of smart city strategies and the type of actors involved, two themes for further research emerge: (a) the need to scrutinize the

role of public or state institutions and state action; and (b) the need to analyse the (conceptual) meaning and the scalar setting of smart city strategies.

Another common feature of all kinds of smart city initiatives is that they are represented as a complex set of ideas that will help to transform urban infrastructures and to solve a number of urban problems (Lombardi and Vanolo, 2015). Although they address mostly urban issues, they create various links to different spatial scales beyond the urban. This illustrates the idea that smart city strategies can be seen and should be conceptualized as part of a wider multiscalar political setting. The most prominent examples are EU funding schemes, which have certainly played a very central role in spreading smart city strategies and programmes across the EU, as the following citation illustrates (Crivello, 2015).

> In 2009/2010 the words 'smart city' entered the scene. IBM had launched their smarter cities programme and the European Commission decided to copy it. After that, the EU Commission started, for the first time, to promote technology-related research in the name of smart cities. Hence, lighthouse projects, technology platforms and joint-programming initiatives were implemented. […] However, the EU Commission faced difficulties in defining what the technology platform 'smart city' should achieve. EU member states reacted immediately and founded the smart city member states initiative. Consequently, each EU member state started to launch their own smart city programmes. Due to the fact that the urban agenda is set up differently, there are a huge variety of smart city programmes in the EU. (From an interview with a former senior executive European Commission, SET-Plan coordinator)

The citation reveals a kind of downscaling of smart city imagery on the one hand as well as indicating the active role of the national scale on the other. Indeed, there are a variety of nationally financed programmes and initiatives in different countries that have promoted smart city projects since the outset (e.g. the Italian Ministry for Education, Research and Universities (MIUR), the Climate and Energy fund in Austria or the National platform 'Zukunftsstadt' in Germany). This alludes to the point that smart city strategies exist on, and tackle, different spatial scales.

A third common feature of smart city strategies is that they are labelled as consensual, responsible and foresighted urban visions that lead to innovation in the urban realm (Wiig and Wyly, 2016). In fact, many urban policymakers argue that smart city strategies are replacing sectoral urban policies with a set of more integral urban policies, as the following citations reveal.

> In Rome, the smart city theme has so far been approached in a sectoral manner that is why the whole city seems to lag behind and is underdeveloped in terms of all the different smart city issues. […] Therefore we have to take into account international standards as well as the first steps of the Vademecum ANCI. However, smart city is a holistic vision that integrates all kinds of governmental components for a better quality of life. (Roma Cd, 2016: 28)

> We need to rethink our cities. Cities need to be based upon innovation, green economy and digitalization. But we also need a cultural change which means that we need to abandon the 19th century style of urban policymaking that still manages our cities […] That is why the smart city is of utmost importance. (Former Mayor of Turin, available at: http://www.anci.it/index.cfm?layout=dettaglio&IdDett=48648)

Although the smart city is represented as an innovative and integral urban policy model that connects formally unrelated actors, a huge number of projects in different European cities demonstrate a rather selective scenario, since the projects are usually managed by a rather small group of public and private actors.

In order to understand this complex setting of spatial scales, selectivity and the different types of actors involved this paper adopts Brenner's strategic-relational approach, since this offers a conceptual framework that is able to scrutinize the multiscalarity of political strategies (2004; 2009). In a nutshell, a strategic-relational approach makes it possible to question the spatial dimension of state power, since it generally tries to understand 'geographies of statehood under modern capitalism' (Brenner, 2004: 93). By taking the example of western Europe in the period 1960–2000, Brenner has shown how a variety of political strategies have changed the scalar architecture by introducing urban

locational policies that are meant to strengthen the role of city regions 'within supranational (European and global) circuits of capital accumulation' (Brenner, 2009: 128). In this regard, a strategic-relational approach enables us to link changes in urban governance and to use them empirically in order to grasp processes and changes in the scalar configuration of societies (Brenner, 2004).[2] This means that new arrangements of competences and powers should be questioned as political acts, which operate spatially and tend to privilege particular actors, interests and spaces (Brenner, 2004: 87–90).

