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SALONE Carlo

Professeur de géographie économique et politique

DIST, Politecnico et Università di Torino

viale Mattioli 39

10125 Torino, Italie

Tél. +39 011 5647446

[carlo.salone@unito.it](mailto:carlo.salone@unito.it)

## **QUESTIONING NEW REGIONALISM FROM AN ITALIAN PERSPECTIVE, OR THE RESISTIBLE RISE OF ITALIAN REGIONS**

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### **Abstract**

The Italian regional articulation is well-known to be one of the most differentiated in Europe and has been the base for a progressive regionalization since the birth of the Republic in 1946. The article summarizes the main stages of the definition of the Italian regions since the national unification in 1861, underscoring the artificial nature of the regional subdivision and, despite it, the increasing relevance of the regional institutions in the governmental framework of the country. The regionalization process has crossed the new-regionalist wave during the nineties of the last century, creating a complex and for some aspects inefficient mechanism of power distribution. The relatively recent constitutional reforms (2011) and the failed re-centralization with the last proposal of reform (2016) are investigated in their impacts on the relationships between the state and the regions.

**Keywords :** Italy, regionalization, regionalism, regional planning, constitutional reform

### **Résumé**

L'Italie est bien connue comme un pays dont l'articulation régionale est particulièrement différenciée et a été aussi la base pour une progressive régionalisation qui s'est déroulée dès la naissance de la République en 1946. Cet article offre une synthèse des plusieurs étapes de la définition des régions italiennes depuis l'unification nationale en 1861, en soulignant la nature artificielle de la subdivision régionale et, malgré cela, l'importance croissante des institutions régionales dans la structure de gouvernement du pays. Le processus de régionalisation a croisé la vague néo-régionaliste pendant les

années 1990 du dernier siècle, constituant un mécanisme complexe et, pour certain aspects, inefficace, de distribution du pouvoir. Les réformes constitutionnelles, relativement récentes (2011), et l'échec de la recentralisation portée par la proposition de réforme (2016) sont analysées dans leur impact sur les relations entre l'État et les régions.

**Mots-clés :** Italie, régionalisation, régionalisme, planification régionale, réforme constitutionnelle

## 1. Introduction

In Italy, the debate on the regions has been traditionally focused on the administrative aspects related to the territorial levels of government and the socio-economic disparities among the main economic macroregions: the industrialized North, the so-called 'Third Italy' with its industrial districts and polycentric patterns of settlement, and the less developed South, the *Mezzogiorno*.

In the early times of the unified country – since 1861 – the regions were drawn and used merely as statistical units, with the first articulation due to Pietro Maestri (1861). Thus regionalization was quickly realized to respond to the need of the first unitary census, organized in 1863. Simultaneously, the Italian political elites elaborated a massive process of construction of a set of unifying institutions, such as national education, a mandatory national service, a common taxation system, and the elaboration of symbolic values and beliefs about the '*Risorgimento*' epics. Initially conceived as a temporary subdivision, the Maestri's regionalization has continued to connote the regional framework of the country. The priority of nation-state making, the huge imbalances within the various parts of the country and the Savoy house's cultural hegemony led to a centralized solution, which provoked deep resentments in the southern parts of the new kingdom, where violent revolts and a phenomenon of banditry long engaged the royal army during the first two decades of the unity. It was a deliberate choice that disregarded the strong territorial identities, against the opinion of a minority of the political elites, which had proposed to recognize the regions as "autarchic entities" (Bifulco, 2004). The word *regione* was revived only many years after the census of 1863, and also in this case for a new census campaign, in 1911, when the definition of region was reported in official documents. The regions were considered as functional spaces according to a general design that privileged the viewpoint of the young nation-state (Rivière, 2004). In other words, during the first century of the unified country, no room was available for institutional arrangements diverging from the unitary state model, notwithstanding the relative strength of federalist thought among the intellectual bourgeoisie in the northern regions. During the Great War and even more over the two decades of Fascism,

nationalism was the dominant ideology that prevented any resurgence of a regionalist discourse. Only with the rise of the republican democracy did the regions go back to the stage.

