

LUIGI SCROFANI

ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISIONS IN SICILY FROM THE ROMAN EMPIRE TO  
THE PRESENT: A JOURNEY THROUGH STRATEGIC FUNCTIONS, LOCAL  
DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVES AND «GATTOPARDISMO» IN THE  
GOVERNANCE OF THE TERRITORY.

Abstract: ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISIONS IN SICILY FROM THE ROMAN EMPIRE TO THE PRESENT: A JOURNEY THROUGH STRATEGIC FUNCTIONS, LOCAL DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVES AND «GATTOPARDISMO» IN THE GOVERNANCE OF THE TERRITORY. – The author writes about the administrative divisions in Italy and Sicily were inspired by the political-administrative, judicial, ecclesiastical functions and census from Roman times until the mid-twentieth century. In the mid -Nineties the new industrial revolution and the supremacy of economic liberalism contributed to giving strength to the local dimension of the territorial government and the processes of economic development. On the one hand the increase of the global economic flows and, on the other hand, the international crises have highlighted many limits of the municipal governance of the territory. Thus, the governance of the metropolitan area has replaced municipal governance in importance. The author explains how these recent issues must be integrated with constitutional autonomy in Sicily. An autonomy that has not been used to strengthen economic structures by means of the administrative divisions but, on the contrary, this autonomy has been used to pursue institutional transformation to preserve positions of power.

*The Administrative Divisions in Sicily.* – During the reign of the Emperor Augustus, Sicily and Sardinia were different from the other Italian Regions because they were Provinces. Sicily, administered by a magistrate sent from Rome, was divided into two different units which delimited the city of Lilybaeum to the West and Syracuse to the East, following the bed of the River Salso (Correnti, 1999; Renda, 2003). The Roman authority had an administrative and judicial role for the population which did not enjoy the same rights as Roman citizens and the perimeter of the Province was also used for census purposes. But other centres became more important becoming the seats of dioceses with the expansion of the Christian religion. The division of the island into two parts was maintained even during the Eastern Roman Empire (from the seventh century AD), which used this Province (Syracuse was its main centre) as the primary source of

supplies of food and labour. With the Arab occupation (from IX to XI century) the island's internal divisions grew with the creation of local potentates and governorates, but largely resisted the Roman division with the addition of a third administrative unit made up by the Northeast portion of Sicily: thus the Val di Mazara in the West, the Val di Noto South-east and the Val Demone in North-east were constituted.

By the early decades of the second millennium the Norman Conquest had begun which culminated in 1130 with establishment of the Kingdom of Sicily under Roger II. Roger II wanted to bring together an island divided between nobles and knights who enjoyed quite frequent donations of lands for services military rendered in the war of conquest. But the unified administration of the kingdom, later reinforced by Frederick II of Swabia, took advantage of internal administrative divisions to collect taxes and for military functions and *giustizierati*<sup>1</sup> for the administration of justice. The Sicilian parliament was set up with three orders: a feudal one, an ecclesiastical one and a domanial one (Tramontana, 2000). The administrative divisions constantly changed name (*vall*<sup>2</sup>, *giustizierati*, counties, *capitanati*<sup>3</sup>) and boundaries as a result of new invasions (Angevin and Aragonese), but their identification always followed the policy of territorial organization of the judicial, tax, military and ecclesiastical functions. It must be emphasized, however, that when the central government went into crisis or worse disintegrated, the power of individual cities that they could exercise criminal justice to maintain order grew in its stead. In addition, the bishops continued to hold a discreet power, often being called upon to exercise judicial power. The different invasions did not weaken the role of cities – with some exceptions – which is particularly significant in the presence of administrative divisions that were characteristic of the feudal period (counties, *signorie*<sup>4</sup>) that stand between the central authorities (State, Empire or Church) and local autonomy. The pre-industrial city was already performing important functions: the pre-eminent political and administrative function, often coinciding with the exercising of episcopal power, it encouraged the centripetal forces, attracting business, controlling and protecting it militarily, in short, it encouraged the development of an urban culture (Bordone, 1984). With the accession of Frederick I of Aragon (1412) Sicily lost its autonomy and became a vicariate of the Kingdom of Spain governed by a viceroy based in Palermo. The downgrading of Sicily to a Spanish colony ruled by nobles who were loyal to the crown often encouraged riots, like the one led by the city Messina (1678). These riots were severely repressed and the cities deprived of their privileges, although there were new grants of counties, baronies and feudal privileges in the search to guarantee a certain consent to the