Taking this particular perspective as a theoretical starting point offers a conceptual lens for an investigation of the two research themes that were introduced at the beginning of this chapter (role of state institutions and the scalar setting of smart city strategies). Moreover, this approach helps one to question the institutional framework of (urban) policymaking and to reflect on the selectivity of political strategies. Last but not least, a strategic-relational approach provides the possibility of studying the transformative power of urban political strategies and their dialectical relationality.

The crisis nexus and smart city making at the supranational scale

Strategies represent mid- to long-term visions. Apart from that, strategies are often applied in times of crisis since they constitute a kind of antipode to the disruptive (chaotic) nature of crisis, as Vogelpohl (2016) notes. Therefore, strategy and crisis are dialectically related as they are often represented as two sides of the same coin. This relationality holds true for smart city strategies, which entered the political stage of Europe shortly after the beginning of the global financial crisis.

In 2009, the European Commission published an official strategy paper that emphasized for the first time the relevance of the smart city as an integral part of the EU's climate change policy and presented it as an essential element of a low carbon economy. In fact, the smart city became part of the programmatic Strategic Energy Technology Plan (SET-Plan), which itself was 'set up as a reaction, in 2007, to the Ukrainian gas crisis in 2006' (from an interview with a former

senior executive European Commission, SET-Plan coordinator). The SET-Plan stated that the smart cities initiative 'has the objective to create the conditions to trigger the mass market take-up of energy efficiency technologies' (European Commission, 2009: 7). Consequently, the EU commission officially launched a competition regarding the smart city by calling for ambitious and pioneer cities, research institutions and private investors to test and apply smart city projects and initiatives.[3] In addition, the EU commission estimated €11 billion as the amount of investment that is needed to realize a transformation towards smarter cities and energy efficiency.[4] This scheme of supranational funding opportunities created huge interest from policymakers at different spatial scales, since the EU commission intensified its initiatives by launching, for example, the European Innovation Partnership (EIP) on Smart Cities and Communities in 2011. Southern European countries and cities were especially attracted, particularly (see the next sections) since budgets and revenues had been reduced dramatically due to the economic crisis and austerity policies (Rossi, 2016). These are just two early examples that indicate the EU's role and the discursive as well as the politico-economic impact that smart city strategies have triggered on different spatial scales since 2010/2011.

Besides being depicted as a new pro-growth strategy, the previously mentioned EU policy paper presents the smart city as an anti-crisis strategy (2009: 12). The following citation highlights this aspect.

> The current economic crisis, combined with growing citizen expectations, is placing increasing pressure on European cities to provide better and more efficient infrastructures and services, often for less cost. This trend has contributed to the growing popularity and use of the term 'Smart City'. (EPIC EPfIc, 2013)

Smart cities are presented as a way to do urban politics for less money. Here, we can identify a narrative of cost-efficiency that makes them adaptable to other multiscalar political strategies, for example, austerity policies, as noted by Pollio (2016). A further EU policy paper confirms this argument. In 2010, the EU Commission published its official anti-crisis strategy. The *Europe 2020 strategy* called for a new era of *smart growth* in times of crisis (European Commission, 2010). This indicates

another nexus between smart policies and crisis. While *smart growth* is designed as a general economic leitmotif focusing on technology and innovation as its major policies, smart city strategies – as a major element of the EU digital agenda – are part of the operational instruments for implementation at the urban scale (European Commission, 2010: 11; Pollio, 2016: 520). This interplay illustrates two general aspects: (a) smart city strategies are part of a wider set of selective political strategies that aim to connect public and private actors; and (b) smart city strategies seem to be hybrid and adaptable to different socio-political circumstances and to other kinds of strategies.

