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SHORT ARTICLE



# Defending the past by challenging the future: spatial and institutional path dependencies in the Naples port-city region

Paolo De Martino

## ABSTRACT

Historical paths matter in port-city regions. Here, spatial patterns and governance arrangements are path dependent to the point that once certain paths have been established, these become hard to change. This defines a condition of institutional inertia that plays a significant role in preventing any form of spatial change. Naples is an exemplar of how different actors have historically developed their own routines and planning tools, resulting in the spatial and governance separation still visible today. How do path dependencies influence the port–city (and regional) relationship we are experiencing today? Nowadays, ports operate in an increasingly changing environment where spatial and economic developments can be better understood as the results of actors’ interactions across different scales. In order to cope with global urgencies, such as energy, economic and societal transition, European infrastructure policies are driving many port authorities towards infrastructural integration and governance cooperation. This offers significant opportunities to improve relations among ports, but it mostly leaves out the interconnections with cities and larger regions. Moreover, it also challenges consolidated beliefs and planning cultures which have planned ports and cities as disconnected entities, at least since industrialization. In Naples, local and national authorities find it difficult to define a sustainable consistency of interests. Today, the Central Tyrrhenian seaport system is the new institutional umbrella overseeing the three main ports of the region: Naples, Castellammare di Stabia and Salerno. This paper investigates whether this new governance entity results in either an opportunity for change or a reinforcement of existing path dependencies.

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## INTRODUCTION

Collaboration has been at the base of the relationship between ports and cities for centuries. In the past, ports have also assumed the role of public areas thanks to their connection to urban and

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social life, commercial activities, and mostly due to morphological integration with the city (Pavia & Di Venosa, 2012). Nevertheless, this relationship has dramatically changed since industrialization, with ports growing towards the hinterland and away from their historical cities (Hein, 2016a; Hoyle, 1989; Kokot et al., 2008; Pinder, 1981; Schubert, 2011). This went hand in hand with fragmentation among the actors (Hein, 2014). Today, a plurality of actors is involved in the planning of port-cities, actors who have different ideas and goals, different tools, and even different time horizons (Hein, 2015). As a result, port-cities have started to change based on the needs and interests of the different actors in charge who have developed planning paths and ways of doing things that have framed ports and cities as two disconnected entities: the city, on the one hand, and the port, on the other. As a result, ports have gradually lost their connection with the city and waterfront areas, becoming highly specialized mechanisms, sectoral infrastructures and the main barrier between the city and the sea (Hoyle, 1989, 2000; Pavia & Di Venosa, 2012; Russo, 2014, 2016).

Port-cities have become port-city regions. This is pushing port authorities to cooperate at a regional level, creating synergies to cope better with global issues such as energy transition, climate change and sustainable use of space. In this context, the existing model of separation (port out, city in) is not working anymore, as also demonstrated by European transport policies which are promoting functional and economic integration (EU, 2013). Moreover, the new inclusive and collaborative perspective introduced by port regionalization – to be analysed as inland connections established between ports and their regional hinterland – can represent an opportunity to improve port-city relations at different levels. The urgent need to identify solutions that improve the port-city relationship is also supported by the contemporary debate, such as the Port City Futures initiative ([portcityfutures.nl](http://portcityfutures.nl)) led by scholars from the universities of Leiden, Delft and Erasmus. The group convened a conference on Port City Futures that hosted port authorities, municipalities, regional authorities and academics from different European cities. The discussions have pointed out that a new research agenda on port-city regions will require new collaborations between port, city, and regional stakeholders and academics.<sup>1</sup>

This paper claims that the recent phenomena of merging of ports is challenging port-city relationships and their spatial forms, clashing with the interests of the actors, their existing practices and historical institutional arrangements which are very hard to change.

Therefore, governance matters in port-city (and regional) development and the paper argues that spatial developments and governance arrangements in port-cities are strongly influenced by evolutionary paths, historical planning traditions, and geographical, economic and political conditions which, once historicized, generate spatial and institutional resistances to change: in other words, path dependencies. Path dependence represents a tendency of actors to become committed to act in certain ways as a result of their consolidated beliefs and values (Arrow, 2004; David, 2007; Sorensen, 2015). This defines a condition of institutional inertia that plays a significant role in preventing moments of change.

