

On the value of Fiorentino Sullo: 50 years after the political defeat of Italian planning reform

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Abstract

The “Sullo affair” has been an authentic, oft forgotten junction in the Italian post-war history,

To understand the value of Fiorentino Sullo’s proposal of planning reform is to fully grasp the profound impact the enactment of the reform would have had, and the profound impact its political defeat has had, not only on urban planning and on urban and territorial dynamics, but more in general on the economic, social and even cultural constitution of the country.

In a short detour I first briefly cast the relevance of Sullo’s proposal in relation to more general ethical, political and cultural implications and consequences of private appropriation of urban rent. Then, I attempt to estimate the value of urban rent that could have been captured by the public (by municipalities), if a scheme *à la* Sullo Bill had been enacted into law at the beginning of the 1960s. I do that by approximately and coarsely reconstructing the value of the overall urban rent produced in Italy since 1961 through new residential urban developments.

A *counterfactual* reconstruction of such a key economic aggregate is a desperate endeavour, and even if I adopted a scarcely plausible *ceteris paribus* hypothesis in my estimations, I find the results still of some interest, if

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anything to roughly behold the fraction of national wealth generated by urban development which has flown to the land owners, for the most part.

It's huge. To imagine what Italian cities could have become with resources of such an order of magnitude – to fund the public city, the right to housing, services, transportation, urban maintenance – helps us a little to imagine what could have been the “value of Sullo”.

Keywords

Italian planning reform, land value capture, urban rent in Italy, Fiorentino Sullo

The value of Sullo

What could the value of Sullo possibly mean, and be?

There is a prosaically literal way to understand this question, and to enquire about the potential economic value of the planning reform proposed by Fiorentino Sullo, even in the narrowest possible meaning of benefits for the public finances. Thus, our question becomes: what could have been the value of urban rent captured by the public (by municipalities), if a scheme *à la* Sullo Bill had been enacted into law at the beginning of the 1960s? A bill, let us recall, which in its integral form included provisions for a generalised expropriation of the undeveloped building land at agricultural value and its subsequent lease for building to developers through a public auction.

A precise answer to this question is nearly impossible, not because it refers to a time span of more than 50 years and not because we would need to collect a bulk of highly disaggregated data. Rather, above all, because it is safe to assume that the enactment of Sullo's planning reform would have had a profound structural impact on the Italian

economic trajectory, on the allocation of investments and consumptions, on fiscal policies and finally on urban and territorial organisation and government.

The juncture of the “Sullo affair”, that page of “deep debate” on urban rent and land-use regimes, with all its normative and institutional outcomes, has been an authentic junction in the Italian post-war history, with profound implications not only for urban planning and for urban and territorial dynamics, but more in general for the economic, social and even cultural constitution of the country. In this constellation, a *counterfactual* reconstruction of the value of a key economic aggregate, such as the total value of the land rent generated by urban development, would be a desperate endeavour.

What we can more easily speculate on is a reconstruction based on an implausible *ceteris paribus* hypothesis. Thus, rather than obstinately persevere with a meticulous reconstruction of little benefit, I will follow a simpler path and will attempt to estimate – approximately and coarsely – the value of the overall rent generated from 1961 to today through residential urban development. Only a strong, and as I said scarcely plausible, *ceteris paribus* hypothesis would justify us to assume that *this* precise value would have been generated in the fifth decades of a counterfactual Sullian world, and furthermore that it could have been mechanically captured by the State through an expropriation-plus-auction scheme *à la* Sullo Bill.

Nonetheless, even though the value I am about to estimate here probably isn't the value that “would have been if”, I believe it still is of some interest, if anything to roughly behold the fraction of national wealth generated by urban development which has flown to the land owners, for the most part.

But of wealth captured and flown in a moment; first a brief detour is due.

A digression, on Sullo's many values¹

To fully grasp the value of Fiorentino Sullo's proposal of planning reform – the profound impact the enactment of the reform would have had and the profound impact its political defeat has had –, we need to cast its merits in the wider context of ethical, political, economical, even anthropological implications and consequences of private appropriation of urban rent. While my purpose here is to contribute to just the economical facet, it is useful to briefly recall the others.