Origin and characteristics of smart city strategies

In fact, being originally a planning strategy that emerged in the 1990s and was meant to densify US city regions and to regulate urban sprawl in US cities, the smart growth doctrine travelled and was absorbed in Europe by remaining an eclectic and hybrid planning approach that combines sustainability and participation as well as economic and financial efficiency in general and uses ICT and business-led initiatives to tackle urban problems in particular (Allaby and Park, 2013; Dierwechter, 2013; Hollands, 2008). Dierwechter calls it the 'syncretic qualities' of smart growth that connect 'seemingly irreconcilable claims about preferred social worlds' (2013: 2278) with classical sets of economic growth policies and planning regulations. Similar characteristics apply to smart city strategies as well. They are often described as fuzzy and flexible concepts that indeed conflate heterogeneous goals (sustainability, economic growth, social inclusion) and topics (housing, mobility, governance, planning, economy and infrastructure) (Rosati and Conti, 2016; Vanolo, 2014). The same holds true if we consider the spatial dimension of smart city strategies. They are adapted in very heterogeneous circumstances from small cities up to global metropolises. Moreover, the smart concept is not only bound to the city scale, since we can find it at the regional level where it gets transformed to a pro-growth strategy that aims to create smart regions (Salvia et al., 2016).

Brenner has outlined similar cross-scale and ambivalent characteristics in his study of urban and regional policies in western Europe between 1960 and 2000. In fact, he argues that 'since the 1990s, new forms of state rescaling (neighbourhoods, metropolitan regions and transnational interurban networks) have emerged largely in response to the crisis tendencies engendered through the first wave of urban locational policy' (2009: 128).

Regarding the smart city, I argue that the fuzziness has to be perceived as a particular characteristic of the smart city phenomenon that establishes possibilities for selective use. In fact, by merging and mixing goals and topics, smart city strategies create adaptability to other political strategies across time, space and scale. Therefore, they represent a bridge to other kinds of rationalities and modes of governance. This adaptability seems to be an especially important element in times of crisis since a crisis is a 'moment of decisive intervention and transformation', as Jessop argues (2013: 39). The following section will elaborate this argument by analysing the role of smart city strategies in times of crisis in the case of Italy.

The national and subnational scales: Smart city strategies in Italy in times of crisis

This section starts with an analysis of the wider politico-economic situation of Italy before and after the emergence of the global financial crisis. This helps one to understand why smart city strategies emerged and to reflect on the multiscalar setting of smart city strategies that will be discussed subsequently.

Features of urban austerity in Italy

Although the impact of the global financial crisis on Italy's banking system was limited, the crisis hit the Italian 'real economy' in quite a dramatic way (Caterina, 2014). In particular, the very important manufacturing sector had been affected severely and decreased by more than 20% between 2007 and 2009; about 20% of firms in the manufacturing sector stopped operating (Confindustria, 2013). Since the public debt also started to increase, the Berlusconi

government introduced – in line with the general EU strategy – the first anti-crisis strategies in 2008, mainly focusing on austerity measures. This marked the beginning of a series of further anti-crisis measures and packages that included a reduction in public spending, the privatization of public infrastructure (e.g. water utility, transportation), an increase in the retirement age and an attempt to increase foreign capital from offshore tax havens (Caterina, 2014).

The crisis evolved into a serious sovereign debt crisis in summer 2011 and the Berlusconi government was replaced by a so-called technocratic government led by former EU commissioner Mario Monti in November 2011. This shift in government also meant a change in the crisis narrative, as crisis became a new normality or modus operandi. This resulted in an increase in anti-crisis measures as well as a confirmation of austerity as the main anti-crisis leitmotif shared by the most important institutional actors on a national scale, such as the above-mentioned Monti government, the President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, or *Confindustria*, the Italian chamber of commerce and employer's association (Pollio, 2016). Moreover, this intensification of austerity policies meant a further transfer of austerity to the urban-local scale.

