How does a Cultural Political Economy approach help to explain the political and hegemonic role of firms? The case of Smart City paradigm in the framing of the Italian urban agenda

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Abstract.

The aim of the paper is to test the usefulness of concepts developed within the Cultural Political Economy (CPE) approach in theoretically and empirically explaining the political role of firms in the contemporary stage of neo-liberalisation, depoliticisation of politics and “post-democracy”.

The case analysed is the launching of an urban policy agenda in Italy, giving consideration to one of its main ideational components: the Smart City paradigm. Even though this component legitimates a specific line of action, it also summarises the frame of the agenda as a whole and specifies its general neo-liberal orientation.

Its function is that of achieving hegemony for enterprises by influencing how the state secures the conditions for short-term profits and long-term accumulation through the acceptance of values and beliefs based on common sense and by carrying high emotional valence as a legitimating element in policy frames. This is achieved by firms by taking on a more direct and proactive political role, based on their knowledge and discursive capacity, which facilitates the isomorphic adaptation of state actors and actions to market patterns.

Conceptual tools developed within CPE such as highly performative imaginaries and knowledge brands actually help to provide evidence about the “how” of this hegemonic process. Smart City as an urban imaginary provides the cognitive and normative pillars a political project is based on and which resonate with the common sense of rationality. Related knowledge brands, produced and retained by ICT and consultancy firms, provide the wider “neo-liberal” imaginaries in which Smart City is embedded with toolkits having framing and operational properties, in addition to being saleable commodities.

1. Depoliticisation and the political role of firms: starting point and hypotheses

In the contemporary stage of neo-liberalisation, processes of depoliticisation impact in various forms on polity, politics and policy bringing with them a variety of shifting responsibilities, both within the political/institutional realm and between the state and the private sphere. As such, depoliticisation “opens up the space within which ‘politics’ and government are played out by producing in its wake a system of complicit politicisation, as the agencies and individuals to whom responsibility for a policy domain is transferred are politicised” (Foster et al. 2014, 236). This paper focuses on the politicisation of an allegedly non-political kind of player – the firms involved – with the aim of answering questions that regard the emergence or otherwise of new forms through which enterprises play a political role in a context of depoliticisation and the implications of this role for power relationships.

Tentative answers are based on a case study of the “Smart City paradigm” as a central component of the urban policy agenda that is taking shape in Italy. Here, firms engage in the creation of a specific market for hardware, software and consultancy, which depends heavily on state demand, thus making it necessary to add political investments to those in R&D. Characteristics of the political role of the firms in this field have been analysed using concepts developed within the Cultural Political Economy (CPE) approach. In particular, the capacity of “imaginaries” and “knowledge brands” to effectively connect the theoretical level (explanation of power in terms of the depoliticised regulation of accumulation processes and cultural hegemony) to the empirical level (evidence about actors’ material interests, strategies, representations, discourses, influence over political decisions, constructions of meanings and policy frames) has been explored.

This paper has four sections. Firstly, the theoretical implications of the object of analysis (political role of firms in the context of depoliticisation processes) are briefly presented. Secondly, the interpretive potential of CPE is explored focusing on those aspects that make its use particularly promising when the aim is that of tracing causal relationships between (i) materiality of economic activities and strategies, (ii) those semiotic
processes through which imaginaries and knowledge brands are selected and retained and (iii) the framing of public policies. Thirdly, the main features of the Smart City (SC) urban imaginary and policy paradigm, along with its related KBs, are presented as pre- eminent semiotic and material components in the setting of an urban agenda at European and national levels. The paper ends with a tentative interpretation and discussion on depoliticisation and the political role of firms in the light of CPE. The overall thesis is that a specific type of economic actor has become better able to steer state action, because it has effected an important strategy change: in order to create the extra-economic preconditions for pursuing successfully an accumulation strategy and reproducing it over time, not only do firms exert pressure but they also play a more direct political role. They provide both the instruments and techniques to carry out actions and the ideas that legitimate, address and structure public regulations, based on a specific vision of cities and the urban environment. Not only is such a politicisation of these firms part of a broader process of depoliticisation, but it also makes it possible for this specific fraction of capital to exert hegemony within policy networks, if not (yet) over urban societies.

**Depoliticisation.** Two generations of debates on depoliticisation (Hay 2014) have explored and even classified – into a "governmental", "social" and "discursive" typology (Hay 2007) – the main aspects of such a "dominant model of statecraft in the twenty-first century" (Flinders, Wood 2014, 135). In depoliticised contexts politics do not disappear (Flinders, Buller 2006; Foster et al 2014, 229-30), neither does public policy. On the contrary, roll-out neoliberalism in particular requires regulation and allocation of resources to be performed through collective actions producing outputs that are to some extent compelling, but “placing at one remove the political character of decision making” (Burnham 2001, 128). As “many of the modes for removing issues from open political contention can also be found in the formation of specific policies, policy making, policy taking, and policy implementation” (Jessop 2014, 216), this paper aims at showing how some crucial components of the politics of policy making become the object of a "social" depoliticisation (Flinders, Wood 2014b), by means of which the power to deal with issues of collective interest is transferred to the private spheres of individuals and the market. Antonio Gramsci's lesson concerning the centrality of private institutions and organisations in state power, recalled by B. Jessop (2014, 211) as an articulation of “state and non-state institutions and practices around particular economic, political and societal projects and strategies” seems compatible with evidence about the behaviour of contemporary market actors, who put innovation at the forefront of economic strategies and public policy, even in semiotic terms.

**Political role of firms.** Economic actors' attempts to influence decisions that shape the extra-economic conditions of accumulation, are obviously not new and have been focused on from various theoretical points of view. These approaches are mostly of a methodological individualist type (emphasising either the activism of individual firms as strategic actors, or the collective action of businesses) vs. holistic ones (emphasising businesses as a class or structure of shared interests and the role of institutions and institutionalised regulatory environments, such as occur in both Marxist and neo-corporatist theories). State-business relations have been conceptualised in terms of a dependence of businesses on the state, the influence of businesses on the state, the dependence of the state on businesses and an interdependence, or mutual influence (Lang, Tenbűcken M., 2006). The latter, especially, brings about forms of an "adaptive" incorporation of individual businesses or collective organisations in public policy making vs. more proactive and strategic attitudes of such enterprises. This latter approach can be understood as the intention and ability of firms to shape their own regulatory environment, making best of their opportunity to steer collective (public) actions provided by the opening up of governance.