In order to highlight the essential features of regionalization and regionalism in Italy between the proclamation of the Republic in 1946 and the last referendum on the Constitution's reform, in 2016, we have structured this essay as follows: after this Introduction, Section 2 reconstructs the main stages of the regionalization process in Italy, with the progressive emergence of the regionalism and its issues after the institutionalization of the regions along with the birth of the Republic. Section 3 illustrates the Italian way to new regionalism until the latest constitutional referendum, held on December 4<sup>th</sup> 2016, and its effects on the articulation of the legislative powers between the state and regions. In the Section 4 we highlight some aspects related to the territorial development policies of the regions, and in the last Section 5, some critical conclusions are proposed to the readers[CE1]. As the limited space of this paper it would be hard to provide an in-depth political and sociological analysis of the Italian regions, we decided to put emphasis on the relationships between the Italian State and the regions, observed through the prisma of the spatial development policies and mainly from the standpoint of the political geography.

## **2. Regionalization and regionalism in Italy: some historical accounts**

Since their constitutional acknowledgement in 1948, the regions have been part of the local autonomies recognized and promoted by the Republic, which « adapts the principles and methods of its legislation to the needs of autonomy and decentralization » (Constitution, art. 5, author's translation[CE2]). According to the Constitution reformed in 2001, the different territorial authorities that constitute the multi-layered Republic are the following (see also Figure X): the State, the Regions, the Provinces, the Metropolitan Cities (*Città metropolitane*) and the Municipalities, each of whom is « of equal order » (*equiordinato*), meaning that the Republic is constituted 'from the bottom', but its components are differentiated by functions (Bifulco, 2004).

The Italian regions were endowed with real authority and officially instituted by general elections during the seventies[CE3], according to a twofold status: the majority of the Regions have an ordinary autonomy (« ordinary regions»), whilst Valle d'Aosta, Trentino-Alto Adige, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Sicily and Sardinia are differentiated - or special - autonomy regions (« special regions»). This distinction concerns some legislative powers that are explicitly mentioned within the single regional statutes or are exclusively devolved to the special autonomy regions, and has been introduced for geopolitical, linguistic or physical reasons.

Meanwhile, from the end of the 1970's the Italian regional mosaic showed a process of stronger internal differentiation, favoured by the impending collapse of the Fordist regime of accumulation and the consequent crisis of the large industrial metropolitan areas located in the north-western regions of the country. On the other hand, the rise of new industrial spaces in the 'Third Italy' regions (Bagnasco, 1977; Trigilia, 1999<sup>[CS4]</sup>) – Veneto, Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Umbria, Marche – organized around networks of small and medium enterprises specializing in traditional manufacturing activities and well supported by a range of market and non-market interdependencies (Becattini, 1987), revealed the vitality of the industrial districts, which differed from the development path of the large industrial concentrations. These changes suggested that the traditional dualistic model used to interpret the Italian development was misleading with regard to the explanation of the emerging new local production systems. A threefold structure – large urbanised industrial areas in the North-West regions, city networks and industrial districts in the Third Italy, poles of growth in poorer rural areas in the *Mezzogiorno* – has dominated the spatial pattern for a long time. The debate on the reasons of this double cleavage cannot be reconstructed here, as it is not the aim of this paper. However, let us at least remind the large echoes produced by the work of Putnam et al. (1989), inspired to a culturalist vision of the social capital and its connections to the different levels of regional development, a work recently taken as a base for a more detailed analysis of the social capital endowment throughout Italy aiming at enlightening the lasting regional imbalances (Carocci, 2007).

Furthermore, since the early nineties, Italy has experienced a crisis in the party system following the collapse of the 'First Republic', for many reasons that cannot be discussed here (for a synthetic overview, see Agnew, 2002). This collapse has produced a deep change in political representation, with new political movements, quickly converted into parties, replacing the old political organizations with a new agenda and different centre-periphery relations.