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<sup>1</sup> Giustizierati, areas delimited by judicial boundaries in the Middle Ages

<sup>2</sup> Valli: areas delimited for administrative-military purposes

<sup>3</sup> Capitanati: areas delimited by military boundaries in the Middle Ages

<sup>4</sup> Signorie: a type of lordship rules by the town's signorie or most powerful lord.

Spanish crown. The real novelty of this Spanish period is the establishment of 42 *comarche*<sup>5</sup> for the administration of the territories in 1583, although *valli*, *sergenzie* (for military activities) and counties (the famous county of Modica enjoyed relative autonomy) survived with rather unclear boundaries and functions. The state-owned cities were located at the head of the *comarche* while the feudal cities were only part of them. The *comarche*, however, were not uniform in their perimeter, so much so that some were constituted only by the domanial town without any feudal cities and other spread across various *valli* (Mack Smith, 1976).

The population of Sicily grew significantly in the late fifteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century, rising from just under five hundred thousand inhabitants to around two million mainly due to urbanization (the newly founded cities in the late Middle Ages, as well as the Baroque reconstruction after the disastrous earthquake of 1693 contributed greatly to increasing the number of inhabitants within city walls) (Aymard, 1978; Iachello, 1978). Under Bourbon rule the Kingdom of Sicily was set up and in 1812 the Sicilian constitution was passed with an administrative reorganization, inspired by the French model, which aimed at unifying the ambitions of local notables ending feudal power and overseeing the territory with the presence of an army captain and 12 soldiers per district (Iachello, 2002). Thus, 7 *intendenze*<sup>6</sup> were established on the island, mainly based on coastal urban centres (Palermo, Catania, Messina, Syracuse, Trapani, Agrigento) with one exception inland (Caltanissetta), which headed 23 new districts delimited according demographic and geomorphological criteria. The new administrative divisions overlapped with the ecclesiastical boundaries that eventually complied with them.

Sicily finally lost its autonomy and the barons their local power at the Congress of Vienna, when the Kingdom of Sicily was united with the Kingdom of Naples and the city of Naples became the capital of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies (1816). As for urban dynamics, it is interesting to note that the administrative reorganization promoted coastal urbanization bolstered by the new peripheral centres of Bourbon power, *intendenze*, countering the tendency of the development of inland areas which had been boosted by the establishment of centres for the colonization of uncultivated areas and the reconstruction of the towns destroyed by the earthquake in the Seventeenth century. The Bourbon domination ended in 1860 with Giuseppe Garibaldi's expedition of *The Thousand* a preliminary annexation of the island to the Kingdom of Italy. The Savoy monarchy essentially consolidated the administrative boundaries making them fully functional under the central control of the state. The administrative reorganization of the Kingdom included provinces, districts, *mandamenti*<sup>7</sup> and municipalities. Each province was headed by a

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<sup>5</sup> Comarca: a type of county or province of the Middle Ages

<sup>6</sup> Intendenze: a type of tax or revenue office under Bourbon rule.

<sup>7</sup> Mandamenti: a type of district

governor, later called a Prefect. The provinces really represented the trustee institution of the decentralized state powers (as seen, for example, in the jobs of the Prefect and of the supervisor of the revenue office) and the link between the municipalities and the state, even if their perimeters existed before and after Unification. Indeed, the province itself was a hybrid institution because it expressed the cohesive identity of different municipalities, while embodying and hosting the central government bodies (Giannini, 1971). In truth, in the last decades of the history of the Italian Republic new municipalities were not created but, new provinces were instead as expressions of local autonomist forces (Palombelli, 2012). After the Unification of Italy it was not until the Fascist period that significant changes in Italian administrative divisions were to be witnessed: the royal decree n. 1 of 1927 which established 17 provinces (in Sicily: Enna, Syracuse instead of Noto).