Literature focusing on business regulation stresses the scalar shift from state-centric modes towards multilateral, non-territorial modes of regulation (Scherer et al. 2007) with private business firms as core actors. Within transnational regimes of governance they often take responsibility for public matters by defining and enforcing standards, business friendly economic regulations, soft law, self-regulatory norms concerning corporate citizenship and corporate social responsibility, and conditioning even state and multilevel public finance policies, rather than rating agencies do. By so doing, they assume state-like functions in non-democratically legitimated ways by substituting, supporting, and complementing states, or even competing with them. In the context of a neo-liberalised "steering and not rowing" state firms also get involved in various forms of urban governance by providing public goods and services (education, health and social care, infrastructure) and by taking part in public-private partnerships and strategic planning. Such involvement makes these firms able to negotiate their own "space of dependence" (Cox 1998) on place-related resources. This regards the dimensions of action and policy processes, but firms play a political role
by also providing cognitive and normative models for public action. This happens through an "ideational turn", in a semiotic process producing an isomorphism of public actions and actors with market processes and actors at various scales. In its first stage, the supply of cognitive and normative models is indirect. For example, the representation of cities as collective actors “in the making” (Le Galès 2002, 264) was based on features that, although not explicitly, viewed businesses as an ideal-typical model. Since then, this metaphor has shown itself to hold powerful, although indirect, performative potential. Allegedly, cities and metropolises engaged in strategic planning look for vision and leadership, must be able to assess the costs and benefits of actions, evaluate strengths and weaknesses, and orient themselves toward partnership and competition, as firms do. Besides, in order to discursively construct the cities as strategic actors within the context of globalisation, cognitive and normative patterns produced through the applied knowledge and skills embedded in the experience of firms turn out to be determinant elements of semiosis. Once deployed by pragmatic local and trans-national political actors, these have contributed to tendencies toward isomorphic and stereotyped imaginaries about cities as competitive actors and the development of policies and forms of governance that should embody such a metaphor. Performing as collective, firm-like actors has become as much an orthodox view as currently are those urban development strategies inspired by sustainability, cleanliness, connectedness, competitiveness, creativity, etc. (Pinson 2012). In a second stage, the “ideational turn” has become more advanced, as firms provide public actions with an isomorphic model, producing and selling it directly. This kind of influence is further focused on in the paper using an analysis of the SC case and the conceptual instruments of CPE.

2. Interpretive tools: how to use imaginaries and knowledge brands?

The Cultural Political Economy (CPE) approach (Jessop 2009; Sum, 2009; Sum, Jessop 2013) is neither presented, nor discussed here in its rich and complex theoretical implications. The author considers it persuasive since in very general terms it explains power as hegemony in contemporary capitalism considering the role of agency and strategic factors (strategic-relational approach), as well as of material interests and semiotic (sense- and meaning-making) processes. The most relevant aspects for the issues focused on in this paper concern the relationships between meanings and economic and political practices (Jessop 2004), the role of technical objects that are socially constructed by an intersubjective production of meaning and the relationships between the material (extra-semiotic) and semiotic dimensions of these processes and the exercise of power.

The focus here instead is on the empirical use of central concepts in CPE, such as imaginaries and knowledge brands (KBs), for research purposes aimed at explaining how hegemony is produced by actors that pursue interest-based strategies manipulating knowledge and technology in order to influence the politics of policies. In particular, this conceptual couple should make it possible to detect empirical evidence on how the construction of extra-economic conditions for profit and accumulation within a given economic sector, which interfaces a specific public policy domain, is shaped by discourses connected to interests. To this end some clarifications are needed about the specific meaning of both concepts, how they relate to each other and their explanatory scope and use.

According to CPE literature imaginaries are “semiotic systems that provide the basis for the lived experience of an inordinately complex world” (Jessop, Oosterlynck 2008, 6) and/or inform collective calculation about that world. They comprise a specific configuration of genres, discourses and styles and thereby constitute the semiotic moment of a network of social practices in a given social field, institutional order, or wider social formation or clusters of meaning (pp. 184; 479). Their function is to make possible complexity reduction through semiosis, meaning-making, and policy technologies (Jessop 2009; Sum 2009). For example, an economic imaginary is a semiotic system that gives meaning and shape to the ‘economic’ field (Jessop 2009, 344), and (re)articulates various genres discourses, and styles around a particular conception of the economy and its extra-economic conditions of existence (Jessop, Oosterlynck 2008, 6). Imaginaries are produced through an evolutionary process of variation in construals, selection of discourses, implying resonance of discourses in personal, organisational, institutional, and broader meta-narrative terms (Jessop 2004; 2009), retention of discourses in policy, as well as reinforcement and institutionalisation. So, they provide narrational and theoretical bases for legitimising policy paradigms and frames. For example, the knowledge-

1 Unless differently specified, references in this section are to Sum and Jessop, 2013.
based economy imaginary “was selected as a leading theoretical paradigm and as the basis of an economic policy paradigm” being “influential in shaping policy paradigms, strategies and policies in and across many different fields of social practice” (p. 263). Reported examples of economic and political imaginaries are neoliberal narratives such as flexibility, privatisation, deregulation, globalisation, export orientation, innovation, and competitiveness (p. 296).

According to CPE literature a KB

can be defined as a resonant hegemonic meaning-making device advanced in various ways by ‘world-class’ gurus-academics-consultants who claim unique knowledge of a relevant strategic or policy field and pragmatically translate this into (trans-) national policy symbols, recipes and toolkits that address policy problems and dilemmas and also appeal to pride, threats and anxieties about socio-economic restructuring and changes. In this regard, a KB is a trans-national manifestation and condensation of institutional, organisational and discursive power in the knowledge–consultancy–policy circuit” (p. 305).