In sum, although the administrative borders of the institutional regions do not reflect the real articulation and interrelation of the numerous local systems, this 'artificial' regionalization, introduced for statistical reasons, has become the framework of reference for the territorial administration, with some minimal changes especially introduced by the Fascist regime.

Recently, the Italian geographical debate has rediscovered the regional issues, starting from the recognition of the 'institutional misfit' of the constitutional regions in relation to the real territorial dynamics and relations (Castelnuovi, 2011; Ferlaino e Molinari, 2009b; Galluccio e Sturani, 2008; Sturani, 2004; Treves, 2004). The Italian research offers many elements to the debate on 'regionality' and the relationship between the geographical region as an analytical category and the constitutional regions, basic components of the Republic. Over the years, the regional question and the regionalism have involved into the discussion historic geographers (Gambi, 1963; Gambi e Merloni, 1995;

Galluccio e Sturani, 2008; Sturani, 2001 e 2004; Treves, 2004), political and economic geographers (Coppola, 1997; Dematteis, 1997; Ferlaino, 2000; Salone, 2011), political scientists and jurists (Merloni, 2001). Since 1989 Dematteis has stated that in Italy the infra-national administrative levels do not correspond to any recognizable territorial system (neither functional nor homogeneous), but are conventional. Yet we can observe that this ‘historical’ conventionality is nowadays the mirror of the fluidity of the social, economic and cultural networks crossing the space and the variety of local territorial identities that cannot be adequately represented by individual governmental bodies. In other terms, this leads to justify the artificiality of the regional system. In contrast, the regional economists and geographers have recognized, in the nineties, that local systems are the basic pillars of the Italian territorial development (Becattini and Sforzi, 2002).

From another perspective, the contribution of the historical geographers has put into value the role of the history in continuously reshaping the spatial fix of governmental entities: the *Ancien Régime* societies showed a huge range of changes occurring in the territorial structures and their institutional settings, a situation that the rise of the nation-states only temporarily froze (Paasi, 2002). The re-scaling process unfolding in many European countries over the last decades and the multi-level governance promoted by the European Union have strongly contributed to weaken this asserted fixity (Brenner, 2004).

The idea that regions – however they have been demarcated – can be institutionalized, under certain conditions, and therefore assume a certain degree of consistence and an ability to act within the political interplay, derives both from the constructionist theories and from some concepts of political sciences. According to Michael Keating (2003)<sup>1</sup>, we can attribute many meanings to regional spaces – functional, political, territorial – but, essentially, when a space of political action emerges, then regions become political arenas and political actors. This room for manoeuvre, in which coalitions of regional players can play as collective actors, depends on several factors such as, for instance, the presence of formal or informal institutions, the level of economic cohesion (Keating, 2003), the sense of cultural regional identity of the people (Paasi, 2009; Fitjar, 2010), the level of legitimacy of the political élites, and the resources that these élites can exploit to keep their power in the region (Fitjar, 2010).

To some extent, Italy has known a regionalization in which the state has devolved relatively late a range of legislative powers to the regions and administrative functions the local authorities such as provinces<sup>2</sup> and municipalities.

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<sup>1</sup> See also his contribution to this special issue (note from the editor).

<sup>2</sup> Provinces are an intermediate level of government and were instituted since the unification of the country in 1861, according to a model deriving from the Napoleonic *Départements* (and with this name they had already been

According to the constitutional reform of 2001, this legislative power is exercised by the regions within some limits, that are defined by the concept of ‘concurring competence’: this means a legislative competence owned both by the state and the regions, on which the former indicates the main principles and the latter provide an extensive and articulated text. Among the concurring competencies there are the international relations, international trade, education, health care, civil protection, spatial planning, valorisation of environmental and cultural assets and promotion of cultural activities. The state keeps dealing with foreign affairs, national defense, monetary politics, but all the functions not explicitly attributed to the state by the art. 117 of the Constitution are devolved to the regions.