Despite the accumulation of literature, few studies have examined the relationship between spatial development and path dependence and the role this concept plays in shaping spatial and institutional distance between ports, cities and their regions (De Martino, 2016; Hein, 2016c; Hein, 2018; Notteboom et al., 2013; Ramos, 2017).

Port-city relationships have been mainly studied by transport and urban geographers, economists, urban planners, and planning historians (Notteboom & Rodrigue, 2005; Pallis et al., 2011; Schubert, 2011). Three main research fields can be identified. The first deals with the long-term evolution of port systems, including the changing relationships between ports and cities (Bird, 1963; Hoyle & Pinder, 1992). In addition, in recent years, transport and economic geographers have focused on the relationships between ports and their regional hinterlands (Ducruet, 2009; Notteboom & Rodrigue, 2005).

The second area of research relates to the governance and institutional aspects of ports. Commonalities and differences between planning traditions have been discussed by several authors through comparative studies (Ubbels, 2005).

Finally, urban planners and planning historians have concentrated on the spatial relationship between ports and cities by considering the port as part of the urban system (Hein, 2016b, 2016c; Meyer, 1999; Russo, 2016; Schubert, 2011).

Therefore, this paper presents historical institutionalism theory (HI) and path dependence as its main concept as a new institutional lens through which to analyse port-city spaces. It applies the theoretical concept of path dependence to the case of Naples, asking: How does path dependence shape spatial and institutional relationships in the Naples port-city region? Naples, in southern Italy, seems an exemplar for the situation in many seaport-cities across Europe, where city, port and regional authorities find it difficult to define a common vision for the port-city relationship, resulting in inertia in historically significant waterfront sites and beyond (De Martino, 2016). Specifically, the paper discusses the case of the Central Tyrrhenian Seaport system (Naples, Castellammare di Stabia and Salerno), investigated in the light of the recent port reform.

The paper is structured as follows. The paper next revisits the concept of path dependence by addressing its spatial dimension in relation to port-city regions. It then questions the contemporary sectorial approach to port planning in the Neapolitan context, discussing the implications of historical legacies for the meaning of future spatial and institutional relationships. Finally, it concludes by claiming the need for change to break from existing spatial and institutional patterns. The study draws data from existing literature and policy documents. In addition, it triangulates findings by complementing them with three interviews of the most relevant planning authorities involved in port-city planning in Naples, and specifically the port authority, municipality and central government.

## PORT CITIES THROUGH THE LENS OF PATH DEPENDENCE

The way we do things creates path dependencies that shape, and often prevent, future developments (Troy, 1999). HI, better known for the concept of path dependence, is a social science theory that mainly focuses on the phenomena of formation and inertia of institutions, understanding how and why certain contexts develop in a specific way (Ishiyama & Breuning, 2015). This has proven a suitable approach for case study analyses. In this we follow scholars such as Sorensen (2015, 2018), who has recently used this theory to explain the creation, persistence, and change of spatial governance and planning institutions over time, and how actors' interactions impact space. Path dependence explains the ways in which actors structure and shape sociocultural and political behaviour. HI allows for an understanding of path dependencies, positive (and negative) feedback, institutional inertia, and their impact on the definition of port-city spaces.

By applying the concept of path dependence, this paper evaluates the weight that history plays in hindering spatial and institutional changes in the Naples port-city region.

The concept of path dependence originated in the work of economists Paul David and W. Brian Arthur, who applied the concept to economic and social evolutionary dynamics (Arthur, 1980; David, 1985, 2007). According to David, most organizational dynamics are strongly influenced by their historical evolution, and this is true even if past circumstances are no longer relevant today. Therefore, according to David, a path can be defined as dependent when the evolution of the dynamic process is dominated by its own history. In other words, history matters. Andre Sorensen claimed the importance of applying path dependence to urban studies, questioning the relationship between planning institutions and their impact on the definition of specific urban forms (Sorensen, 2015, 2018). He argues that cities can be understood as a dense collection of institutions which are, quite often, intentionally designed to be hard to

change. Thus, based on the theoretical concept of path dependence, this paper argues that port-cities are path dependent to the point that once certain institutional configurations become established, inertia will be common. Here, the negative feedback effects among multiple actors have generated historical legacies accentuating spatial and institutional separation. Nevertheless, path dependence can also be seen from a positive aspect. In this case, the way we do things may also be framed as a way to defend local specificities against a globalized approach that persists in considering ports just as hubs within a global logistic chain, without any relationship with the cities close by.