KBs work as discursive apparatuses (e.g. indexes and metaphors), providing flexible templates that can be developed and re-contextualised to changing global regional, national and local conditions. KBs are simple, user-friendly, readily useable, saleable and transferable (p. 301), problem oriented toolkits, and have high problem-solving capacity, as they re-engineer solutions for policy and organisational issues and also appeal to non-rational motives. For example, use of ranking discourses is made to convey pride, needs, desires, gaps and even panic (p. 310). "Knowledgeing" instruments such as indexes measuring performance, benchmarking, and best practices, may function as a “discursive apparatus that frames the understandings (of competitiveness)” (p. 307) and “function as a disciplinary tool (or paper panopticon) with surveillance capacities” (p. 309). As such, KBs play a key role in fast policy transfer on multiple sites and scales (p. 274), and can be used to persuade policy-makers and offer ready-made solutions.

KBs can be R&D products based on methodologies guaranteed by well known producers and the research institutes they control, can be easily leveraged and transferred to the consultancy-policy world (p. 301), as well as circulated and popularised by “idea entrepreneurs” through reports, public performances, and the business press. Reported examples of KB are: competitiveness advantage discourses in organisational strategy, national systems of innovation in innovation and learning, ‘creative class’ in urban regeneration, and ‘global commodity chain’.

Thus, both imaginaries and KBs have the characteristics of semiotic systems and social practices, are not neutral with regard to interests and also refer to a specific (wider or narrower, social and/or political) field. Both are shaped through “evolutionary” and overlapping stages, but theoretical paradigms and accounts are translated into policy paradigms (discourses and narratives) and then into KBs (management models, consultancy methodologies and learning devices) about how to perform and achieve objectives (p. 298). For example, this regards a “shift from a theoretical paradigm to a policy paradigm for economic imaginaries and discourses concerned with competition and competitiveness. A further stage occurs with the transformation of these paradigms into knowledge brands” (p. 267, Italic added).

Therefore, as far as KBs are concerned the instrumental and pragmatical qualities of discourses as well as "knowledgeing" and governmental technologies are emphasised more. Imaginaries are considered here as the wider semiotic premises of KBs, which "embody" them. Imaginaries and KBs relate to each other, share basic cognitive and normative assumptions (theoretical paradigms evolving into policy paradigms) but the functions performed are partially different. In the following sections both concepts are used to analyse how firms play a political and hegemonic role in urban policy through a process of selection and retention of an urban imaginary and related KBs, which are produced more by the firms themselves than by "gurus–academics–consultants". In particular, the focus is on how the processes of variation, selection and retention work, as well as on the relationships between imaginaries, KBs and the processes of depoliticisation and re-politicisation.

3. Urban agendas and the Smart City paradigm: the Italian case

Multi-scalar urban agendas. In 2012 a national urban agenda was launched in Italy by a bipartisan parliamentary initiative that established a governmental Committee for Urban Policies in order to co-ordinate
national and local actions having impacts on cities – especially EU structural funds\(^2\) – and to negotiate effectively in the corresponding EU policy arenas. In the meanwhile a reform established metropolitan governments, a state scale that is also able to get funds from EU 2014-2020 policies. When the decisions were made some conditions were present for a public policy agenda to be formed (Kingdon 1984): social, economic and spatial challenges were constructed socially and politically as specifically urban as a result of influential discourses and pressures exerted by the EU Commission. These made it possible for a policy network to take shape on urban issues (Gelli 2014) and involved: political actors, bureaucrats, experts and economic actors; national political conditions, such as a “big coalition” parliamentary majority and motivated political entrepreneurs; and a (neo-liberal) policy frame (Rein e Schön, 1993) providing cognitive and normative means (representations, values, aims) to construct shared meanings of public action. The Italian urban agenda is part of a multilevel and trans-scalar public action, since a EU urban agenda is also taking shape, focused on urban regeneration, regionalisation of urban development and environmental issues. Basically, it is coherent with the orthodox frame found in “Europe 2020” strategy and EU cohesion policy\(^3\), both expressions of roll-out neoliberalism, since growth strategy is supposed to help the EU to become a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy through employment, innovation, education, social inclusion and climate/energy initiatives\(^4\). A depoliticisation process, above all discursive in nature, is at work (Flinders, Buller 2006; Wood, Flinders 2014; Wood 2015), from which the urban policy paradigm results naturalised, entrenched and unchallenged.

Europeanisation (Radaelli 2000) has brought about isomorphism through a communicative and co-ordinational role of policy discourses (Schmidt 2008) and conditionality through funding. Compliance at the national level regards the frame, goals, and forms of governance, as well as the institutional and administrative tools of urban policy. Actions in the Italian National Operational Programme 2014-2020 and “Digital Agenda” are aimed at the competitiveness and attractiveness of cities. For metropolitan regions there are two “metrodinators”: the implementation of Social Innovation practices and projects as well as those of a SC paradigm (DPS 2014), which has, in this way, been selected and retained.

*The Smart City imaginary*. Within the frame of both the Italian and EU urban agendas there is a discursive sub-system, which also corresponds to its strategic kernel, based on innovation as “new knowledge, primary factor of development, growth and social inclusion” (CIPU, 2013). In particular, the SC paradigm is considered a "successful model in Italy if aligned with the issue of urban development and the strategic planning of Europe 2020"\(^5\). Such a discourse has especially cognitive and communicative (but also co-ordinational) functions (Schmidt 2008) within the policy network. As an urban imaginary and one of the main ideational components of urban policy, in the EU and in Italy SC provides a paradigm that legitimates specific lines of action, but it summarises the frame of the urban agenda as a whole and specifies its general neo-liberal orientation. Such imaginary gathers and synthesises representations and meanings of urban problems and provides them with the sense of a composite and integrated governing agenda. It is beyond the scope of this article to illustrate the SC paradigm in detail, also because there are too many “official” definitions of SC, partially coinciding yet partially differing, to report them all. Briefly, it combines pre-existing urban imaginaries (smart growth; intelligent city), is based on the urbanisation of the world population, and is coherent with models of competitive cities as engines of economic and sustainable urban development (Hollands, 2014) made concrete through the ICT, and is presented as adaptable to every urban context. A definition was “retained” by the EU Parliament, according to which a “city that tackles public problems through ICT and multi-stakeholder local partnership” is defined as smart\(^6\). At the national level one of the most important (public) agencies supporting and helping to spread the imaginary and related KBs describes SC as “an urban space, well led by a forward-looking politics, which faces the challenges brought about by globalisation and the economic crisis in terms of competitiveness and sustainable development,

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\(^2\) In the 2007-2013 period Italy got 2.4 billion Euro for cities and urban systems, dispersed over more than 1,600 projects. Other actions were funded by the Italian government and, of course, by local governments.

