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INTERNAL GEOPOLITICS AND REGIONAL POLICY IN ITALY

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The aim of this article is to summarize the main points that have characterised the programming policy and the development of Italy in the last decade. In particular, it will be focused on what experts have properly called the "new regional policy". This policy, despite a series of historical events and mistakes, represents the most relevant and important public action in Italy since the 1990's. For this reason, it is important to examine the characteristics of public intervention in the first four decades to understand the elements and the worries that have determined the definition of the "new regional policy".

The scientific approach used in this article is the one of internal geopolitics defined by Yves Lacoste¹, who affirms that geopolitics is considered as a situation where two or more territorial actors contend for the same territory. To grant themselves a dominant position, these actors make use of rivalry representations of a given territory to legitimize their positions, especially toward public opinion.

I argue that one of the major problems concerning the new regional policy was a failure to consider the situation between the other territorial actors and antagonists, and above all, an inappropriate consultation among the various actors' interventions operating at different levels. Although most of the policy "coordinations" operate at a sectorial level, this has never occurred on a different level inside the same territory. This situation has worsened since the institutional evolution of Italy, where a major responsibility for the economy and territorial programming of the country has slowly passed from the centre to the outlying Regions. To conclude this Article, we will give insights to the inconsistencies and contradictions of this experience. However, after all facts have been examined, we argue that the experience can be considered as a positive one.

Towards the "New Regional Policy"

At this point the question is: where can we find the origins of today's programming policy practices such as we have seen in the decade from 1997 to the present? The origin must surely be from the post war reconstruction period, when the programming policy was mainly based on the intervention of the public actor: the state as „controller“ of the economy. What did "programming" in that period mean? Simply it concerned the actions taken by the various public authorities through negotiations with the private actors.

One characteristic of this period is that "territories" weren't considered at all. Nobody considered the various territorial peculiarities which could have imposed specific political interventions: the best scenario concerned sectorial interventions; in other cases the interventions simply consisted of a series of financing and scattered distribution of resources. These political programming efforts were nevertheless focused on policies of national intervention which made no distinction for the areas in which the intervention was made. The rapid levels of growth were such that the successful interventions in some areas overshadowed the enormous wastes and disadvantages in other areas. In this phase, the analysis of the various territories was considered to be entirely useless. Above all, the knowledge and understanding

¹ Lacoste Y., *Dictionnaire de Géopolitique*, Preambule, Flammarion, Paris, 1993.

of the various local networks was not considered as useful: the Italian “centre” knew everything which was needed and planned the interventions based on this knowledge that they considered sufficient. The Italian government’s centralism was different from the French type of centralism, in which the centre administered and programmed every territory of the State in complete autonomy. In Italy, the centre “programmed” under pressure by local actors, however lacking complete information about the local situations. Above all the crucial balance of power at the local level was absent. In short, a chaotic form of negotiation was brought about by various local actors who had the strength to emerge and have a dialogue with the centre. However, this occurred at the expense of the other weaker local actors who were unable to have their voices heard. From this situation of asymmetric information, the centre comes to know only the strategy of the dominant local actor. As a consequence of the centre’s one-sided information, there was a considerable proliferation of subsidies, various concessions and derogations from the masterplan etc., which is what Barca defines as “Negotiation without programming”². Italy’s turning point can be seen in two important decisions: closing of the Italian *Mezzogiorno*³ Agency and prohibiting the state from eliminating the deficits of companies. These decisions, related to the fact that the rapid rates of growth seen during the first thirty years of the post-war period had already finished for some time, imposed a more clear evaluation of the expenditures, a more coherent and transparent

management of the intervention of the public actor and, above all, a valuation of the financial resources. This amounts to a true cultural revolution beginning in 1992 (it is no coincidence that this is the same year as the “mani pulite” revolt, in which the system of financing the political parties based on patronage and corruption came to light and resulted in the break down of the Italian political system). This revolution led to the modification of the language used in the Public Administration, the beginning of various methods of valuation of both investments and policies, and administrative activities. Slowly, principles such as governance, which up to then had only been found in the articles of scientific journals, were beginning to be seen in the every day activities of the public actor and also give rise to projects which were no longer requested by the public actor after negotiation with the most powerful territorial actor. In fact, it concerns projects involving the authentic participation of the various public actors at different levels, and of interested private actors (the most relevant example of recent years would be the Territorial Pacts).