The ethical argument, in point of political philosophy, is that of the well-known “unearned increment”, the idea that the increase in the land value due to a more favourable urban position or to the presence of services and public infrastructures does not belong to (or, in some variants of the argument, is not deserved by) the land owner, but is rather a societal value, an economic value which belongs (in some variants of the argument, *exclusively*) to the community, because it is the product of the dynamics, behaviours and actions of the community.

It is not of little relevance that here we find ourselves on an intellectual trajectory in company of a few, perhaps unexpected, allies. Here is how, for example, John Stuart Mills talks in a famous passage of his *Principles of Political Economy* from 1848:

Suppose that there is a kind of income which constantly tends to increase, without any exertion or sacrifice on the part of the owners: those owners constituting a class in the community, whom the natural course of things progressively enriches, consistently with complete passiveness on their own part. In such a case it would be no violation of the principles on which private property is grounded, if the state should appropriate this increase of wealth, or part of it, as it arises. This would not properly be taking anything from anybody; it would merely be applying an accession of wealth, created by circumstances, to

the benefit of society, instead of allowing it to become an unearned appendage to the riches of a particular class.

Now this is actually the case with rent. The ordinary progress of a society which increases in wealth, is at all times tending to augment the incomes of landlords; to give them both a greater amount and a greater proportion of the wealth of the community, independently of any trouble or outlay incurred by themselves. They grow richer, as it were in their sleep, without working, risking, or economizing. What claim have they, on the general principle of social justice, to this accession of riches?" (Mill, 1848, V.II.27-28).

After all, already Adam Smith, in his *The Wealth of the Nations*, argued for the capture of the “*unearned increment*” by the State:

Both ground-rents and the ordinary rent of land are a species of revenue which the owner, in many cases, enjoys without any care or attention of his own. Though a part of this revenue should be taken from him in order to defray the expences of the state, no discouragement will thereby be given to any sort of industry. The annual produce of the land and labour of the society, the real wealth and revenue of the great body of the people, might be the same after such a tax as before. Ground-rents and the ordinary rent of land are, therefore, perhaps, the species of revenue which can best bear to have a peculiar tax imposed upon them. (Smith, 1776, V.II.27)

For excessive sketchiness, it is sometimes forgotten that this attitude wasn't only common among the classical political economists. Indeed, Léon Walras, a founding father of the marginalist revolution in economics, arrives at similar conclusions in his *Études d'économie sociale* of 1848 (eng. ed. 2010), where he expresses and strengthens the thesis with historicist considerations:

The land does not belong to all the people of one generation; it belongs to humanity; that is to say, to all human generations (II.6, p. 218).

Unfortunately, in relieving the feudal aristocracy of public functions, the land, the income from which had been payment for those functions, was, by negligence, not taken from them (II.6, p. 221).

[In] order that the totality of personal faculties and the totality of their product belong to the individual, the State certainly must be the owner of the land to obtain through its rent the means to exist, and the funding for the capital goods it needs. And indeed, conceding the land to the State solves the problem of taxation by abolishing it. (II.8, p. 223).

And, in this context, how could we forget Henry George, no doubt the most notorious advocate of land rent capture by the public hand and a forceful proponent of land value taxation. In his famous 1879 book *Progress and Poverty*, George argues that the appropriation of the land “*on which and from which all must live*” is a fundamental injustice from which all the other injustices follow, “*which distort and endanger modern development, which condemn the producer of wealth to poverty, and pamper the non-producer in luxury [...]*” (George, 1879, p. 241-242).

A curious endorsement of George came from Milton Friedman (1978) (but with a slightly different undertone, moved by the problem of identifying the “least bad” kind of taxation rather than strictly by the considerations of distributive justice):

So the question is, which are the least bad taxes? In my opinion the least bad tax is the property tax on the unimproved value of land, the Henry George argument of many, many years ago².

To this arguments in point of political philosophy and economy we need to add the argument of the political-institutional dysfunction. In fact, it seems to me that the predominant modes of private appropriation of urban rent in Italy are, besides planning practice, one of the main causes of dysfunction of politics at the local levels of government. Even when it does not give rise to open

corruption and graft, it is the source of enormous political and economic pressure on local politicians and public officials. A pressure hard to be resisted, to which oftentimes, to a lesser or greater degree, they cannot but surrender. Yet it is hard to imagine how could it possibly be otherwise, when the planning decisions on the allocation of building rights and land uses are constitutively discretionary and in the same time differentiate among land owners in terms of potential rent extractable from urban development (Chiodelli and Moroni, 2015). A politically and socially toxic mix.