\(^3\) EU cohesion policy is an investment policy supporting job creation, competitiveness, economic growth, improved quality of life and sustainable development (http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/index_en.cfm)


\(^5\) http://smartinnovation.forumpa.it/story/75169/la-mappa-delle-smart-city-eu-e-la-sinergia-con-europa2020


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paying attention particularly to social cohesion, diffusion and availability of knowledge, creativity, freedom and actually usable mobility, quality of the environment and culture\textsuperscript{7}. SC rationales and concrete initiatives are commonly organised around six main fields, which correspond to the shared, meaningful and by now well retained multiplicity of dimensions: \textit{Smart Governance}, \textit{Smart People}, \textit{Smart Living}, \textit{Smart Mobility}, \textit{Smart Economy}, \textit{Smart Environment}\textsuperscript{8}. Therefore, the paradigm potentially corresponds to the entire governing agenda of a city.

What does such a comprehensive frame depend on? On the one hand there is the aim of preventing objections by distributing benefits – especially those coming from public funds, which are very rare at the moment – to a wide variety of those components in the policy network (see below). However, on the other hand, the corresponding rhetoric of holistic, inter-sectoral and mainstreaming action is also functional to the market implications and aims of the imaginary itself, whose commodified KBs can be sold more easily the higher the number and variety of potential purchasers.

As concerns the “variation” mechanism there are several, almost mythological narratives about the birth of the SC paradigm, which is allegedly traceable within the initiatives of big ICT firms. In particular, in 2005, Cisco Systems met the Clinton Foundation’s challenge to use its know-how to make cities sustainable with a $25 million investment and through the launch (in 2010) of a division charged with selling the resulting new products and services\textsuperscript{9}. IBM, which patented its own \textit{Smarter Cities} brand\textsuperscript{10}, Siemens, Microsoft and several others transnational corporations, along with national firms, compete for an expanding SC market, which is allegedly expected to grow further\textsuperscript{11}. So, the SC business is an economic sub-system, spread all around the world, in which economic activities are quite simple to identify, since they refer to the specific business of selling hardware, software and related managerial consultancy, concerning organisational and policy issues.

If there are meso and micro economic imaginaries related to specific subsets of economic activities (commodity production) as objects of regulation (…) (Jessop 2004; Sum, Jessop 2013, 167) the SC economy can be considered a micro “imagined economy”. As both a “micro” economic and urban imaginary the SC paradigm reveals its parentage to wider ones, already selected and translated into policy frames/paradigms. In particular, knowledge-based economy, sustainable development and the like, are seen as both paradigms in economics and policy paradigms, whereas more specifically “urban” antecedents are the competitiveness of cities and entrepreneurship, resilience, greenness, and “Good” (urban) governance. Besides, the SC imaginary recalls previous sets of solutions (smartness and smart growth) as much “scientific” and depoliticised as to be considered not necessarily effective for urban management (Shelton et al. 2014).

\textit{Smart City network and practices}. Once selected and retained as a policy paradigm the SC imaginary gave birth to a myriad of local initiatives in Italy, supported by national agencies and clusters of firms. Consequently a policy community took shape, made up of local governments, associations of local governments, technical agencies established at the initiative of public actors (such as the \textit{National Smart City Observatory} established in 2012\textsuperscript{12}) in partnership with private actors and corporate think tanks. Under a law passed in 2012 (Decreto-Legge 18/10/2012, n. 179) the "Agency for Digital Italy" (an Italian governmental organisation) should propose and monitor annually a “Plan of Smart/Intelligent Communities, doing so with the advice of a technical committee on which firms are represented. It should also regulate the requirements for a city to obtain public allocations for SC projects, using legal instruments such as statutes and protocols. Thus, these agencies have both a regulatory task and that of disseminating and legitimating the imaginary,

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\textsuperscript{7} \url{http://smartinnovation.forumpa.it/smartsection/smart-cities}
\textsuperscript{8} \url{http://www.smart-cities.eu}. The Italian “official” platform of SC projects is organized around eight dimensions: environment, energy, economy, people, living, mobility, government and planning (\url{www.italiansmartcities.it}).
\textsuperscript{9} \url{http://www.information-age.com/industry/hardware/2087993/ibm-cisco-and-the-business-of-smart-cities}
\textsuperscript{10} \url{http://www.ibm.com/smarterplanet/us/en/smartercities/overview/}
\textsuperscript{11} In Italy so far investments amount to € 3,800,059,298 in 1,195 projects (\url{www.italiansmartcities.it}, visited on August 9\textsuperscript{th}, 2015). According to a recent report (\url{http://www.navigantresearch.com/research/smart-cities}) the revenue of this business is supposed to grow from $8.8 billion annually in 2014 to $27.5 billion in 2023 with a cumulative total of $117.3 billion from 2013 to 2020. Other figures speak of spending soaring from about $1 billion in 2013 to more than $12 billion in 2025 (\url{http://smartcitiescouncil.com/article/next-decade-bring-fourfold-increase-number-smart-cities}), while according to ABI Research, smart cities technology is an $8.1 billion market today and in five years it will grow to almost five times that size, reaching $39.5 billion. Pike Research forecasts that investment in smart city technology infrastructure will total $108 billion during the decade from 2010 to 2020 (\url{http://smartcitiescouncil.com/article/our-vision}).
\textsuperscript{12} \url{http://osservatoriosmartcitta.it/coe-c/}

making the sale of commodities easier and teaching local political actors how-to-do-it-flexibly through collective networking and learning, benchmarking practices, processing applied knowledge and producing and making use of KBs. Forms of communication are varied: the internet, social media, newsletters, above all big trade fairs/workshops such as the yearly “Smart City Exhibition”\(^{13}\) in which producers and customers exchange ideas and commodities, sponsored by important supplier and retailers\(^{14}\) of KBs.

