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ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY IN SOUTHERN ITALIAN UNIVERSITIES

(1920-40)

Over the last two years, the national working group led by Prof. Piero Barucci carried out research entitled *La cultura economica in Italia nel Mezzogiorno tra le due guerre* (*The economic culture in southern Italy between the two wars*). The Italian Geographical Society participated in the study by asking Prof. Ernesto Mazzetti to gather contributions on several southern Italian universities and to provide a logical synthesis of the data*. The following text comes from that exercise.

The twenty years between the two wars are significant for geographical disciplines in Italy. During this period economic geography was enriched with contents and methods that consolidated its specificity. The process is due to some eminent scholars working in the universities of Bari, Naples and Catania, but also to the innovation of the university system, which during the 1930s turned the former Royal Institutes of Higher Education for Economics and Commercial Sciences into Faculties of Economics and Management within the major universities.

The ever-evolving research endeavour which started in Apulia ended up defining the autonomous space of a geography that cannot but be accompanied by the adjective “economic”. The remark comes from the activity of Carlo Maranelli in Bari since 1904. He was an eminent figure in the history of Italian geography during the 20th century. Born in Campobasso, in a family from the Marches, Maranelli studied in Rome with Giuseppe Della Vedova. In 1904, when he was 28, he was appointed chair of Economic Geography at the Royal Institute of Higher Education for Commercial Sciences in Bari, where he wrote *Considerazioni geografiche sulla questione meridionale* (*Geographical considerations on the southern Issue*), in 1908. His work will later be considered of great importance in the framework of the so called “studi meridionalistici”, specifically concerning the south of Italy. With its work Maranelli introduces the geographical approach within the debate on the adverse conditions of southern Italian regions, which occurred in the scientific world, as

much as in politics and journalism, right after the Italian unification.

Maranelli stayed in Bari until 1920, when he moved to Naples, followed by his student Ferdinando Milone. The latter returned to Bari in 1927, after being appointed professor, and once again moved back to Naples in 1935. He was replaced in Bari by Umberto Toschi, coming from Catania. After having been appointed professor in 1933, he worked in Bari for 14 years. He was also named Dean of the newborn Faculty of Economics and Management in 1938 and eventually Rector of the Athenaeum from 1940 to 1947.

Maranelli, Milone and Toschi were three scholars who extended geographical research in directions increasingly concentrating on macroeconomic issues, social matters and the equipment of territories. They also dealt with issues such as geography of ports and navigation, urban geography and examined in depth the causes of the diversity in the spatial distribution of human activities. Thanks to their contribution, Italian geography increasingly examines the complexity and the diversity of the structuring process of the relation between society and territories in different times and spaces. That relation is no longer considered as the inevitable result of a specific physical and climatic environment, but rather as stemming from the greater or smaller inclination of human groups to become key players in using their inhabited space.

It is right mentioning that a few years earlier another geographer, Arcangelo Ghisleri, wrote about *La questione meridionale quale soluzione del problema italiano (The southern Issue as a solution to the Italian problem)*. Ghisleri was born in Lombardy, but knew the South well. He actually worked as a journalist in Naples between 1882 and 1883, and as a teacher in secondary school for the next two years in Matera. His work was inspired by the federalist ideas of the philosopher and patriot Carlo Cattaneo, testifying the political fervour of the author, who joined the little Republican party. Maranelli did not join any party, even though he shared socialist values and cooperated with his friend Gaetano Salvemini, who was an historian and a politician. The advent of the Fascist regime in Italy marked the beginning of a progressive marginalization for Maranelli. In 1925 he supported the Manifesto of the anti-fascist intellectuals written by Benedetto Croce, which led to his isolation and to the subsequent early abandonment of Academia.

Ferdinando Milone (born in Naples in 1896) and 20 years younger than Maranelli, was one of his students. He was active in Bari and then in Naples. Here Milone helped Maranelli in the newborn Faculty of Economics, teaching political geography. In 1936 he was appointed Chair of Economic Geography at the Royal Naval Technical Institute of Naples, which he also led later on, until he was transferred to Rome after the war. Some of his memorable works are the study on the port of Naples and the research on the location of industries in Italy, but his masterpiece is rightly considered so: *L'Italia nell'economia delle sue regioni (Italy in the economy of its regions)* (1955), which is a cornerstone of economic geography literature.