Today, regionalization brings the perspective of port development to a higher geographical scale, beyond the port perimeter (Notteboom & Rodrigue, 2005; Pallis, 2007). Negative externalities, such as air and water pollution, land-use conflicts, and traffic congestion impact cities, pushing ports and port authorities towards integration and cooperation. According to this perspective, multiple port authorities join forces to create port systems (Ferretti et al., 2018). This collaborative approach may represent an opportunity for institutional change allowing ports, cities and their regions to move towards new spatial configurations and integration among multiple stakeholders. However, it is also challenging the traditional port–city relationship, moving the focus towards the hinterland, paying less attention to the city and sea perspective.

## METHODOLOGY AND CASE STUDY: PLANNING CULTURES AND PORT-CITY MODELS

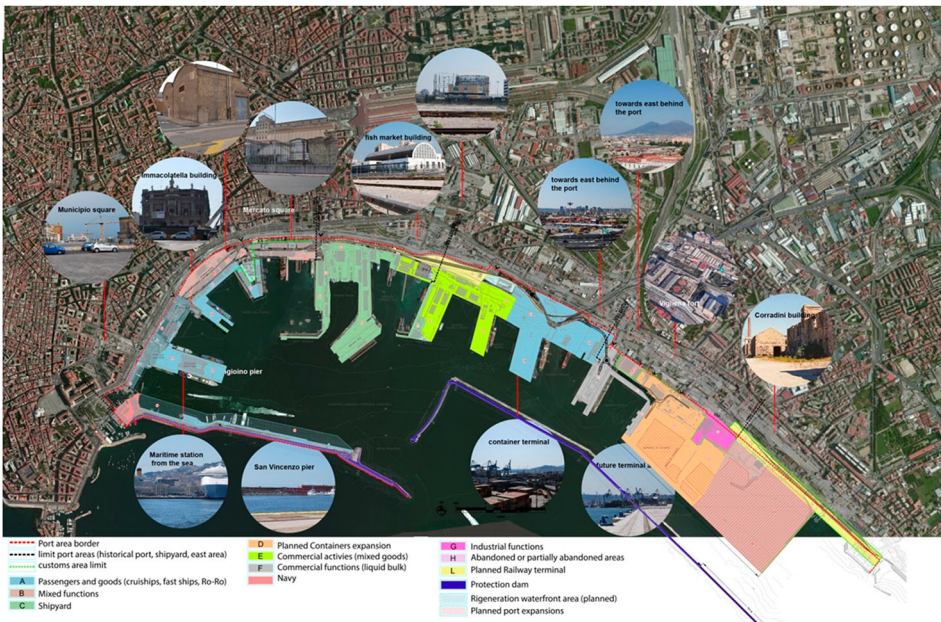
Ports are managed and planned according to different planning cultures (Brooks & Pallis, 2012; Debie et al., 2013; Ng & Pallis, 2010; Othengrafen & Knieling, 2009; Ubbels, 2005; Verhoeven, 2010). These differences are strongly related to historical, geographical and political factors, and to the diverse economic and social environments in which ports operate (Ubbels, 2005). In Europe, with the exception of Britain, ports are managed by port authorities, public bodies operating at a level between central and local governments. Port authorities give concessions to private companies to operate commercial activities within ports. Three different geographically based traditions can be identified in Europe. In the Hanseatic tradition, typical for North-western Europe and Scandinavia, local and municipal authorities play a very important role in port planning. Within the Latin tradition, typical of France and Southern Europe (Naples belongs to this category), ports are planned according to a top-down approach, with local governments playing a more marginal role. Finally, within the Anglo-Saxon tradition, ports are completely privatized.

In order to evaluate the role played by path dependence in Naples port-city, policy documents, such as city and port plans and national port reforms, have been analysed and complemented with semi-structured interviews in relation to spatial and institutional dimensions of port–city relationships.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, actors from the municipality, port authority and central government are selected as the most relevant actors in charge. The main questions asked related to, in their opinion, the challenges that city and port were experiencing, how each actor perceived the relationship between the port and the city, whether they recognized the presence of path dependence, and what actions they were planning to put in place to overcome spatial and institutional inertia. These questions were the starting point to better grasp their different views, possible interactions and the spatial consequences that path dependence may have when different actors have divergent goals and interests.