But its social toxicity does not exhaust itself with the argument of political dysfunction. The power of rent is so pervasive to give rise to urban dynamics which in further ways “fragilise” the city. Urban developments oriented at the maximal extraction of rent at the expense of liveability and quality of public spaces (in some cases of the mere availability of space: think for instance of the portions of streets used as car parking); lack of funding for the construction, management and maintenance of the “public city”; loss of diversity (and thus of optionality), economic monocultures, social uniformity of neighbourhoods; lack of funding for public housing; urban dispersion and excessive expansion of urban developments: these are all phenomena which in many ways are caused or co-caused by the mechanisms of creation, extraction, and private appropriation of urban rent.

We should push ourselves even further on this point, and wonder about the long-term social, cultural, even anthropological consequences of a normative-institutional arrangement which favours a systematic private appropriation of a collectively produced value, a value which in many respects possesses the features of a common resource. Here, we ought to turn around the well-known formula of the libertarian objectivism “taxation is theft”, into “*non-taxation of the rent is theft!*”:

As long as land value is socially created and land ownership is duty-free, a theft is occurring. [...] Rather than flowing to the community that created it, however, it is captured by individual real-estate owners (Myerson, 2015).

After all, is such an institutional arrangement of distribution of the rent value not a permanent, perhaps latent, but by all means contagious hotbed of social rivalries? If the collectively produced rent represents a relevant share of the wealth created, if the extraction of that rent is conditioned by planning decisions and hence its private appropriation is determined by a discretionary (political-administrative) mediation, do we not have in rent a perfect “object of desire”, following Renè Girard’s illuminating insights (Girard, 1972, 1978), which is capable to bring about an escalation of mimetic rivalries? With inevitable deep implications on the quality of social relations and cohesion, on the functioning of government mechanisms and on the rate of violence latent in the local politics and communities.

Ultimately, not in one, but in the joint corrosive bustle of all these ethical, political, economical, environmental, social and cultural consequences and their fallouts, resides what makes the private appropriation of urban rent, based on discretionary and differential logic, a vigorous “fragiliser” of the city as a complex social system.

Thus, the remedy for all these reasons *taken together* would seem to be to remove or at least to sensibly contain the possibility of private appropriation of the urban rent value. The mechanism proposed by Sullo was conceived as one such possible remedy. And it was the last true attempt in Italy to find and apply a remedy.

A brief history of urban rent in Italy, from Sullo to today

Let us return now to our main proposition to approximately reconstruct the value of the overall urban rent produced since 1961 through new residential urban developments. I was saying that the underlying scenario will be the *ceteris-paribus* hypothesis, that is to say, we will imagine that the Sullo scheme has been used along the true historically observed real-estate trends from 1961 to 2011.

To embark on this appraisal, we can combine several data sources with a series of recent studies on the trends of the Italian real-estate market in the last 50 years.

The essential data on my reconstruction are reported in Table 1. Let us see the rationale, sources and reconstruction procedures.

Limiting our analysis, as I said, only to residential development, the first datum we need is the evolution of the residential stock in Italy. There are some discrepancies among different data sources and authors, due to different survey and reconstruction methods, use of primary sources and treatment of unauthorised building. For a more refined estimation in our case we would need to distinguish with greater precision the evolution of the residential stock on new urban developments, hence excluding enlargements, renovations, reconstructions and changes in use destinations of buildings, all taking place on already used urban land on which presumably Sullo's scheme of expropriation at agricultural land value could not have been applicable. Without such nuances, I ground my estimation – which as I said does not have but the purpose to give us a broad idea – on the evolution of the housing stock reported by Istat housing censuses.

The first row (A) in Table 1 presents the census data on the housing stock starting from 1961. The second row (B) shows the net differences among the censuses. One here

needs to take into account that stock increases registered in the censuses are the net result of new developments, demolitions and other types of variations (renovations, changes in building use, etc.)³.