Umberto Toschi stayed in Bari for 14 years, making his mark not only for the didactic and scientific determination, but also for his organisational skills. He was appointed Rector of the same Athenaeum in 1940 and kept his position until 1947, when he was transferred to Venice first and then to Bologna. Scholars agree that Toschi produced some fundamental contributions to the vast range of disciplines concerning geography, both through field research and theoretical input. His industrious activity as researcher and theorist demonstrated how the methodological framework of economic geography may produce follow-ups in other directions, which may evolve in specific disciplinary paths: i.e. geography of maritime and air transportation, geography of tourism. His work also showed how economic geography may generate application methodologies which are particularly useful in urban and regional planning and for the localization choices of industrial and commercial undertakings. A true intellectual, he contributed to drawing Italian scholars' attention to the German and French schools. In the years after the war he actually managed to create a school around his teaching, which remained a point of reference in Italian geography for a long time.

The Secondary Courses of Commercial Studies were founded in Catania in the February of 1920. They were the premise to a higher education in economics. The courses were the result of a joint public and private effort – the University of Catania hosted the courses in its headquarters with its professors, while banks and entrepreneurs contributed in the organisation. The Royal Institute of Higher Education for Economics and Commercial Sciences was founded in 1922. As it happened for other universities, it became the Faculty of Economics and Management in 1935.

The organisers of the Higher Courses of Commercial Studies invited Attilio Mori, Professor of Geography at Messina's Athenaeum, to teach Commercial Geography. A Florentine, Mori arrived at University at the age of forty, after having attended scientific field-trips and after standing out as a topographer at the Military Geographical Institute because of his skills in cartography and topography. He taught economic and commercial geography and history of commerce in Catania from 1920 to 1923. His wide program included the reconnaissance of mining outputs, agricultural and animal productions, as well as the analysis of the human element, of land and maritime transportation and of export and import flows in economic geography.

In 1923 his transfer request to Florence was accepted. He was therefore replaced by the esteemed Sicilian naturalist Gaetano Platania for the course that was then absorbed by the Royal Institute of Higher Education. Born in Acireale in 1867, Platania was an expert in volcanology, mineralogy and geology and a member of the Public Works Authority. He taught economic and commercial geography from 1923 to

1930 developing a programme dealing with elements of general geography and notions of regional geography, particularly referring to Italy and its colonies and to European countries.

In 1930 the teaching of geographical and commercial subjects was handed down by Platania to the under thirty Angelo Segré, called to teach economic history in Catania, after having won a national competition in 1929. Segré was a scholar in history of Roman law, papyrology and epigraphy. His interest in ancient history led him to study economic and social facts. He was in charge of the two year course in Economic Geography until the academic year 1932-33, focusing on physical geography, population geography and regional geography, but also productions, consumptions and communications. He was replaced by professor Umberto Toschi, who won a contest to teach economic and commercial geography in 1933. Toschi came from the Free Institute of Higher Education for Economic and Commercial Sciences in Bologna. He was born 36 years earlier in the province of Bologna and had fought in the great war as an infantry officer. He graduated in Arts in 1921, with a dissertation in geography about the Danube-Carpathian region and taught in technical institutes. After he got a teaching qualification in 1931, he ranked first in the next competition organised by the University of Catania, to become professor of economic geography. Here he established a school of economic geography that carried out significant research in addition to teaching. As soon as the Faculty of Economics and Management was founded, Toschi was appointed dean. He left the position once he was transferred to Bari in 1937, when the time had come for him to become full professor. In his large bibliography, the works written during the time spent in Catania dealt mainly with issues related to the geography of air communications (a topic he also developed in a speech at the Warsaw International Geography Congress in 1934), monographs on countries and continents and the aforementioned study on Bologna's urban morphology. A collection of 36 writings.

From the academic year 1936-37, Toschi was replaced in Catania for the course of economic geography by the 40 year old scholar Gustavo Cumin, from Trieste. His scientific education, as for Platania ten years before, was mainly naturalistic. His transfer to Catania gave him the chance to do research in volcanology and petrography, although he never neglected his duties connected to the courses in economic geography of which he was in charge until his untimely death – he had just turned 60 – in 1956. He graduated in natural sciences in Rome in 1922; once back in Trieste, he temporarily taught at the Secondary School for Commerce, and attended as an assistant the Economic Geography Institute directed by Prof. Roletto (who founded the magazine “Geopolitica” in 1939). He taught economic geography at the Technical Institute for Commerce in Ancona, after he became a qualified lecturer in geology in 1929, and in geography in 1931. In 1936 he won a contest to teach economic geography at the Faculty of Economics and