The interviews focused specifically on the Neapolitan case. However, since the port of Naples belongs to a landlord port model (which is quite common in Europe), some findings can be generalized. The people interviewed, although in small numbers, complement sufficiently the policy documents and give a complete overview of the contemporary debate and position of the actors.

In Naples, port, city and region are separated in spatial and institutional terms as a result of historical planning practices which have seen actors treat the port and the city as two





**Figure 1.** Characteristics of the port area combined with the port master plan vision to 2030. Source: Author based on the master plan drawn by the port authority.

disconnected elements. As a result, the port has two different relationships with the city. The port of Naples extends over a coastline of about 5 km and occupies an area of about 2700 km<sup>2</sup> (Autorità di Sistema Portuale del Mar Tirreno Centrale, 2017). The port extends from San Vincenzo (the 19th-century port) pier to the Vigliena area in the eastern part of the city. In the central area of the port, adjacent to the lively city centre, the contact spaces between port and city have currently become a cluttered port landscape characterized by abandoned or underused buildings and marginal areas (Figure 1).

Today, European infrastructure policies aim to promote collaboration between ports. As a result, in 2016, the Ministry of Infrastructures and Transport (MIT) approved the new port reform (Legislative Decree 4 August 2016, No. 169). The law aims to integrate the logistics system, reduce competition, improve port performances and optimize the use of spaces between the contiguous ports of Naples, Castellammare di Stabia and Salerno (Figure 2). However, historical legacies may influence future developments of the port of Naples preventing integration and the adaptation of the port to a new metropolitan scale. Therefore, the paper questions the concept of integration envisioned by the different actors and the extent to which national reforms respond to spatial and institutional separation in the Naples port-city region.

## DISCUSSION WITH NATIONAL AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES

A multitude of actors are involved in shaping the port-city relationship in Naples, actors who have different ideas, missions and planning tools. Therefore, port and city plans have been analysed to better understand this plurality of visions. In addition, decision-makers from the central government, the Central Tyrrhenian Sea-port system, and from the municipality of Naples are interviewed to show the conflicts and the path dependencies that may emerge when different actors are called to plan port-city relations. Integration emerges as a key topic both from the



**Figure 2.** Port system in the Campania region: Naples, Castellammare di Stabia and Salerno. Source: Author.

plans and the interviews. However, it also appears to be a very controversial concept, open to different interpretations.

The youngest among the actors is that with the widest scale: the European Union (EU) (De Martino, 2016). In 2013, the EU introduced the new European transport policy. The aim was to turn the current patchwork of ports, airports, roads and railways into an integrated trans-European transport network (TEN-T) (EU, 2013). At the national scale, the MIT is promoting a similar approach to port planning, facilitating integration between ports and European corridors through port systems (Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport, 2014). On a regional scale, the development of the special economic zones (ZESs) is promoting a reindustrialization of the territory adjacent to the port with relevant investments in the field of logistics (Regione Campania, 2016). The port authority is interested in port efficiency and connection of the port with the regional territory (Autorità di Sistema Portuale del Mar Tirreno Centrale, 2017). On the contrary, the municipality frames the port as a physical barrier between city and water and potential land for urban expansions aiming mainly at a reappropriation of the coastline (Comune di Napoli, 2004). Citizens suffer negative externalities and there is a strong separation between the port and the urban communities. Finally, powerful actors such as shipping companies, terminal operators and logistics providers within and outside the port are redesigning the geography of relations between the port and the surrounding territory. The latter are not generally interested in a single port, since they operate on a global scale (Baltazar, 2007).

These contrasting visions manifest themselves as a waiting condition for the areas where the city physically meets the port. The divergence of visions was also confirmed by the interviewees. According to a minister from the MIT, ports belong to a different and higher institutional level, which goes beyond the local dimension and control. The national port reform, in fact, was introduced to give a future to Italian ports, which were perceived to be weak compared with North European ones. The minister describes this weakness as a result of historical and cultural traditions. Ports in Northern Europe, for example, developed over the centuries to support the



industrial and manufacturing revolution. These ports are complex infrastructures linked to a wider logistics system, with a strong connection between production and hinterland.

