

Lost in Transition? Deindustrial Change at Sesto San Giovanni and Porto Marghera (1980-2020)

The municipality of Sesto San Giovanni (Milan) and the district of Marghera (Venice) are two urban areas that have been strongly marked by processes of deindustrialization over the last forty years. The research project aims to compare the post-industrial transition in the two cases by collecting and organizing data on the structural change in demographic, social, economic and political composition. The research is conceived as part of the international project DEPOT (*Deindustrialization and the Politics of Our Time*) with support from Italian units based at the Ca' Foscari University of Venice and the Isec Foundation of Sesto San Giovanni.

Deindustrialization Studies have highlighted how industrial decline is a process of change with relevant and long-term consequences on the communities and territories involved (High, MacKinnon, Perchard 2017). They have also emphasized how restructuring and closures do not only affect workers and their families, but also other classes, following generations, and more generally the ways of life and social geography of urban communities.

A wide range of phenomena have been associated with the processes of industrial decline in cities and neighbourhoods: demographic changes (urban shrinkage, aging, immigration), social (growth in inequality and perception of insecurity), health (rates of degenerative diseases, drug addiction, mental disorders), environmental (urban decay, presence of contaminated areas), and economic (decline in property values, deterioration of public services).

The decline of big industry has also been connected to processes of a different kind: advanced tertiarization, functional reallocation of areas, environmental reclamation, and requalification of artistic and real estate patrimony. In other words, the end of the big factory does not necessarily coincide with economic decline, although it always seems to coincide with the retreat of the "working people".

To understand the complexity and unevenness of these transitions, an investigation of the cultural capital and collective memory of the places affected by structural transformation is of great importance. The concept of "half-life of deindustrialization" (Linkon 2018) suggests a long-term perspective and research that is more attentive to the re-elaborations of the industrial past operated by literature, performing arts and industrial heritage initiatives (for Italy, see for example the exhibition *Mirafiori after the myth*, <https://mirafioridopoilmito.it/>).

Another relevant issue concerns the political implications of deindustrialization. In all Western democracies, since the 1980s there has been a progressive shift in the popular class vote towards conservative and populist parties (Gethin, Martínez-Toledano, Piketty, 2021). In the US and the UK, many observers have found a particular relevance of this phenomenon precisely in the areas most affected by industrial decline, but this hypothesis has only been sketched for the Italian context (Revelli 2017) and never highlighted through a comparative survey. More generally, the theme of deindustrialization is still at an early stage in the agenda of Italian historiography and social sciences (Doria 2019).

In the light of these thematic and methodological indications, the aim of the research project is to collect and organize diachronic data regarding the municipality of Sesto San Giovanni (Milan) and the Marghera district of the city of Venice, two areas of metropolitan cities strongly marked by processes of deindustrialization in the last forty years. The researcher is asked to collect and organize preliminary data for a comparative analysis of the effects of deindustrialization in the two case studies, using 1980 to the present as a reference period. Among the sources of structural change, we include:

- resident population, population by age and level of education, immigration
- trends in birth, mortality, marriage, and morbidity rates
- composition and number of households
- employees and local units
- specialization by sectors
- presence of new entrepreneurship and forms of work (e.g. R&D activities, startups, incubators, coworking)
- electoral flows
- indicators of non-institutionalized political activity (political and religious associations, volunteering, popular sports, mutual aid) and, more generally, practices of direct social action (other than voting, militancy, protest action): alternative cultural activities, critical consumption, distribution of food and basic necessities, occupation of houses and buildings for non-housing purposes, forms of solidarity with migrants but also with other groups of citizens, legal/financial/administrative help desks.

The project provides availability for the researcher to spend time in the field, in addition to remote work using accessible sources. Among which are:

- census data
- electoral data provided by the Ministry of the Interior and local electoral observatories
- demographic data provided by local institutions
- trade union's surveys
- surveys provided by associations, observatories and research centers
- local newspapers and magazines

Since the project is at a crossroads of different disciplines, according to the profile, skills and interests of the researcher, the work program may be subject to adjustments and redefinitions agreed with supervisors and external referees. The research is part of the international project DEPOT (Deindustrialization and the Politics of Our Time, www.deindustrialization.org), funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada, which brings together researchers from six countries (Canada, USA, UK, Germany, France and Italy).

The expected results are: the organization of comparable data for the two case studies, a final research report and a public seminar (in English) to discuss the outcomes of the research.

Brief references to the two case studies and an essential bibliography follow.

Sesto San Giovanni is the municipality with the most important manufacturing history in the Metropolitan City of Milan, where some large businesses of the second industrial revolution settled at the beginning of the twentieth century in critical manufacturing sectors. Sesto was not a "company town" but a proper industrial hub. The city was awarded the gold medal for the Resistance to Nazi-Fascism and became "the Stalingrad of Italy" for the strength of the Communist Party, providing a

widespread working-class culture and a rate of unionization that in the following decade was close to 90%.

At the end of the century, big companies that were the major protagonists of this history (Ercole Marelli, Breda, Falck, Magneti Marelli and Campari) were no longer there, but had left a marked identity (sometimes they still have headquarters in Sesto), and many consequences in their retirement. The city had 6,000 inhabitants in 1901 and 100,000 by 1981. As a result of industrial divestment, it lost nearly 20% of its population. Today it has about 82,000 residents, making it the second largest municipality of the province by number of inhabitants after Milan, and the third most densely populated (with 6,951.3 inhabitants/sq km), albeit aged despite migration flows (the data of the last census says that 17% of its citizens are non-Italian). An important municipality with an important parable then, Sesto San Giovanni represents an interesting political laboratory attested by the local summer elections of 2017, in which the government, for the first time in seventy years, swung to a right-wing coalition.

Marghera is an urban district designed in the 20s and based on the model of the English "garden towns" to host the workers of the new industrial port of Marghera (Porto Marghera). Between the two world wars, increases in population and the construction of the district proceeded slowly, as workers from the new factories (mainly blue-collar) were recruited in the surrounding countryside. The great development of Marghera (and more generally of the mainland city of Venice) occurred in the second post-war period in chaotic and unplanned ways. Around the incomplete center of the "garden town", popular residential areas developed (Ca' Emiliani, Catene, Cita, Villabona) with a strong working-class composition, marked by a serious lack of services and infrastructure. Between the 60s and the 80s, Marghera became a symbol of urban and environmental degradation, but at the same time a place of incubation of new, participatory experiences, cultural experimentation and environmental awareness. Starting in the 80s, the dismantling of the large factories of Porto Marghera began, but the impact of this process, which grew in intensity over the next two decades, on the social composition, living conditions and self-representation of the inhabitants was not the object of specific attention.

In the 90s, the long trial against the petrochemical industries' top management for the deaths of more than a hundred workers and for pollution, represented a fundamental moment in the construction of a collective identity for the neighborhood, strengthening the consensus for the Green Party. While the community has reworked its recent and complex industrial past, it has not yet questioned its post-industrial present. The most evident changes of the last twenty years concerns the presence of foreign population (today estimated at about 7,000 legal immigrants, with the second largest Bengali community in Italy), and the halving of the consensus of progressive and leftist parties, to the advantage of the new populist right-wingers.

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