Table 1 - Main aggregates reconstructed and used for the estimation of the value of urban rent realized from residential urban development

	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001
A. Total dwellings (thousands)	14.214	17.434	21.937	25.029	27.292
B. Stock variation (thousands)		3.220	4.503	3.092	2.263
C. Average dwelling area	70	75.1	85.3	94.1	96
D. Total area (AxC) thousands of square metres	994.980	1.309.293	1.871.226	2.355.229	2.620.032
E. Area variation (square metres)		314.313	561.933	484.003	264.803
F. Dwelling average price (previous decade)		1.000	1400	1650	1650
G1. Cost of land share of price 2011 hypothesis 35%		0.17	0.25	0.25	0.35
G2. Cost of land share of price hypothesis 2011 40%		0.15	0.22	0.22	0.30
H1. Land value, hypothesis G1 (E x F x G1) (million euros)		53.433	196.676	199.651	152.924
H2. Land value, hypothesis G2 (E x F x G2) (million euros)		47.147	173.075	175.693	131.078

The third row (C) in Table 1 reports the average dwelling area, reconstructed by Tecnoborsa (Ciani and Scelba, 2015) from the classification of dwellings by size provided by Istat housing censuses since 1971. For year 1961, we assumed an average area of 70 m² (a simple sensitivity analysis shows that our final result would vary as little as about 3% if we used the values of 65 or 75 m² instead). As one can observe from data in the table, in 50 years there has been a notable increase in the average dwelling area of

about 24 m², with the greatest increase of 19 m² taking place between 1971 and 1991.

From data on the average dwelling area we can derive the evolution of the total dwellings area of the housing stock (reported in the row D of Table 1) and calculate the variations between censuses (row E).

To approximately estimate the value of urban rent on these increases of the housing stock, we equate the rent to the cost of land; thus we need to reconstruct the evolution of the cost of the building land. In the sixth row (F) of Table 1, I report my reconstruction of the (rounded) average real housing prices for each decade, which are based on the elaboration by Ance (Italian association of building industry) (Figure 1) using sources from the Bank of Italy, Italian Bank Association (Abi), Istat and Nomisma.

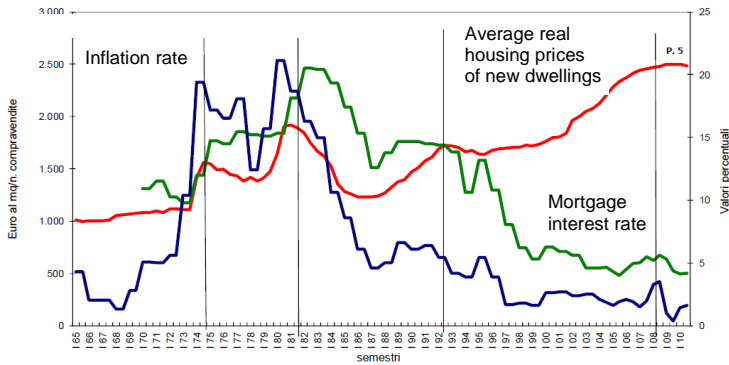


Figure 1 - Average prices of new dwellings (from Ance, 2011, p. 3).

For the price dynamics of the land, we gather useful reconstructions from a recent study by the Bank of Italy on the evolution of housing prices in Italy from 1927 to 2012 (Cannari *et al.*, 2016). The interest of this study for us resides in its attempt of decomposing housing prices from the underlying cost of land. Figure 2 reports the evolution of the main indicators reconstructed in the study by

Cannari *et al.*: real housing prices, the cost of land and the construction costs of residential buildings.

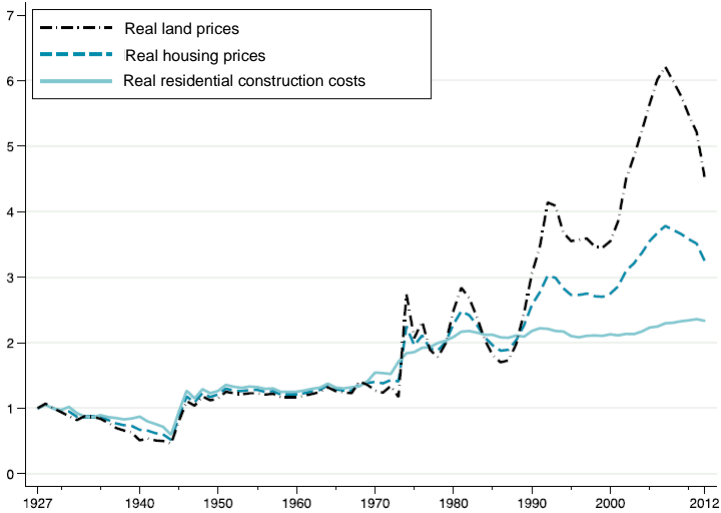


Figure 2 - Reconstruction of real housing prices, of the cost of land and of the construction costs of residential buildings (indices, base 1927=1) (from Cannari *et al.*, 2016).