The origin of this change, in addition to the events mentioned above, was principally found in The European Union which constrained Italy to modify its interventions for the development of the Italian *Mezzogiorno* since they were largely unsuccessful. Precisely in the *Mezzogiorno*, the wish for the major changes was concentrated through new initiatives:

1. The intervention on the offer which Barca calls integrated collective services⁴.
2. An attempt to create a government of multilevel interventions which has the authority to address and concentrate its competencies, the region has to select the various projects while the local level has the role of proposing these projects.
3. The Modernization of the Public Administration System (in particular, thanks to a system of rewarding by increasing financing for any further initiative made in this direction).
4. Putting into practise the “valuation” and the spread of its culture.

² Barca F., *Italia Frenata*, Donzelli editor, Rome, 2006, pag. 72.

³ The South of Italy.

⁴ Barca F., *Italia frenata*, *op.cit.*, pag 74.

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This can be easily understood, as the above is concerned with increasing that which we may define as “social capital”. The problem with this change was that it was based entirely on the fact that it could create expectations on the part of the private actors and therefore they began to increase capital investment. Nevertheless, this did not happen. The implementation of the new Regional policy most likely did not result in what the Department for Development and Cohesion Policies hoped for: the possibility of developing new ideas with subsequent investment opportunities. It was hoped that these new ideas would spawn a repetitive cycle of growth. Indeed, Barca himself did not hesitate to admitting that he was expecting a rate of growth for the Italian *Mezzogiorno* which could double the average rate of growth of the member countries of the European Union⁵.

We can definitely recognize the most relevant result achieved in the Regional policy of Southern Italy, which shows a fundamental turning point for the institutional functions of the State and its relation with both public and private actors. Obviously there is a series of consequences related to these changes, such as the new need of “transparency” and “simplification” for what concerns bureaucracy (even the administrative language). Although the Regional policy of Southern Italy achieved meaningful results, there were also several partial successes and outright failures. One “partial success” surely corresponds to a positive level of growth, although less relevant to the expected goal. A serious international crisis can't be considered as the only reason of the growing's failure of southern Italian regions. Many people, including Fabrizio Barca⁶, believe that this problem depends not only on an inadequate capital expenditure budget in relation to the expected goals⁷, but also from the clear perception of entrepreneurs and citizens of this slow growth, which has created a slowdown effect.

Barca made a noticeable difference among various sectors by focusing the attention on Education, Research, valorization of natural and cultural resources, the local productive systems, the cities and tourism. However, it is very probable that one of the main reasons for the failure resides in the previous sectorial division. This division has never corresponded to a political intervention which should have considered a territorial division.

Taking a step back, we can review the success and the positive institutional changes which resulted from the new Regional Policy. In the early 1990's, a proper programming policy such as a Regional Development Plan did not yet exist for the various authorities in southern Italy. Everything that was supposed to be “policy” was just considered by experts as facts that “will be filed away somewhere in a desk drawer”. The underlying problem with this previous policy was that it didn't provide any means to strengthen the authorities and change the *status quo*. Moreover, centres of responsibility, control, and valuation for the use of financial resources did not exist. With a few exceptions, we could simplify this situation as a reign of anarchy. The worst part of this situation can be seen in the approximate cooperation between the State and the Authorities in which everything was based on a direct channel of communication between these two levels. This confirmed choices that we could define as “paternalistic”, which discouraged participation of other actors, particularly private ones. The new Regional Policy allowed Italy to abandon the previous policy, where the State allocated resources making sure they were reported, but not actually verifying the resources were used properly. Today, the different governmental levels, together with the social actors, fix the priorities for the use of resources; these funds will be given to the responsible authorities that will employ them in the respect of the rules and the expected goals. This is a model

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ Barca F., *Italia Frenata*, *op.cit.*, pag. 94.

⁷ Criticism made by Rossi N., *Mediterraneo del Nord. Un'altra idea del Mezzogiorno*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2005.

called “conditional grants” which is already in use in many countries. The only disadvantage in this model, which is inarguably better than the past scenario, is the blindness related to the territorial diversification. In fact, Barca writes that among the priorities and the addresses, only a few times it says “where” to allocate the funds, while the grant always talks of which services, incentives, and type of project⁸.

Advantages and Disadvantages: towards a geopolitical view?