When reviewing the anti-crisis decisions of Italian governments of that period one can conclude that austerity measures were aimed at reducing expenditure and services, especially on an urban-local scale (Patti and Polyak, 2016). Transfers to local government were cut dramatically. There are estimations that the financial resources of Italian municipalities were reduced by €16 billion between 2008 and 2013 (Morlino and Piana, 2014). This financial restructuring of course had different outcomes and happened for different reasons in different municipalities, but it generally significantly reduced the quality and quantity of public services (the health sector, education, infrastructure and cultural activities) on an urban scale. Moreover, law 243 introduced a new constitutional principle, the so-called 'balanced budget', which is now a main principle for all public authorities and all kind of public policies. This has generally reduced the possibility of local governments doing direct investments (Morlino and Piana, 2014). Another feature of

urban austerity is associated with the privatization of municipal assets, which was intensified by a decision made in July 2012 that called for the selling of real estate assets and the privatization of state-owned companies up to the value of 1 per cent of the national gross domestic product (GDP) (Goretti and Landi, 2013). Again, the urban-local scale was seen as a strategic field of anti-crisis intervention since more than 50% of Italy's real estate assets and stock holdings are at the local level, while at the same time the local government debt was only 6% of the GDP in 2012 (Goretti and Landi, 2013). These examples indicate that austerity represents a political strategy consisting of heterogeneous measures that are adaptable to different kinds of scalar settings, but which especially affect the local scale (Bifulco, 2016; Peck, 2012). Within this general setting, smart city strategies entered the political stage.

Arrival, institutionalization and selectivity of smart city strategies in Italy

Shortly after taking office, the Monti government enacted a series of decree laws that were meant to reduce public debt and should have initiated economic reforms (Goretti and Landi, 2013). The decree laws, called *Salva Italia, Cresci Italia, Semplifica Italia* (Save Italy, Grow Italy, Simplify Italy), contained a variety of political initiatives that can be summarized, however, as a dialectic set of austerity measures on the one hand and pro-growth strategies on the other, as documented by Morlino and Piana (2014).

The smart city is part of the pro-growth strategies and was introduced at the national scale in article 20 by the decree law *Cresci Italia*, 'Further urgent measures for Italy's economic growth' (179/2012 converted into law 221/2012), which called for a digital revolution in order to create economic growth (GazzettaUfficiale, 2012). A new institution, the Italian digital agency (AgID), was founded in order to coordinate this revolution. One of the agency's responsibilities – in line with the EU digital strategy – was the introduction of smart cities in Italy, since smart cities were explicitly seen as a project of national interest. Furthermore, article 20 declares that the smart city is a new model of governance that can

create a new public property (AgID AplID, 2014). Consequently, a national platform of exchange, data collection and definition of smart standards and a national smart city monitoring report on an annual basis were set up. What stands out is that the above-mentioned law defines the smart city as a technical and measurable form of policymaking that is based on standards and statistics (GazzettaUfficiale, 2012). Beyond the technical character of governance, smart cities are designed as a top-down political strategy that at the same time tries to address and involve all different scales of policymaking, but prioritizes metropolitan reforms. In fact, one can conclude that smart cities in Italy seem to be a kind of state-led political strategy that is directed to change the state's own institutional and territorial configuration as well as producing new public–private partnerships.

This should not be understood as a one-dimensional process, of course. Different actors play(ed) an important role, including engaging in private and public enterprises, regions and cities as well as the National Association of Italian Municipalities (ANCI). In fact, ANCI created an Observation Centre for smart city activities (*osservartorio nazionale smart city*) that collects, maps and monitors all kinds of smart city activities in Italy (ANCI, 2017).[5] Moreover, a large number of Italian municipalities have established their own smart city foundations that are responsible for the coordination and marketing of city-related smart city activities as well as for applying for EU funding (Crivello, 2015). Beyond that, a few key figures particularly helped to mobilize and popularize the idea of the smart city (ANCI, 2014; Renzi, 2013).[6] In terms of urban political documents one can conclude that the smart city has entered long-term urban policy visions and plans in some major Italian cities (Roma Cd, 2016; Torino, 2016). This diversity of actors accompanies a thematic heterogeneity that is related to the quite heterogeneous conditions that different Italian cities face. Therefore, smart city strategies cannot be perceived as stable strategies, since they are part of broader societal processes and often get changed and rearranged. Although presented as new and innovative concepts, smart city strategies are neither the first kind of urban pro-growth policies nor are they implemented in an unworked governmental setting

(Crivello and Staricco, 2017). In fact, they are part of a governmental landscape that has been changing (i.e. through de-centralization and fragmentation) since the 1990s, as described by Bifulco (2016). Against this background, the arrival and implementation of smart city strategies has to be reflected on as a process of reorganization/rescaling that includes new responsibilities and powers on a local scale as well as creating new state territoriality.