Management in Catania. Later on he occupied the same position for the University of Messina. From 1939 (when he became full professor) he taught geography for the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy and economic and political geography at the Faculty of Political Sciences. When the Faculty of Economics decided to start a proficiency course in Colonial Studies in 1938, Cumin was assigned the course of geography and ethnography of Italian and foreign colonies. However the initiative was nipped in the bud by the upcoming war. Once peace was re-established, the Faculty of Economics could eventually take possession of *Palazzo delle Scienze (the Palace of Sciences)*, a new and more adequate seat, which had been converted to other uses during the war and the Allied invasion of Sicily. When Cumin was appointed dean of the Faculty, he was already the Director of the Institute of Geography.

During his years in Catania, the works resulting from research in the fields of volcanology, geology and hydrography outnumbered those specifically related to economic geography. Among the latter, there is research on pastoralism in the Etna region, the exploitation of pumice stones in Lipari and salt evaporation ponds in Trapani, major and secondary ports of Sicily, as well as regions', countries' and continents' "profiles".

During the twenty years between the two wars, there was no significant presence of scholars and courses specifically dedicated to economic geography at the University of Palermo. Greater interest was shown to general geography, and schools of ethno-anthropology and popular culture were active and consolidated. The situation lasted until professor Luigi Arcuri di Marco was appointed chair of economic geography – as qualified lecturer – by the Faculty of Economics and Management. A true Sicilian, Arcuri was born in 1896, in a high-ranking family from Palermo. His university activity started only in 1939, at the age of 43. He gathered complex and intense experiences both in daily and academic life. He fought in World War I and in the Second Italo–Ethiopian War. He travelled along southern America and east Africa for a long time and closely analysed the condition of Italian emigrants. He believed in a practical economic geography. He drafted the “*Bollettino del Banco di Sicilia*” (*Bulletin of the Bank of Sicily*). His bibliography is rich in contributions to this bulletin, as well as texts published in the annals of the Faculty of Economics and Management.

Sardinia – During the twenty years hereby discussed, economic geography was totally absent from the universities of Cagliari and Sassari. The discipline was granted space in the Sardinian Athenaeums only from 1950, when the Faculty of Economics was founded in Cagliari. The few courses in which geography

was included in the humanities faculties of the city were about physical geography, mainly referring to the agricultural and mineral characteristics of the Sardinian territory, as well as to historic and anthropological issues. The courses were entrusted to professor Crinò at the end of the 1920s, and to professor Sestini from 1940 to 1942. Geography was taught in the Faculties of Arts and Education by historians and archaeologists.

Only two faculties were active in the University of Sassari: Medicine and Law; the latter offered courses in economics and statistics, some taught by eminent scholars, but none had a geographical approach when analysing economic phenomena.

Some final remarks – In the framework of Italian culture, geography is rather marginalized during the dramatic war period and when the activities of southern universities strain to start again. Geography is hardly included in research and in in-depth analysis of issues, which become prevalent for the international community, its territory and activities, starting from the 1950s. Some examples are: the emigration from southern to northern Italy, Europe and across the ocean; the rebuilding of cities with the related problems of urban planning; the ever increasing shift of more and more farm workers to industry first and to businesses and services later; the progressive widening of railway and road transport networks, of telephone communications and of water and electricity distribution; the change in crops and farming techniques – not to forget the ever increasing social, economic and political gap between the southern and island regions of the country and the central/northern ones.

From the end of the war until most of the 1950s, the chairs of geography active in southern universities produced only rare and inadequate analyses of the ongoing transformations within the country. Which is why in 1962 the young, but already authoritative geographer Lucio Gambi, professor at Messina's University, wrote an essay entitled *Geografia regione depressa (The depressed region of geography)*, where the adjective “depressed” referred to the general situation in Italy of teaching and research in the field of geography. The result was a stimulating and useful debate, from the scientific point of view. From the 1960s the so called “Scuola di Nord e Sud” (School of North and South) became more and more important in Naples. Its name came from the magazine founded in 1954 by Francesco Compagna, professor of economic and political geography from 1960 for the course of political sciences – which became a Faculty in the 1970s. The same spirit that motivated people like Maranelli, Milone and Toschi forty years before, allowed economic geography to legitimately enter the cultural and scientific debate

about the development of Italy, considering both domestic problems and its relations with Europe and the world.

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