From Figure 2 we observe that, in real terms, the cost of land was stable in the 1960s by and large, then it begins to increase from early 1970s, then it almost doubles in the two decades of 1970 and 1980, only to further increase in the 1990s and in the first decade of the new century, reaching the maximum in 2007 with values three times as high as those in the 1960s⁴.

To estimate the share of the cost of land in the overall residential property prices, we start from the reference values reported by the journal *Consulente Immobiliare* for year 2011, and, in order to take into account the uncertainty of this datum, we explore two hypotheses of the share of the cost of land in 2011, respectively of 35 and 40%. From these values we can approximately reconstruct backwards

the values for previous decades using the ratios between the two indices from Figure 2. The results of this reconstruction are reported in rows G1 and G2 of Table 1. We need to emphasise here that among all data used for this reconstruction, the share of the cost of land is generally the most uncertain one, because of the methodological difficulties to determine it, the scarcity of data, the lack of a consistent and systematic survey over a long period of time.

Our reconstructions finally brings us to formulate an approximate estimation of the total value of land used for new housing developments, reported for each decade in rows H1 and H2, respectively for the two hypotheses (G1 and G2) of the share of the cost of land in housing property prices.

In aggregate terms, adding up the real values of the five decades from 1961 to 2011, we reach a total value of about 800 to 1.000 billion euros (of which the greatest contribution of about 40% comes from the 2001-2011 period).

Beyond the inevitable approximation and lack of precision inherent in the estimation procedure I followed here, once again I have to reiterate that, for many reasons I mentioned earlier, it is not plausibly thinkable that the entire value of the generated urban rent could have been captured. Nonetheless, we also need to keep in mind the fact, related to the opposite effect, that I have considered only the residential development in our calculations, and that all the rest – commercial real-estates, business districts, service infrastructures, tourist settlements and so on – are hardly of little relevance and have hardly been left out of the processes of creation and private appropriation of urban rent. In any case our initial general premise holds out: the trajectory of the real-estate market and of the Italian economy in general would have been certainly even

sensibly different from the *ceteris-paribus* assumption underlying our estimation.

All that notwithstanding, the value we have reached does not seem to me of no interest, if anything to indicate the order of magnitude of the enormous value for the most part flown to land owners, instead of funding the public city. To give us a touchstone, the Italian GDP in 2011 was about 1.600 and the public debt slightly less than 1.900 billion euros. Thus, the total value of the rent we have reconstructed amounts to more than half of the entire public debt accumulated by the country.

Besides a different institutional planning framework, to imagine what Italian cities could have become with resources of such an order of magnitude – to fund the public city, the right to housing, services, transportation, urban maintenance – helps us a little to imagine what could have been the “value of Sullo”.

Conclusions

Moved by the different orders of arguments – economic, ethical, political, environmental, cultural – briefly presented in the introductory digression, a series of proposals lies on the table, promising to reduce or to do away altogether with discretionary planning mechanisms which differentiate among private agents. Among others, there are proposals of mechanisms of uniform and equitable distribution of building rights, or of using transferable development rights (Micelli, 2002), or of even more heterodox planning practices such as “urban codes” and “abstract and general rules” (Moroni, 2015a) without the conventional zoning and differential land-use destinations.

These proposals are heading in the right direction as long as they do away with, or at least significantly limit, the differentiation among land owners based on discretionary

decision-making. But they are not pushing far enough if they do not set their ultimate goal in a consistent limitation of the possibility of *private* appropriation of the value of the realised urban rent. This is a crucial point that deserves to be laid down more precisely.