A paradigmatic example of the reorganization of (urban) governance and the 'rescaling of powers' (Crivello and Staricco, 2017: 229) that involves smart cities is the so-called *Legge Delrio* (Delrio law No.56/2014). The Delrio law portrays a kind of rearrangement of Italy's urban institutional structure that has some forerunners. The local government reform of 1993 was a first step that led to a strengthening of the mayor's position, something that the Delrio law continues (Di Giulio et al., 2016; Vinci, 2016). In fact, in April 2014, the Delrio law set up 14 new Metropolitan cities (Turin, Genoa, Milan, Venice, Bologna, Florence, Rome, Naples, Bari, Reggio Calabria, Cagliari, Catania, Messina and Palermo) and 14 Metropolitan mayors. This meant a big change in the political and institutional static of these regions and municipalities, since the former provinces were abolished at the same time (Vinci, 2016).[7] In addition, it shows a new selective arrangement of decision-making that favours and strengthens the role of large cities. Although Metropolitan cities are still not operating properly, a new institutional layer of planning and policymaking has been created by the State. Besides installing a new level of strategic planning, reducing public spending is the main aim of the Delrio law, since Metropolitan cities replace tasks and services that belonged to the former provinces by having fewer personnel and financial resources. Crivello and Staricco (2017) estimate a reduction of 30% of the former budgets. Metropolitan cities are considered to be more efficient administrative structures that will help the reorganization of what one national report calls the urban system. This reflects another feature of urban austerity in Italy in times of crisis. In addition, the idea of cost-efficiency is a direct link to the rationale of smart cities, as I have outlined before. In fact, smart cities are an essential part of Metropolitan cities, as

the National Operational Programme 'Metropolitan Cities' (PON Metro) indicates. The PON Metro programme, which itself is part of the first national urban agenda in Italy, defines the smart city as one of two strategic drivers to implement the new territorial and organizational structure of the 14 Metropolitan cities (AplCT, 2015b).Therefore, smart city initiatives comprise a budget of €469 million that will be used to redesign and modernize public services, as the programme states (AplCT, 2015a). This application of the smart city illustrates the earlier mentioned adaptability of the smart city as an operational instrument related to broader political programmes as well as showing how the smart city approach is part of a scalar reorganization of governance. It also shows the simultaneous process of centralization as well as giving new power to local governments. Furthermore it indicates a multilevel governance beyond the national-urban framework, since two-thirds of the €900 million of the PON Metro programme are financed by EU structural funds (AplCT, 2015a).

However, we still need to consider the arrival and actual implementation of smart cities in order to reflect further features of the multiscalarity of smart city strategies in Italy.

I have underlined the state-led character of smart city strategies in Italy. In fact, the MIUR was the first state institution that launched a major initiative regarding smart cities (with two calls for ideas and projects) in 2012. The first national call was only meant for the 'Mezzogiorno', the southern part of Italy, and had a value of €200 million (PONREC, 2014). The second call, entitled 'smart cities and communities and social innovation', was meant for the whole country and comprised a budget of €655 million (MIUR, 2012). At the same time, multinational ICT-related firms (Cisco, IBM, Siemens and ABB) as well as utility companies (e.g. Enel) and bank foundations had launched their smart city projects or started co-financing smart city projects in different Italian cities, such as Genoa, Syracuse, Bari, Milan and Turin (Crivello, 2015; Vanolo, 2014). The MIUR approved more than 80 projects. Both the MIUR calls as well as the approved proposals reveal the ambivalent and fuzzy character of the smart city since very diverse issues, such as traffic systems, housing, energy, waste, water, e-governance, entrepreneurship and health, in Italian cities are tackled. Almost all of these projects are carried out by public–private consortia, including public administrations, research centres, and private as well as state-led companies. Again, public–private-partnership is not a novelty in urban governance. The late 1990s saw a series of urban regeneration programmes of Italian city centres that established new modes of governance, including public and private partnerships (Bifulco, 2016). However, smart city projects enlarge this cooperation scheme by linking public administrations, business and research and expanding it to new policy areas. Under the umbrella term 'participation', we can see a mix of new actors entering and taking part in smart city projects that tackle quite numerous policy areas, often in an unrelated manner and without clear political monitoring.