<b>Period</b>	<b>Division</b>	<b>Main Function</b>
Emperor Augustus (7 AD.)	following the bed of the river Salso, Sicily was divided into two units (but with more dioceses)	Administrative, ecclesiastical
Arabs (IX and XI century)	3 <i>Valli</i> : the Val di Mazara, the Val di Noto and the Val Demone	Administration, Justice
Normans, Swabians, Angevins, (1061-1282)	<i>Valli, capitanati</i> , giustizierati, and counties	Tax, military, justice, ecclesiastical-cult.
Aragonese (from 1282) Spanish (from 1516), Piedmont, Austrian (1713-1734)	<i>Comarche, sergenzie</i> , and counties	Tax, military, justice, ecclesiastical-cult.
Borbons (1734-1860)	7 <i>intendenze</i> and 23 districts	Tax, justice.
Kingdom of Italy (from 1861)	7 provinces, districts, and <i>mandamenti</i>	Administration, tax, justice.
Fascist Period (1927)	9 province	Administration, control and justice.

The First Republic (1946) and the Independent State of Sicily (1946)	9 provinces, 390 municipalities.	Political-administrative., justice, censorship.
The Third Industrial Revolution (from II half of the Twentieth Century)	3 Metropolitan Areas (established in 1995)	Economy, planning and control, political-administrative, public transport.
Globalization (from the end of the Nineties)	3 metropolitan cities (2014), consortiums of municipalities.	Economy, planning and control. Political-administrative, public transport and logistics, justice.

Tab.1 – *Administrative Divisions and main functions in Sicily for the historical period*

Source: Author's work.

*Local government of the territory in the Global Era.* – A watershed in administrative divisions in Italy as well as in the rest of the Western world occurred in the twentieth century, a century during which technological change accompanied, imbued and drove economic change. Economic change was one which imposed the value and the role of businesses producing goods and services from other activities and functions which until then had been considered the reference points in the government of the territory, such as the administration of justice, tax collection and those of the church. These continued to be carried out but took on a secondary role, the weight of the economy and its government became predominant for human survival and for society.

However, the Republican State, which was established in Italy in 1946 with the Constitution of 1948, did not acknowledge the new thrusts from society and from the economy and only resumed the previous administrative divisions and, above all, established the Regions attempting a difficult mediation between centralist needs and the centrifugal forces of localism. In fact the Regions, which began to take shape after Unification, looked more like an aggregation of provinces rather than independent governments for their history and cultural identity. This interpretation is supported by their history: the statistical areas defined for census purposes in 1863 formed the backbone on which the Republican regions

were established, an incongruous assemblage of crystallized municipal divisions (Caldo, 1972, Gambi, 1976, and 1995; Gambi and Merloni, 1999; more recently Castelnovi, 2013; Sturani, 2011). In Sicily, the situation was clearly different as regional autonomy was an indispensable element in the relationship between local authorities and the State: the Region has always stood as the main custodian of the historical and cultural identity, dispossessing the municipalities and the Provinces, of the power to dialogue or cooperation with state administration however large they were, that increasingly resembled a territorial artifice. In fact the Sicilian Statute (1946) did not include the provincial constituencies but consortiums of free Municipalities: 40 years had to pass so that, with the regional law n. 9 of 1986, the consortiums were called Regional Provinces (an operation of institutional transformation or "*gattopardismo*"<sup>8</sup> that allows the Region to implement the decentralized and organized powers on a provincial basis from the national government).

In the Seventies, by exploiting the productive decentralization of the largest industrial enterprises in decline, productive systems made up mostly of small and medium-sized enterprises exploiting the presence of local features (cultural, social and economic) (Scrofani, Ruggiero, 2012). These features were a territorial capital available for companies which, in turn, made this even richer with their business. Business that contained more of an immaterial component, both in terms of relationships and in terms of innovation, creating a strong demand for production services destined to tertiary businesses, which found a suitable welcoming in urbanized, modern, equipped areas. Technological innovations in the field of information technology and telematics gave enterprise an unprecedented ability to manoeuvre and a different, stronger independence to the territories, which sometimes needed to break free from state control and frequently to interact with other spaces that possessed characteristics suited to their identity. At the end of the twentieth century two issues, therefore, intertwined bringing local areas to scientific and international attention: on the one hand, there was the problem of what the optimal size of a territorial government might be, on the other hand the central powers were considered as a hindrance to the full unfolding of local vocations and so asked, and often obtained, their decentralization. State decentralization in Italy has transferred the completion of important public functions to the provinces, such as health (with the National Health System), culture (with the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage), the civil protection services, civil engineering, work and study, as well as the government's representatives (the Prefect). However, this decentralization in Sicily takes on a special connotation because the state autonomy directly attributes the State powers to the Region which then transfers them to local governments. The emergence