In the last decade there are many positive and relevant sides of the regional policy to be considered in the long term, although many of them still raise the doubts of the experts. In the opinion of the DPS there are at least ten main points to be considered, however this article aims only to address the most important of these. First of all, thanks to this new method, the regional policy has become more “programmable” and easily “monitored”. The local administration and its dominant culture have deeply changed, improving its effectiveness and efficiency, although one can not easily quantify or measure these changes. Moreover a sort of unification of the national regional policy has begun, by the same standards as the European regional policy, and has formed a “under-utilized area fund”. This unique fund responds to the same European regulations, at least for what concerns the principles of allocating resources, project's selection and monitoring. It is well known that the European regional policy made innovations in relation to the principles of rationalization, transparency, and monitoring, but it is also true that for well-known historical reasons, the policy turned a blind eye toward the field of the territorial selection. These are the same reasons that constrained the signature of a unique but damaging treaty, where it was not possible referring to territorial cohesion, but only to social and economical cohesion⁹. The choice of the sectorial characteristics, which allow access to the communitarian resource, depends on sectorial variables. For example, whether or not a particular area is considered industrial, exhibiting a declining phase for several years and raises a specific unemployment rate. This strict division does not consider all the characteristics of each territory, and even less so, the peculiarities of the social networks which determine a fundamental discrimination for a successful intervention. The true reasons of this territorial “blindness” are not related to scientific objectivity (as many affirmed), but rather to the fact that the member countries have never agreed or allowed the European Commission to give voice to the territorial decisions taken in the various countries. It is no coincidence that the Unique Treaty mentions only the Social and Economic cohesion (with the exception of the section about the general-interest services, where the “territorial” variable appears for the first time), while the European Spatial Development Perspective talks about Territorial Cohesion (in fact this last document is not as coercive as the Unique Treaty)¹⁰. This strategy is not without its problems. For example, consider the Agricultural Policy of France great results; however both social and economic catastrophic in Portugal. The main question is: “Why apply characteristics to the national Regional Policy that belong to the European policy?” Keep in mind that these characteristics are independent with respect to sectorial and territorial discrimination.

The other positive sides of the new Regional Policy are certainly the Framework Agreements, which were able to create a vertical coordination from difficult situations of conflict. Afterwards, there was a concentration of interventions which avoided the high level of fragmentation that was an obstacle for the optimization and rationalization. Lastly, we should mention the new tools known as the “Territorial

⁸ Barca F., *Italia Frenata*, *op.cit.*, pag. 80.

⁹ Bettoni G., *Dalla Geografia alla Geopolitica*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2004.

¹⁰ Husson C., *L'Europe sans Territoire*, L'Aube/datar, Paris, 2002.

Pacts" and the "Integrated Territorial Projects", which led to the highest level of integration among the various territorial-actors policies.

At this point it is important to highlight a connection with the Internal Geopolitics approach. In fact, we should consider the great merit of the Pacts or of the various projects which have imposed a collaboration between different actors to plan an intervention. At first, these projects were considered to be based on economical decisions only and did not consider the diversity and the antagonism of each actor's different view. This approach has also influenced the valuation method of the various projects, which is supposed to be more objective in order to avoid all the incoherent programming policy and interventions that would not result efficient. However, this research of objectivity has underestimated, at times not considered at all, certain fundamental aspects and essential elements, at the risk of making the whole method of valuation and programming inefficient. Barca underlines how inadequate co-operation among the various administrations and some essential elements were. This proved to be an obstacle for the expected achievements of the new Regional policy and corresponds to "[...] sectorial policies incoherent with the regional policy [...] in the territorial integration of national interventions"¹¹. All this is related to the failure of realizing a "centre" which could give dispositions and addresses policies, as a centre of high competence at which the local levels could refer to. This corresponds to what is arguably the most important point for the power of local actors, particularly regional. These local actors find the tools that the European Union and the central Government give them, but without undergoing the possible constraints that would have allowed increased cohesion in the horizontal way of programming. This is one of the best examples of the limitation of this method, which is fundamental for the internal geopolitics: antagonist relations among territorial actors which wish to determine the development of their territory (this means that each territorial actor wants to control the evolution of the territory).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the work realized by the "new regional policy" acquired a historical dimension, since it was able to readdress a dangerous path that Italy was taking towards a situation of a possible delay and falling irrecoverably behind. At this point there is a new and maybe highest challenge: to set up a new programming policy which will be able to differentiate its action in relation to other territorial scales and characteristics, without losing the efficiency that the culture of the valuation has brought. It is not possible to persist in leading a research of a valuation's method devoid of any subjective perspective, since in the field of territorial planning this could not exist. The true challenge consists in finding possible indicators, which are able to consider several non-objective variables and, above all, to measure the territorial diversity and the antagonism's level among actors. However this requires a clearer and courageous definition of the "politician's role" in programming and development strategies.

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¹¹ Barca F., Italia Frenata, *op.cit.*, pag. 99.

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