> The topic of the smart city is deeply connected with the issue of participation and innovation. We need the participation of all the different users of the city in order to initiate a process of change. And innovation is of the utmost importance since it will create areas of economic development for all of our urban enterprises. (From an interview with a municipal City of Rome councillor)

This citation indicates another central issue of smart cities. Even though smart city projects address a broad range of themes, there is quite a clear focus on creating new economic opportunities and business models. The project 'Smart Basilicata' (Basilicata is a region in southern Italy) also highlights this orientation, as it shows the new type of governance the smart city approach enables. In fact, smartness is used as a cross-scale concept that approaches both the urban and regional scales and aims at developing 'innovative products' (Salvia, 2013: 1027). A few powerful national players run the whole 'Smart Basilicata' project, which has a volume of about €18 million and focuses particularly on energy efficiency and the use of natural resources. This includes Enel[8] (a formerly state-owned multinational utility company), ENEA (the Italian agency for new technologies – the former national research centre for nuclear research), two national research institutions (CNR and IMAA) and TeRN (a public–private natural risk observation centre), which indicates a kind of actor selectivity. Regional institutions

as well as the municipalities of Potenza and Matera complete the constellation of actors (Salvia, 2013).

Apart from that, 'Smart Basilicata' is characterized by a mixture of different discursive frames, used in order to address a rather classic set of infrastructure policies and investment.[9] In fact, a major focus of 'Smart Basilicata' is to create a so-called energy district in the Agri Valley that holds, incidentally, the largest oil and gas reserves in Europe (Salvia et al., 2016). In this case the smart city approach is applied, as the project argues, in order to implement strategies outlined in a regional energy plan that means 'increasing electric and thermal energy production from renewables' (Salvia et al., 2016: 1030). This includes experimentation and the search for new techniques of residual biomass production that will contribute to achieving the national goals for 2020, as the authors conclude (Salvia et al., 2016). Summing up, we can conclude that 'Smart Basilicata' reflects how smart city strategies are used as new scales of governance in order to create new cases for capital investment in an urban-regional context. So far, this paper has documented the adaptability of smart city strategies and has shown that they are used to rearrange the institutional fabric, to produce new public–private partnerships, to create new investment opportunities and to prioritize regional and metropolitan venues. The next section will analyse the representation of smart city projects in rankings and reports and what this means in times of crisis.

Behind the buzzword – Representation of smart city projects in rankings and reports in times of crisis

Rosati and Conti have recently stated that 'the smart city project is an important appointment for Mediterranean Europe, because it allows for a *reinvention* of its territories' (2016: 971) one could add, 'in times of crisis'. Consequently, they argue that this reinvention is used to increase the competitiveness of territories. Certainly, a prime motive of state and urban authorities is to adapt smart city strategies to create competitiveness, as discussed in the previous sections. This mirrors the widely spread vision of national smart city rankings, 'Tante smart cities, una smart nation' (Many smart cities, one smart nation) (Between, 2014: 4). However, why is the smart city such a suitable political strategy in times of crisis? I will use this section to discuss this question by analysing data of the already mentioned webpage *agendaurbana.it* that collects and maps information on all types of smart city projects in Italy as well as the findings of a content analysis of three national rankings of Italian smart cities (Between, 2013, 2014; EY, 2016). *Agendaurbana.it* counts more than 1300 smart city projects that are separated into eight categories (environment, energy, economy, people, living, mobility, government, planning). Smart city projects related to planning have the highest financial volume (€1 billion) followed by mobility projects (€810 million) and energy projects (€642 million). The Apulian capital Bari holds the first place in terms of financial volume of smart city projects (€750 million), while Milan has the highest number of smart city projects (81).