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<sup>8</sup> Gattopardismo named after the famous book *Il Gattopardo* written by Tommaso di Lampedusa, it describes the attitude of a person who apparently backs innovations but who in reality does not want to change anything much and aims to preserve his own privileges.

of liberal policies has strengthened the role of all the Regions before the State's withdrawal, creating a sort of new centralism. This is a procedure that in the Autonomous Regions, like Sicily has helped to strengthen public functions of planning, control and distribution of EU funds – in fact the power of bureaucracy – while it has encouraged the demands for autonomy of the Regions (such as Veneto) and the provinces in other areas with a strong private economy (the economic success of some industrial districts has led to the creation of some provinces, such as Biella and Prato).

On the other hand, the emphasis placed on local development has given rise to speculation that the optimum size for the management of development procedures of assets of territorial resources must necessarily coincide with the smallest local institutions in Italy, the Municipality. However, under the pressures of global economic forces, this belief is in crisis, outstripped by the new idea that the territorial heritage becomes truly competitive when it refers to bigger areas – coinciding with groups of municipalities – where they exist, for example, the logistic *hub* with a national value, commercial structures with sub-regional gravitational areas, universities that conduct research on an international level and host students from around the world. It is precisely these features that determine the importance of cities and their position in urban networks ruled by hierarchical principles (Italian Geographic Society, 2013). Nevertheless, besides all the new functions the traditional strategic functions, such as the judiciary, are strengthened. The case of the Regional Administrative Court (TAR) of Catania is emblematic which, despite being destined to close in accordance with the implementation of a national plan of reorganization that included the concentration the headquarters of the regional administrative courts in the municipal regional capitals to reduce operating expenses, has been opportunely left open due to the number of law suits in progress, among the highest in Italy.

The metropolitan area stands out for functions of management, innovation, coordination and development involving private stakeholders much more than in the past (Grasso, 1994). In Italy, these considerations lead to the recognition of the existence of metropolitan areas, which were established in Sicily in 1995: the establishment of the metropolitan areas of Palermo, Catania and Messina caused strong protest from the Municipalities who feared the loss of their privileges at the benefit of the Province which at first it seemed destined to accept the offices of the new metropolitan area. The constitutional conflict that ensued was resolved with the recognition of the new administrative division that brought together the municipalities that were included there. However the extensive and sometimes bitter debate succeeded in blocking the passing of regional decrees thus making the institution of metropolitan areas ineffective which were finally abandoned, also as a result of the institutional changes included in the constitutional reform of 2001.

*Territorial relations and institutional perspectives.* – The establishment of Provinces in Italy had already posed practical problems in Sicily, whose statute did not include such local authorities, but consortiums of free Municipalities. Then, when Mr. Monti's government in 2012 wanted to review the organization of the provinces proposing possible mergers or abolitions, the Regional Assembly quickly took steps to suppress them in 2013, showing not sensitivity to institutional innovation but rather deft *gattopardismo*. Beyond the need to conduct a review of public spending, this important decision nevertheless opened the way up for the revision of functional administrative divisions, for the revival of economic and strategic business activities as well as administrative ones. The same experiences of integrated planning and urban strategic planning had highlighted that a hard core of municipalities which share activities, projects, events and even religious festivals (such as the celebration of the patron saint of Catania which involves the closure not only of schools in Catania but also those of some neighbouring municipalities) is now established around the three main cities (Palermo, Catania and Messina). It is a variable geography of municipal aggregations in accordance with some objectives but with strong social cohesion. This cohesion is representative of the resilience of the territory itself and becomes the principle for the generation of large urban areas, based on the processes of self-organization of local stakeholders around development projects of the sprawling city.