4. Urban imaginary and knowledge brands and the hegemonic production of isomorphism

The case of the urban agenda and the SC imaginary, selected and retained as an urban policy paradigm, shows how depoliticisation processes and the political role played by firms through ideational resources complement and mutually reinforce each other. In the case analysed the ideational function, which is fundamental for politics, is not extinguished, neither are “politicised” firms passive, nor reactive recipients of transferred responsibility. Rather, they take on a political role both directly and proactively, replacing both public (elected) actors and other sites where applied knowledge for public policy making and its meaning-making functions are usually produced, such as research centres and think tanks.

Such a politicised role originates from strategies aimed at both short-term and long-term advantages. The SC imaginary and related KBs turn out to be very useful for both purposes. Short-term advantages consist of opening up new markets and activating those socio-spatial relationships that make it possible not only to negotiate, but even to construct their own space of dependence. Since purchasers of products are especially local governments, such business depends heavily on access to local markets through forms of public procurement and public-private partnerships. In a context of shrinking state budgets, legitimisation is strongly needed since SC products and practices have to compete fiercely with others to obtain allocations. Consequently, economic actors mobilise various kinds of resources in order to influence relevant public policy. R&D investments on the supply side create a demand by themselves, whereas semiotic resources are invested to create and communicate the immediately retrievable urban imaginary briefly sketched out above and its “embodiment” in specific KBs.

The KBs related to the SC paradigm are methodologies and technological artefacts that integrate this urban imaginary and make it operational, so that the performative impact of the imaginary is largely due to these KBs. They are (mostly) saleable commodities of three types: (i) hardware and software products through which to achieve practices concerning the multiple dimensions of city smartness; (ii) managerial consultancy sold to local governments to teach them SC’s logics, practices and the artefacts useful to such ends, such as handbooks and toolkits; (iii) research results and databases providing cognitive bases for policy transfer – instruments for reflexivity within the SC policy community on factors upon which the success (failure is far less mentioned in discourses) of the paradigm depends – and highlighting local market opportunities to firms. They are produced, spread and retailed worldwide by both larger and smaller ITC and consultancy firms, through the intermediation of inter- and trans-national (political) organisations. Being imbued with cognitive and normative properties, they bring about both framing/legitimating and operational/pragmatic consequences.

For the sake of brevity, some examples of KBs relevant to the Italian SC market and policy and produced by both Italian and international actors – mostly local branches of multinational corporations – are reported in Annex 1. KBs are artefacts performing both pragmatic and symbolic functions and providing material for knowledge-based and discursive depoliticisation. Suppliers of KBs reduce costs by adapting to the SC products and business routines already developed for private purchasers. For example, PwC Italia proposes the same consultancy products and processes to public clients as those devised for private firms (Galassi, 2014). To this end cities are discursively constructed not only as actors who can win or lose the competitive challenge of SC (Vanolo 2014) but also as “socio-technical systems”, capable of knowing their environment, being strategic, convincing stakeholders and sustaining innovation (Vademecum ANCI, 2012). To convince clients, ICT and consultancy firms represent the success conditions necessary for SC (e.g. In 2014; Pwc Italia 2014) in a very similar way to those typical of competitive enterprises and to this end they use rankings


\(^{14}\) Main sponsors of the 2013 Smart City Exhibition were Sinergis, ABB, Selex ES-Finmeccanica, IBM, Pwc. In 2014 also Acea, Autodesk, Enea, Eurotech, Datalogic, Electric Vehicles, Hp, Vodafone and many others
as incentives. Local governments, just like any economic actor, (ought to) develop strategies aimed at creating competitive advantages and use consultancy to this end (Dicken 1994).

SC KBs communicate plausible and seductive narratives, often through metaphorical language, resonating with both the rational and irrational aspects of human nature (Jessop, Sum 2013, 305). The promise to combine intelligence and efficiency evokes a foundational myth of capitalism that (long after M. Weber) is still able to combine values, feelings and interests, using rationality as a premise of individual and collective action and as shared common sense. As pragmatic translations of the SC urban imaginary, KBs provide purchaser-public actors with a reassuring definition of a reality in which are found both the room and manageable tools for purposeful and rational agency to be performed in order to deal with complexity and to govern risky urban systems and societies. Not only is agency possible but, in a difficult environment (global competition, crisis) there is no rational alternative to collective, intelligent action. This in turn needs appropriate, effective tools of a technological (ICT) and organisational kind, the latter being provided by business-like organisational principles, and also providing the criteria that urban (Good) governance should be based on.

Similarly to other neoliberal imaginaries, the SC paradigm and each of its KBs are presented as a common, inescapable wisdom, an offer one cannot refuse (Kitchin, 2014) and an urban panacea (Hollands, 2014). Solutions are of the win-win type (State Agency for Digital Italy, 2012), with both concentrated and diffuse benefits and apparently at no cost. This produces complexity reduction effects through a clear-cut boundary between what is acceptable and alluring or otherwise. Particularly persuasive arguments are performances when measured and compared through specific KBs, consisting of ratings and rankings of smartness. The latter especially (for example: Fast, 2014; cityrates, 2014) provide implicit forms of shaming that mobilise an emotive potential – or valence (Cox, Béland 2013) – which works as an incentive to join the SC movement and purchase SC products. Cities are discursively constructed as collective actors who can win or lose the competitive challenge – not only metaphorically 16 – for being smart (smarter). Those lagging behind or, even worse, not willing to adapt to "smart mentality", are "smartdeviant" (Vanolo 2014). Just as in H.C. Andersen's tale "The Emperor's New Clothes", in which clothes had a wonderful way of becoming invisible to anyone who was unfit for his office, or who was unusually stupid 17, the SC imaginary and just as much smart KBs are the object of a self-induced selectivity based even on shame: only people (and above all elected and appointed public officers) who are unfit for office or not up-to-date fail to recognise the thauomaguric force of these commodities. Such a present vs. missing ability "to see" fits well with depoliticisation, in which policy tends to be evaluated by actors

"in ‘black and white’ terms, constructing binary distinctions (good versus evil, natural versus unnatural, efficient versus inefficient, inevitable versus contingent, alternatives versus no alternatives, etc.) to justify the inherent 'goodness' of an existing policy (depoliticising)" (Wood 2015, 14).

