

Abstract

Urban regeneration today constitutes one of the most pervasive yet conceptually unstable categories in urban policy and academic discourse. It encompasses a remarkably heterogeneous range of interventions, gathered under a single, seemingly coherent label, and it operates less as a clearly defined policy tool than as an elastic and mobile signifier, one that shifts in meaning depending on the context in which it is mobilised. It is precisely this instability that grants the term both analytical relevance and political force, and that motivates the question at the centre of this thesis: why, and under what conditions, does it still make sense to speak of urban regeneration today? In Italy, the current cycle of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) has mobilised unprecedented resources under that name, while a unified legislative framework has been debated across three parliamentary cycles, without settling what the term is taken to mean. This thesis takes up that instability as its object of inquiry. It examines urban regeneration as a socio-political process embedded within discursive and institutional configurations, investigating how the concept operates as an elastic signifier that constructs the urban problems it claims to address and shapes patterns of intervention and resource allocation. The study is organised around three analytical axes, theoretical, discursive, and socio-spatial, with empirical fieldwork on Palermo's south-eastern coast. The epistemological framework, drawing on critical geography and planning theory, approaches space as relationally produced, institutions and policy instruments as active producers of urban categories, and discourse as a constitutive force with material effects. It combines Critical Discourse Analysis of the Italian legislative and programmatic corpus, including the consolidated bill on urban regeneration across three legislative cycles and the operative documents of PNRR Mission 5 (PRU, PUI, PINQuA, EIB Fund of Funds), with ethnographic fieldwork along the coast: twenty-two semi-structured interviews with professional-inhabitants, walking and sea-based exploration, photographic documentation as method, and an ethics of non-extraction. The theoretical axis traces the biomedical genealogy of regeneration and the normative coupling of *degrado* and *decoro* in Italian urban governance, and articulates the epistemological shift from cure to care. Drawing on feminist care ethics, urban care is constructed not as a counter-model but as a critical orientation beginning from relation rather than deficiency, attention rather than diagnosis. The discursive analysis identifies five repertoires organising Italian institutional discourse: pathological urban, techno-economic rationality, instrumental inclusion, sustainable modernisation, and temporality of emergency, and shows that the gap between its discursive surfaces and its operative architecture is constitutive, not incidental. The socio-spatial axis reveals that the pathologising grammar circulates beyond the documents that produce it, internalised by actors who simultaneously contest the interventions it legitimises. The thesis contributes three principal findings: that pathologising framings are operative, embedded in classificatory instruments and allocation formulas with material consequences; that a structural ambivalence, in which care and uncare are produced simultaneously by the same governance apparatus, characterises contemporary Italian regeneration; and that the pathologising grammar acquires the status of common sense even among its critics, a circulation explaining its resilience and the difficulty of any epistemological displacement urban care might propose. The answer to the title's question is conditional: the paradigm of care has not arrived, but the questions it poses correspond to demands already articulated by the people inhabiting the spaces regeneration targets. The findings position the Italian case within a broader Mediterranean geography of contested coastal urbanism, inviting sustained critical attention to the regeneration already being planned for landscapes now reduced to rubble.