On the contrary, in the Mediterranean tradition, ports were the ‘emporium’ without any link with the territory, rather with the sea and the ships. In other words, while in Northern Europe the governments conceived the ports as hubs, in Italy the central government conceived the ports as destinations and completely detached from their hinterlands. The minister emphasized the fact that, in Italy, ports have always been of national interest. Therefore, Italian port reform was introduced to support this position and in reaction to a strong port municipalism that has developed in Italy in recent years. Every city is attached to its own port. This can be defined as a positive path dependence, a sense of belonging of citizens and local authorities to their own port and a cultural tradition. Nevertheless, this has historically generated anarchy in planning and an absence of systemic coordination still present today.

Similarly to the minister, but on a different note, a chief executive, from the Central Tyrrhenian Sea-port system, argues that it is time to rethink the role and nature of the port in relation to a territory that is changing rapidly. According to his vision, the port-city topic needs to be reformulated at a higher scale as port-metropolitan city. The traditional idea of a city to which we normally refer is very narrow compared with the reality of the port. The territory of the port, in fact, has a sphere of influence that embraces 14 million citizens. It is much wider than the city and must be designed at a different scale. In order to understand the port-city relationship decision-makers and planners should look at the flows rather than focus on administrative borders. Port and city relate to different territories and scales. They change according to different times, needs and speed. The chief executive also believes that at the city level it is necessary to identify more flexible and creative ways for port and city to coexist. Adaptive solutions should happen with respect to the nature of the port as an economic and infrastructural element within the city. This is already happening in the historical and monumental waterfront of Municipio Square, but the port-city areas in the east of Naples are still waiting for solutions.

Finally, a counsellor for urban planning from the municipality of Naples seems to have a more critical perspective on the port-city relation, confirming the existence of two critical path dependencies that have influenced the way ports and cities have been planned in Naples and, more generally, in Italy. The first is the conflict of competences between the multitude of authorities, planning agencies and consortia. The second is European regulations that have introduced a rationalization of ports, requiring decision-makers to frame ports only from an economic-financial perspective. The first aspect has prevented the identification of common goals between the different actors; and the second has widened a deep fragmentation between ports and regional territories. As a result, ports have been excluded from the cities and their inhabitants. Therefore, according to the counsellor, Europe as a planning actor is impacting locally the relationship between port and city quite strongly, imposing port development plans regardless of the local contexts behind them.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper has presented a case study of the Naples port-city region arguing that spatial and governance developments are strongly influenced by path dependencies.

The need to frame the port at a more regional scale emerges as a central argument from discussions with actors. However, both policy documents and interviews have also confirmed the presence of conflicts when multiple actors have different visions and interests. Path dependence occurs when actors are used to thinking and acting only according to their own consolidated beliefs. In fact, findings have shown that each actor considers integration from a different perspective. For each discipline, integration has a different significance and quality. The European and national authorities promote port clusters and functional interdependence between ports in

proximity by sharing sea and land services. The port authority looks at integration in terms of improving port efficiency by better connecting the port to its regional hinterland. The municipality looks at the port as land for urban expansion, as an economic motor or a facilitator of urban reform. The historical legacies still influence the future development of the port of Naples, preventing integration and the adaptation of the port to a new regional dimension. The more inclusive approach introduced by regionalization, in the absence of a coordinated vision and joint plans between the different authorities, risks reinforcing existing path dependencies, rather than breaking from them. Therefore, separation is still embedded in contemporary approaches to port-city planning, and, in order to interrupt path dependencies, port challenges should be better framed by the different authorities as an opportunity for an urban and territorial regeneration. This asks for new spatial configurations, port-city-regional collaborations and, most importantly, a profound change in the institutional and cultural behaviour.

HI applied to port-cities is, therefore, a useful theoretical approach to understand the transformation and inertia processes in port-cities, and a valid contribution in comparative studies. However, more research is needed to understand better how to translate the results that come out of the theory into operational guidelines for planning authorities, analysing, through comparative investigations, how other authorities in different contexts are dealing with similar issues.

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## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For the PortCityFutures conference, see <http://conference.portcityfutures.org/> (last accessed on 18 March 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Interviews were conducted by the author between June and July 2017.

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