Not only does this shelter both the imaginary and its KBs from political disputes, but social and political tensions are further prevented by subsuming values of social and above all environmental sustainability within the meaning system of the SC imaginary. Other neoliberal urban KBs, such as city marketing, city branding, SWOT analysis and the like have been updated. In the current context of crisis counter-cyclical imaginaries of sustainable, green, digital and networked social market economies provide economic, cultural and ready-to-use policy and governance models. Examples of such imaginaries include the Economy of functionality, or the narrative, practices and the related KBs of Social Investment, Social Entrepreneurship, Social Innovation, Social resilience, and Sharing Economy (Dey, Steyaert 2010; Whitfield 2012), Open data, as well as citizens’ empowerment, participatory and deliberative practices, e-government, e-governance and

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15 For example: according to the State Agency for Digital Italy (2012) “smart strategy” is an approach “to reach any kind of objective successfully”. In the innovation community actors of innovation are “champions” (innovative firms), “angels” (research centres, hi-tech firms, consultants) and “promoters” (governments, business associations, Venture Capital & Private Equity (http://www.urbanexperience.it/eventi/innovating-innovation-nuove-frontiere-per-linnovazione-nellimpresa-in-rete-al-cnr/)

16 For example, IBM launched a global Smarter City Challenge won for 2015/16 by 16 cities, each of them taking part in the contest through a committee composed of public officials and IBM advisors (http://smartercitieschallenge1.org). The Italian yearly ‘Smart City Exhibition’ hosts a call and contest for technological smart solutions for cities (http://www.smartcityexhibition.it/it/news/mostra-sce2014-dieci-prototipi-innovativi-la-citta-smart)

17 http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholm/TheEmperorsNewClothes_e.html
e-democracy, the 4P model “People, Public, Private, Partnership”. Those listed are all included in Smart people (education, ethnic pluralism, open-mindedness), Smart living (health, safety, housing, economic well-being) and Smart governance dimensions, or are discursively associated with them.\textsuperscript{18}

Such a holistic, comprehensive approach makes it seemingly easier to achieve convergence between firms, state actors, private stakeholders, “no-profit” civil society, the mass media, opinion makers, academics, etc. in the construction of a unique, although variegated, urban reality. Furthermore, it helps to prevent counter-hegemonic resistance, absorbing and assimilating apparently opposing ideas and devising ad hoc and compatible policy niches for them, similar to what happened in corporations with recoded meanings of competitiveness (Jessop, Sum 2013, 319).

Long-term advantages for firms consist of institutionalising regulations within urban economies and services that are favourable to the SC business. The corresponding space of engagement (Cox 1998) of these firms is multi-scalar, since to achieve retention of the urban imaginary and ensure the corresponding market, national and trans-national urban agendas must be influenced, as well as local ones. In fact, the United Nations (e.g. Global Compact Cities Programme\textsuperscript{19}, an urban component of the United Nations Global Compact) and the EU Commission (e.g. European Innovation Partnership on Smart Cities and Communities\textsuperscript{20}) are both engaged in promoting and institutionalising the SC paradigm. In Italy ITC and consultancy firms actively lobby the national government asking for the SC paradigm to be sheltered from political changes and uncertainties (Ambrosetti-ABB 2012). They have obtained (since 2014) a Minister with responsibility for a “national SC strategy and masterplan of industrial policy”\textsuperscript{21} the Plan mentioned above and the insertion into the national state procurement system (Public Administration Electronic Marketplace) of a specific purchasing line for SC commodities, organised along the six smart dimensions and replicating the content and stages of relationships between consultancy and firms.\textsuperscript{22}

In conclusion, CPE analytical tools are particularly useful in providing evidence about the “how” of the process through which the search for both short-term and long-term advantages for firms translate into highly performative imaginaries and KBs, through which such firms play a “new” political role, going beyond relationships of dependence, influence and interdependence with states (Lang, Tenbücken, 2006) and taking a lead in collective (public) action through specific ideational abilities. The effects are not only the creation of market opportunities and the allocation of material resources, but also a depoliticised definition of urban problems and appropriate policy (frames, objectives and tools) at EU, national and local levels.

Thus, the SC strategies of firms go beyond single company interests. What is at stake in the depoliticised and marketed relationships between political and economic actors is hegemony. This is achieved through an urban imaginary and buzzword situated within the variegated pattern of neoliberalism (Macartney 2011), carrying high emotional valence and whose cognitive and normative pillars are rooted in rational common sense. In this way the strategy of accumulation of a specific “fraction” of economic interests becomes a state project based on a hegemonic vision inspiring and mobilising a network of knowledge, practices and actors within which the firms are better than public actors in developing reflexivity and learning. As a result the geometries of power relationships are altered (Vanolo 2014) and firms themselves are to be considered “private apparatuses of hegemony” (Gramsci).

Relationships between the semiotic and material dimensions (dialectical of discursiveness and materiality: see Jessop 2004) in the SC paradigm and KBs are quite visible: both contribute to frame, legitimise and articulate those actions of urban policy which provide extra-economic conditions for specific economic strategies to be pursued and business to be potentially carried out over the short and long term. Furthermore, the process of isomorphic adherence of places, cities and public processes respectively to business-like and market-like processes becomes more “advanced” as a result of a likewise more “advanced” political role played by firms in providing functions that for a long time had been typical of political actors and monopolised by states. Not only do firms provide public policy with performative models both indirectly and metaphorically, as has happened with the “cities as collective (entrepreneurial) actors” metaphor, but they

\textsuperscript{18} http://www.smart-cities.eu/?cid=2&ver=3
\textsuperscript{19} http://citiesprogramme.com
\textsuperscript{20} http://ec.europa.eu/eip/smartcities
\textsuperscript{21} http://smartinnovation.forumpa.it/story/87599/vicari-definiamo-una-strategia-nazionale-ridisegnare-le-citta
\textsuperscript{22} http://www.consip.it/press_room/comunicati/2013/4/notizia_0017?subFold=Comunicati
also discursively reframe regulatory issues, development strategies and the related public policies intentionally (strategically) and directly as either “technical”, or "taken for granted" issues, based on self-evident cognitive and normative premises of rationality. Such a role is compatible with the theories of depoliticisation mentioned above, as well as those of post-democracy (Crouch 2004) and “post-political” ones (Swyngedouw 2007; Wilson, Swyngedouw 2014).