Contrary to how it is sometimes hastily said, we cannot get rid of the rent. The rent value is due to location preferences (for dwelling, for economic activities, etc.) of economic agents in space. A greater preference matches a greater willingness to pay, a greater demand, hence a greater price. To get literally rid of the rent would mean to eliminate the (differential) location preferences of agents in space which, as it were, can be done in only two ways: by exterminating agents, or by annihilating the space, that is, the city.

Rent itself is not eliminable and the point is rather who gets to appropriate it and through which mechanisms. So, the essential point here is that, for reasons I briefly mentioned in the digression, the rent becomes a potent “fragiliser” of the city when (i) it is privately appropriated and when (ii) its creation and extraction depend on the discretionary decisional procedures which differentiate among economic agents (land owners).

That is why the proposals which only aim at removing or reducing the discretionary and differentiating decision mechanisms do not push themselves far enough, because they leave the first source of fragility to persist, the fact that a value which is essentially produced as a common resource gets almost exclusively appropriated by land owners.

In operational terms, some of the proposals we have mentioned could indeed, in the line of principle, be apt to fulfil this second function also practically. Take as an example the mechanism which assigns equal building rights to each land owner (proportional to the size of the owned land), with the possibility to transfer the building rights

from one parcel to another, and to allow their free trade modelled after the *cap-and-trade* mechanism devised for pollution control. Someone supporting such mechanisms could not have objections on the strictly operational grounds if now, instead of giving building rights to land owners only, we should distribute them indistinctly to all citizens, no matter if they do or do not possess any land.

What today, 50 years later, sets us apart from Fiorentino Sullo and from the technical *entourage* which assisted him to develop the planning reform proposal is almost certainly a greater awareness of the limits of a “synoptic” approach of comprehensive planning. An awareness of the limits of a planning practice strongly hinging on the presumption of planner’s capability to mechanistically make predictions and govern the city and the territory as complex systems. However, that does not imply that we need to do away with planning (governing) the territory; far from it. But it does follow that we need a planning practice based on a “weak” conception of prediction, a planning which contains and removes what fragilises the city and strengthens what makes the city resilient to negative events and antifragile to perturbations, threats and opportunities.

In a recent book (Blečić and Cecchini, 2016; for a primer in English see Blečić and Cecchini, 2017) we have long talked about an idea of antifragile planning. In the book we put forward what we call “planning *via negativa*” as one of the tenants of antifragile planning. With that expression we mean a system of “external” restrictions and obligations which delimit the abstract space of rules and of the possible actions. They follow the logic of *via negativa* since they do not preconstitute the outcomes, nor do they indicate what to do, what needs to be done, what has to happen, where and when, but they only tell what is not allowed, what is forbidden. But the concept of *via negativa* also pertains to the removal of the superfluous – from counterproductive rules to procedural and normative

superfetations – which reduces the waste of human and social energies (Moroni, 2015b). It doesn't do away with the need to govern processes, to employ plans, to define rules and restrictions. What instead needs to be called into question is the idea that everything can and has to happen out of the demiurgic will of the decision maker - be he or she politician or technician.

So, the idea of planning *via negativa* does not exclude the possibility of even structural transitions and of “change of regime” – on the contrary, but at certain conditions. These conditions involve precisely that the transition itself operates through a *via negativa*, through general and abstract rules, without the pretension to bridle, to over-control and to micro-manage the internal dynamicity of the system, its capacity of self-organization and of autopoiesis, the capability of the system and of the agents operating therein of developing dynamic adaptation.

At these conditions, structural transitions and “changes of regime” even very different from each other - like for example a planning reform, or a new general legal regime of the *ius aedificandi* and of land property rights, or the introduction of fiscal tools to capture land value increases (Ingram and Hong, 2011) - become all, at least in principle, admissible.

¹ Parts of this digression, with some re-elaborations and extensions, are taken from Blečić and Cecchini (2016, pp. 114-121).

² “Milton Friedman Interviewed”, *The Times Herald*, Norristown, Pennsylvania, 1 December 1978, available online: http://www.cooperative-individualism.org/anonymous_milton-friedman-interviewed-1978.htm

³ For an attempt of a more accurate estimation of the evolution of the housing stock, based on this distinction, see Cortese (2015).

⁴ The cost of land also shows a greater volatility with respect to housing prices, besides following the five cycles of the Italian real-estate market (ante-1974, 1975-1982, 1983-1992, 1992-2007, post-2008; see Zollino *et al.*, 2008).

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