A year later, the Regional Law 8/2014 established a consortium of free municipalities and metropolitan cities aimed at the need "to achieve the cost reduction of public administration", while the National Law 56/2014 (Law Delrio) a few months later made provisions for "in the area of metropolitan cities, provinces, unions and mergers of municipalities in order to adapt their laws to the principles of subsidiarity, differentiation and adequacy". The different purposes of the two laws were noticeable, the national one standing out with its aim to understand the reform of local self-government within a broader framework that allows for the grasping of the most ambitious goals of territorial development, despite the urgencies for the reduction of public spending which instead remains anchored to the regional law (Piraino, 2014). The new consortium of free Sicilian municipalities coincide in geographical and administrative borders with those of the abolished provinces, while the metropolitan cities are modelled on the boundaries of the already established metropolitan areas. But, as well as emphasizing the unfading Sicilian tradition of opportunism, it seems appropriate to underline that the national legislature provides clear functions both for the consortiums and for the metropolitan cities, while the regional legislature not only disregards the actual functions performed by the various urban centres in the territory but it also fails to grasp the great opportunity to achieve real reform of local autonomy which could give oxygen to asphyxiated economies (Piraino, 2014). The metropolitan cities as defined by the regional law do not meet any needs: the municipalities that are part of or are excluded which may decide their respective exclusion



or inclusion; the metropolitan cities which can lose or acquire pieces of land regardless of their will; other cities that lack the same requisites (which certifies a subordinate position); the municipalities that lie inland that see their *gap* with the coastal areas widen even further. In August 2015, despite several attempts by some significantly large centres to set up a consortium to solve atavistic conflicts (such as the one between Marsala and Trapani, or the one between Caltagirone and Catania), they were not able to form different consortiums from the ones identified by the Regional law of 8/2014 (i.e. those coinciding with provincial perimeters except the set of three metropolitan cities).

The only significant novelty of this tortuous process of revising the administrative districts of Sicily in the Republican Era is the one which emerges in the eastern part of the island. Here, the interpretation of the regional law establishing the metropolitan cities and articulated applications that have derived from it (such as those concerning the agreements of some municipalities described above) induced behaviour and consequent statements by the municipal administration of Catania, which rather than complying with the identification of metropolitan cities according to regional law, chose to wait to apply the national ruling (the Delrio law) which effectively equates the perimeters of metropolitan cities with the respective provinces. Therefore, the metropolitan city of Catania does not include 27 municipalities, but the entire set of municipalities afferent to the abolished province (in this interpretation another application of the Sicilian *gattopardismo* can be seen, but this time in Italian style). But the real novelty is the administration's decision in this metropolitan city to place this former province at the centre of an area which also includes the municipalities of the former provinces of Syracuse and Ragusa, an area identified by UNESCO as the Baroque District of the South-East. Thus, a large area of eastern Sicily should take shape, as opposed to the areas of the Western side that gravitate around the regional capital of Palermo. The South-Eastern district, established in 2002 by the project to develop tourism in Caltagirone, Catania, Militello Val di Catania, Modica, Noto, Palazzolo Acreide, Ragusa, Scicli and Syracuse has been extended to share important strategic functions, such as transport and logistics (this can be seen in the opening of the airport of Comiso-Ragusa in whose shareholding structure the same company that runs the airport in Catania, is represented as well as the project of integration between the port of Catania and that of Augusta). Many companies work in the South-Eastern district while the public sector is more present in the Western part of the Island. Since February 26, 2014 when the Protocol Agreement of the establishment of the South-East district was signed by 9 parties in front of the Head of Italian State the integration of economic functions now also seems to want to take on a new institutional format. The parties were the Municipalities of Catania, Syracuse and Ragusa, together with the homonymous three provinces and the three Chambers of commerce. The South-Eastern district, therefore, does not seem to be a simple geographic artifice but, being in line with the reorganization of the Italian Regions in 2009 which authorized the amendment of

the perimeters of Emilia Romagna and Marche for the first time, it could introduce an institutional innovation which was previously thought to be unattainable. It would seem to delineate a sub-regional area of Sicily that wants institutional recognition as well as laying claim to its economic strength.

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*Università di Catania, Dipartimento di Economia e Impresa*

*scrofani@unict.it*