Research perspectives emerging from this case study regard not only the characteristics of depoliticisation/politicisation processes but also their consequences on urban societies, since the real achievements and impacts of the SC paradigm in “actually existing smart cities” are far from being clear (Hollands 2008; 2014; Shelton et al. 2014; Vanolo 2014; Kitchin 2014). In the Italian case, so far only the members of the resulting community of enthusiastic devotees and policy innovators, who share values, beliefs, practices and a specific jargon and make the best of such an opportunity to reassure and reward self-identification, seem to be actually getting the message, although this is enough in fact to inspire policy frames and investments. The general public and city dwellers have not (yet) been reached. A recent analysis carried out by a private firm with expertise in Customer Relationship Management (another KB adapted to the SC movement’s needs) by monitoring and paying attention to social media (Twitter) shows that the SC discourse takes place among influencers, “evangelists” and opinion leaders, while the general public does not speak about SC, or interacts only occasionally and marginally on this theme. Despite the rhetoric of Smart governance “the main beneficiaries of SC projects are neither listened to, nor involved, nor enthusiastic about this theme, can see it only minimally and are not aware of what local governments do or try to do for them” (Verioli 2015). This confirms that in order to produce effective consequences in agenda setting the SC narrative, just like others, needs above all to convince a few key policy-makers (Sum, Jessop 2013, 404). Therefore the question remains to be answered about the importance of obtaining consensus from the wider general public of citizens, which the SC paradigm recodes into customers, but who are not the direct purchasers of KBs.

More generally, studying those organisational, puzzling and powering processes (Hoppe 2011) that take place within firms and market relationships seems to be more and more promising as a way of understanding policy processes in the current context of neo-liberalism and depoliticisation.

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Schmidt
responsibility
Scherer
argumentative
Integration,
IPSA
Palgrave
Regions,
K
Kingdon,
American
Jessop
Hoppe
Economy
Hollands
do
Hay
Gelli
government,
Foster
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Flinders,
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### Annex 1. Smart Cities knowledge brands: a selection of examples from the Italian case

<table>
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<tr>
<th>ACTORS</th>
<th>KNOWLEDGE BRANDS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ICT (and consultancy) companies</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><a href="http://www-05.ibm.com/innovation/it/smartercity/">IBM</a></td>
<td>Smarter City – Technological solutions for healthcare, airports, mobility, sustainability, retail, territorial development, social services, education, railroads, urban safety (<a href="http://www-05.ibm.com/innovation/it/smartercity/">http://www-05.ibm.com/innovation/it/smartercity/</a>)</td>
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<td><a href="http://w5.siemens.com/italy/web/citta_sostenibili/soluzioni/Pages/Default.aspx">Siemens</a></td>
<td>Città sostenibili (sustainable cities) - solution portfolio for energy/environment, building technology, lighting, traffic and public transportation, ports, water and sewers, public administrations, healthcare, metropolitan security, sports and fair events, financial services (<a href="http://w5.siemens.com/italy/web/citta_sostenibili/soluzioni/Pages/Default.aspx">http://w5.siemens.com/italy/web/citta_sostenibili/soluzioni/Pages/Default.aspx</a>)</td>
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<tr>
<td><a href="http://new.abb.com/it/smartcity">ABB</a></td>
<td>Smart City - Technological solutions for energy, buildings and infrastructures, transportation (Italy) + city communication platforms, electricity grids, water networks, district heating and cooling (global) (<a href="http://new.abb.com/it/smartcity">http://new.abb.com/it/smartcity</a>)</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.reply.eu/en/content/better-cities-for-smarter-people">Reply</a></td>
<td>Technological solutions: Hi Reply - PRISMA - Interoperable Cloud Platforms for Smart Government ; OPEN CITY PLATFORM (OCP) - Cloud Computing for Smart Government ; OPLON - Opportunities for active and healthy Lifestyle; ROMA - Resilience enhancement of a Metropolitan Area (<a href="http://www.reply.eu/en/content/better-cities-for-smarter-people">http://www.reply.eu/en/content/better-cities-for-smarter-people</a>)</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.dedagroup.it/static/content/Smart-Cities-177.aspx">DEDAGROUP ICT NETWORK</a></td>
<td>Sulla strada per la Smart City – solutions: Web, social and mobile, interpretive models (of data), public administration open services, sensors networks (<a href="http://www.dedagroup.it/static/content/Smart-Cities-177.aspx">http://www.dedagroup.it/static/content/Smart-Cities-177.aspx</a>)</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.smartpolis.it">Epolis</a></td>
<td>Law-compliant technological solutions for public administrations (<a href="http://www.smartpolis.it">http://www.smartpolis.it</a>)</td>
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<td>Technological solutions for territorial management, the environment, lighting, water, traffic (<a href="http://www.sicetelecom.it/prodotti/smart-city">http://www.sicetelecom.it/prodotti/smart-city</a>)</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.b-intouch.it/soluzioni/pubblica-amministrazione-smart-city/">b! ICT Company</a></td>
<td>Technological solutions for urban security and organization intelligence (<a href="http://www.b-intouch.it/soluzioni/pubblica-amministrazione-smart-city/">http://www.b-intouch.it/soluzioni/pubblica-amministrazione-smart-city/</a>)</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.smartid.it/it/smart-city">smartid</a></td>
<td>Technological solutions: NFC Heritage (<a href="http://www.smartid.it/it/smart-city">http://www.smartid.it/it/smart-city</a>)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technology Solutions</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technologies and services for mobility, sustainable development, involvement of citizens, services accessibility, communication, streamlining of resources</td>
<td>(<a href="http://www.urbanocreativo.it/smart-city">http://www.urbanocreativo.it/smart-city</a>)</td>
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<td>Technological solutions for data processing, smart mobility, risk assessment</td>
<td>(<a href="http://www.esriitalia.it/eventi/1651-con-le-soluzioni-per-la-smart-city-il-cittadino-diventa-protagonista.html">http://www.esriitalia.it/eventi/1651-con-le-soluzioni-per-la-smart-city-il-cittadino-diventa-protagonista.html</a>)</td>
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<td>Minos System – Technological solutions for city lighting and communication</td>
<td>(<a href="http://www.umpi.it/it/minos-system-smart-city">http://www.umpi.it/it/minos-system-smart-city</a>)</td>
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<td>Technological National Cluster SmartCommunitiesTech: Technological solutions for energy/environment, mobility, security of territory, healthcare and wellbeing, education and training, cultural heritage and tourism, e-government</td>
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<td>TETRis – Smart City/Mobility - hardware and software for urban mobility</td>
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<td>Technological solutions for parking and urban mobility</td>
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<td>Lynx Digital Innovation: Technological solutions for Open data and Open source</td>
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<td>(<a href="http://www.gruppohera.it/gruppo/com_media/dossier_smartcities/">http://www.gruppohera.it/gruppo/com_media/dossier_smartcities/</a>)</td>
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<td>(<a href="http://www.caleffi.com/italy/it/i-nostri-produsti-smart-city-energy-torino">http://www.caleffi.com/italy/it/i-nostri-produsti-smart-city-energy-torino</a>)</td>
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<td>Technology solutions by entraincittà: SMASPO SYSTEM Technological solutions for lighting</td>
<td>(<a href="http://entraincitta.it/index.php/component/k2/item/230-smart-city">http://entraincitta.it/index.php/component/k2/item/230-smart-city</a>)</td>
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<td><strong>Technological solutions for urban mobility, environment, Asset management and inventory, Content Management</strong> (<a href="http://www.sirti.it/IT/progetti/soluzioni/pagine/smartCity.aspx">http://www.sirti.it/IT/progetti/soluzioni/pagine/smartCity.aspx</a>)</td>
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<td>Kes Security Management (security), iCity (mobility), Noticity (communication of criticity) (<a href="http://www.kesitaly.it">http://www.kesitaly.it</a>)</td>
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<td><strong>Technological solutions for urban safety, energy</strong> (<a href="http://www.trilogis.it/?page_id=187">http://www.trilogis.it/?page_id=187</a>)</td>
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<td><strong>Technological networking solutions</strong> (<a href="http://www.metroweb.it/milano/smart-city/">http://www.metroweb.it/milano/smart-city/</a>)</td>
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**Institutional promoters, think tanks and communication initiatives**