Beyond numbers and indicators, these analysed rankings and reports combine four modes of smart city representation (performativity, measurability, cost-efficiency, legitimacy) that I will discuss below. These four modes of representation mark a political orientation and arguments for political action in times of crisis.

Performativity. In all kinds of smart city reports and websites, cities and projects are ranked according to their general performance. This includes the positioning of cities, which becomes a main argument for declaring smartness or a lack of smartness. In all kinds of smart city rankings we find the classical division of best-performing northern Italian Metropolitan cities (e.g. Bologna, Milano, Torino) on the top and southern Italian Metropolitan cities (e.g. Messina, Catania, Napoli) at the bottom of the ranking (Between, 2013, 2014; EY, 2016). Therefore, southern Italian cities in particular are expected to be more innovative in terms of public–private partnerships and financing, as the reports argue. It further shows that cities, policies and projects are ranked and classified as competitors or competitive objects nationally and internationally, since Amsterdam and New York City are listed as smart city role models.

Good or best practices. *Good* or *best practices* that are widely used in all kinds of Italian smart city rankings illustrate this in a methodological manner. A great variety of visual options (graphs, tables, figures) that are meant to create a transparent feature of smart city measuring are employed. Moreover, *good* or *best practices* create another layer of selectivity on which future policymaking should be based. In fact, as the reports argue, the idea of best practice is to identify the most profitable policy areas in each city (EY, 2016: 5).

Measurability. This mode of representation is closely connected to *performativity* as well. Measurability of smart city strategies is a core element of this type of urban policy. Reports and rankings collect, evaluate and weight a huge amount of structural data. While this is done extensively, processes of evaluation remain rather unclear. Furthermore, reports and rankings mention that data are standardized, but do not discuss the selection of data. The main data providers are utility firms (Enel), the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) and ministries (MIUR), as well as ICT firms. Consultancies collect all these data and provide the report making. In fact, smart city reports illustrate public–private cooperation, since private consultancies (Between, EY – the former Ernst and Young) are commissioned by the Ministry of Economic development to create national smart city rankings by interpreting the data of Enel, ISTAT and MIUR.

Cost-efficiency. As discussed in the previous sections, smart city projects are often presented as doing more with less money. This includes a vision that the technology of smart city projects helps to reduce public spending. In fact, *agendaurbana.it* reflects this characteristic in several ways. Firstly, it illustrates the total investment costs for each city, each category and each project. Here, we can find the issue of the transparency and visibility of the costs of policymaking. Secondly, when having a closer look at each topic it shows that more than 50 per cent (669 of 1311 projects) are listed as so-called zero-cost projects. This raises the question of what zero-cost means and why projects are labelled as zero-cost. One answer is that labour costs are individualized and externalized, something that reflects the idea of the social entrepreneurship that a lot of smart city

projects in Italy are promoting (Pollio, 2016). Thirdly, when looking at the type of projects listed as smart city projects and their year of commencement, one can observe that the most well-equipped projects, in terms of financial investment, are classical regeneration or infrastructure projects supported by EU funds, Italian public authorities or national utility firms, and were projects that had already been approved before the smart city boom (2012) and some even before the crisis started. Summing up, by using the issue of cost-efficiency the smart city narrative actually helps to hide a shift and reduction in public funding.

Legitimacy. Since many Italian municipalities face multiple crises (reduction of revenues, increasing unemployment, decay of housing and urban infrastructure, such as roads and sewage systems), the smart city imagery presents an optimistic and solutionist vision of the future (Vanolo, 2014). This image is certainly used by policymakers as well as by rankings and reports in order to create a certain type of legitimacy. This creation of legitimacy for urban politics and urban policymakers is oriented towards different audiences and therefore contains forms of selectivity. Firstly, it is oriented towards a broader civil society, since Italian public authorities face a long-standing credibility crisis (Morlino and Piana, 2014). Moreover, it is also directed towards other institutional players and, last but not least, also towards circuits of capital. Therefore, we can conclude that the smart city reflects a complex political strategy that legitimizes new public–private cooperatives, institutional rearrangements, economic policies and spatial imaginations.