| EU Commission’s Smart Cities and Communities European Innovation Partnership |
| Initiative supported by the European Commission bringing together cities, industry, SMEs, banks, research and other smart city actors: Smart City Stakeholders Platform - Marketplace of the EIP on Smart Cities and Communities; Action clusters (assembly of partners) - provides an opportunity for stakeholders in Europe to communicate ([https://eu-smartcities.eu](https://eu-smartcities.eu)), ([http://ec.europa.eu/eip/smartcities/index_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/eip/smartcities/index_en.htm)) |
| **National Association of Italian Municipalities’ (ANCI) information platform on 105 Italian local governments and 1.201 projects** ([http://www.italiansmartcities.it](http://www.italiansmartcities.it)) |
| **Forum PA** (company of PR, institutional communication and advice to public administrations, state agency for innovation in public administration): SmartInnovation – newsletter on Open Government, Social Innovation, Smart City ([http://smartinnovation.forumpa.it](http://smartinnovation.forumpa.it)) |
| **FORUM PA – Icity Lab: ICity Rate 2014** (ranking of Italian cities’ smartness and competitiveness through 89 indicators, [http://www.icitylab.it/il-rapporto-icityrate/edizione-2014/](http://www.icitylab.it/il-rapporto-icityrate/edizione-2014/)) |
### Smart Cities Observatory of the National Associations of Italian Municipalities in Partnership with FORUM PA
*Vademecum per la città intelligente* (guide to plan change according to the SC paradigm; compilation of operational tools and best practices; tool for benchmarking among cities) (2012) ([http://osservatoriosmartcity.it/il-vademecum/](http://osservatoriosmartcity.it/il-vademecum/))

### Smart City Exhibition, since 2015 “Citizen Data Festival”
- Yearly fair connecting local governments to producers and consultancy firms ([http://www.smartcityexhibition.it](http://www.smartcityexhibition.it))

### Città sostenibile (sustainable city)
- Fair exhibition regarding sectors: ICT, building, energy, mobility, waste, water, management of territory, Safety and accessibility in the territory ([http://www.cittasostenibile.net/en/](http://www.cittasostenibile.net/en/))

### Consultancy firms

| Between & 20 ICT companies operating in Italy, including IBM, FastWeb, Microsoft, Wind, Ericsson, Cisco, hp, Olivetti, IT Telecom | CITY+: pre-competitive dialogue between demand and offer in the purchase-supply (of ICT and services) process, “aims at improving life quality, sustainability and competitiveness of Milan metropolitan area and to decrease public expenses by increasing the innovation rate” ([http://www.between.it/en/smart-cities-best-cases.php](http://www.between.it/en/smart-cities-best-cases.php)) |
| MPB – “smart cities for a smart future” | MPB Approach (Metropolitan & Public Backup) – Consultancy for Smart City projects ([http://www.mpbresearch4innovation.it/](http://www.mpbresearch4innovation.it/)) |
| Dhitech S.c.a.r.l (state-funded Hi-tech district project): Puglia Smart Lab - Puglia@Service - Knowledge Intensive Services ([http://www.pugliasmartlab.it](http://www.pugliasmartlab.it)) | |
| SOCLOO (Social School) – Teaching social network, free for customers, funded by private sponsors and crowd-funding ([https://www.socloo.org](https://www.socloo.org)) | |

### Dhitech S.c.a.r.l (state-funded Hi-tech district project): Puglia Smart Lab - Puglia@Service - Knowledge Intensive Services ([http://www.pugliasmartlab.it](http://www.pugliasmartlab.it))