Conclusion

This paper has elaborated several socio-spatial-political dimensions of smart city strategies that illustrate that the smart city is more than a new urban vision, a novel concept of urban planning or a business model of the ICT industry. Although all these categorizations describe certain features of smart cities, a critical reflection must take into consideration the diversity of actors, scales, topics and rationales that convene and interact in smart city strategies.

By using a strategic-relational approach, the paper has elaborated the multiscalarity of smart city strategies in Italy in times of crisis. The analysis has shown that smart city approaches are part of a (national) pro-growth strategy on one hand as well as embodying and transferring the logic of austerity to the urban-regional scale on the other. Furthermore, the Italian case represents how smart city strategies are embedded in a reconfiguration of governance that creates new scales of governance and provides a deepening of public–private partnerships. Finally, the smart city is a mode of (urban) political strategy that opens up new areas for capital investment on the national, regional and urban scale. These processes are uneven and provide different outcomes, since smart city strategies are employed in highly different urban-regional contexts. However, as we have seen, smart city strategies are adaptable and ambiguous political strategies that use an inclusive narrative on one hand but create actor and spatial selectivity on the other, which strengthens the prevailing role of northern metropolitan regions.

The last arguments indicate an area for future research on smart cities. This includes a particular emphasis on broader issues of infrastructure, digital capitalism or urban political economy, which this article could not address. This leads to questions such as the following: how are smart city strategies related to processes like financialization in terms of urban and public infrastructures? At the same time, the outlined characteristics of smart city strategies reveal aspects that add to the broader dialectic and strategic setting that the paper has described and analysed as the smart city – crisis and growth – austerity nexus. However, this can be only a first step since we need a further empirical as well as conceptual investigation that might help to understand the power, territoriality and (state) spatiality of smart city strategies.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. The paper considers selectivity as a 'tendency to privilege particular social forces, interests, and actors over others' (Brenner, 2004: 87).
2. Brenner distinguishes *state spatial projects* from *state spatial strategies* (2004: 93). He defines *state spatial projects* as political strategies that are oriented towards the 'state's own territorial and scalar configuration' (2004: 94), whereas *state spatial strategies* are defined as political strategies that are oriented towards broader 'audiences' (i.e. circuits of capital, civil society).
3. The document explicitly underlined that 'by 2020, the Smart Cities initiative should put 25 to 30 European cities at the forefront of the transition to a low carbon future. These cities will be the nuclei from which smart networks, a new generation of buildings and low carbon transport solutions will develop into European wide realities that will transform our energy system' (European Commission, 2009: 7).
4. Ever since, smart city projects have become an integral part of EU funding schemes, such as Horizon 2020 (Vanolo, 2014).
5. The webpage *agendaurbana.it*, designed and run by ANCI and the Italian Ministry of Economic Development, which collects all declared smart city ideas and projects, counts, for example, more than 1300 smart city projects in Italy with a volume of €3.8 billion (ANCI, 2017).
6. Crivello (2015) and Pollio (2016) mention Francesco Profumo, MIUR minister and Mario Calderini, senior advisor for the Italian prime minister, as key figures. Furthermore, Piero Fassino, former mayor of Turin (2011–2016) and president of ANCI (2013–2016), strongly emphasized the need to transform Italian cities into smart cities (ANCI, 2014). Even Matteo Renzi, former prime minister of Italy and mayor of Florence until 2014, disseminated the smart city idea on his personal webpage, publishing an informative graph of what a 'smart city made in Firenze' looks like (Renzi, 2013).
7. The idea of installing Metropolitan cities as a new subnational layer of governance between municipalities and regions goes back to the early 1990s, as noted by Crivello and Staricco (2017).
8. Enel uses smart city technologies extensively, as 90% of 30 million clients in Italy are already equipped with smart meters.
9. Similar cases of smart city projects that address infrastructure investments by combining economic and ecological discourses are, for example, *Idrovia*

ferrarese (€140 million, investment in the development of navigable waterways in Emilia Romagna) or different projects in the city of Bari (the regeneration of an urban quarter (Japigia) and a waterfront-road construction (Camionale)), comprising a financial volume of several hundred million Euros (ANCI, 2017).

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