Nevertheless, in spite of a quite advanced regional capacity, regions do not have any formalized representation at the central level<sup>[CE5]</sup>, except for the Permanent Conference State-Regions where the state consults and negotiates with the regions on common matters. In this aspect Italy differs from other countries, not only the federal ones like Germany or Austria, but also a still centralized country like France, where the high chamber – the Senate – gathers mainly representatives of regional and local authorities. The rejection of the constitutional reform in the recent referendum in December 2016 reiterated this lack of representation of the regional and local authorities on the national stage.

### **3. The Italian regions and the new-regionalist paradigm**

As Jessop (2004) and many other authors pointed out (Amin and Tomaney, 1995; Keating, 1997; Storper, 1997; MacLeod, 1999), during the eighties the new-regionalist paradigm has become increasingly influential and pervasive in Europe, in close relation with the hollowing-out of the nation-states within the old capitalist world. This trend has been interpreted as a result of the globalization of production, credit, information and technological research, the pressure of global economic institutions on states in order to affirm global rules of exchanges, or as the effect of a ‘transnational diplomacy’ which is pushing the globalization of state power (Amin and Tomaney, 1995<sup>[CE6]</sup>). The reduced capacity of the state control over its territory and communities at the end of the last century has been contrasted by a resurgence of local and regional systems as actors of an increased economic competition, often accompanied by pro-regions institutional reforms and regional political mobilization (Keating, 1997)

Some scholars even argue that the way the capitalist power is organized plays a continuous subverting action in the ‘national-territorial framework’ through the global commodity chains (Hadjimichalis

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established in the Italian territories conquered by the *Armée* between 1802 and 1809) and have been reinforced by a series of laws during the nineties.

and Hudson, 2007). Yet the recent evidence of states' behaviour after the crisis of 2008 might suggest a reactivity against the global forces of the economy. Indeed claims in favour of new protectionist barriers to the international trade, severe measures against migrants in many European countries as well as in the US, and national economic policies reluctant towards the budgetary constraints that are imposed by the international technocratic and financial institutions – European Commission, International Monetary Fund etc. –, seem to describe national governments as resurgent actors in these last years of the 'Great Recession'. Whether this reaction of the nation-states to their power dispossession by the global players is a sign of a reversal trend or, simply, an ephemeral phenomenon, is still hard to predict.

However, as a matter of fact, the regionalism is still a current issue in the political economy of the late capitalism, even if its strength is much less disrupting than in its 'Golden Age' during the pre-crisis period. Its practical features are various in number and quality and can be examined from several standpoints: institutional, economic, functional or political. From an institutional perspective, such a process is characterized by the strengthening of supra-national powers like the European Union, which looks at the regions as partners to whom to delegate the implementation of development and cohesion policies, thus helping to promote new forms of governance.

Furthemore, although it seems paradoxical, the push to this regional renaissance has been fostered by national states, with different ways, solutions and timetables according to the institutional traditions (Agnew, 2002; Herrschel and Newman, 2002; Rodríguez-Pose and Gill, 2003; Amin, 2004), which have reinforced the Euro-regionalism supported by the European Union and [CE7]the 'Europeanization' of the regional policies (Macleod, 1999, Jessop, 2004b).

To schematize, according to Keating (2003), we can argue that a first phase of institutionalization of the regions has occurred between the sixties and the seventies, to respond to needs of rationalization of state action and efficiency of welfare systems. It is a regionalization that Keating defines as 'technocratic', that is not owed, at least formally, to political and ideological reasons.

A second and mightier regional wave has developed over the eighties and nineties, along with the birth of Euro-regionalism. Here two autonomous but converging processes coexist: on the one hand, a re-composition of government bodies and public or quasi-public actors operating inside the regions, which is envisaged to foster the regional economies' effectiveness (a well-attested example have been the former regional development agencies in the UK: Murdoch and Norton, 2001; Alden, 2001); on the other hand, a restructuring of the political regulation of nation-state, which transfers important powers to the sub-national bodies (it is the European experience in the last decades, with the *Estado autonómico* in Spain, the never-ending reform of the constitutional law in Italy, the relative reinforcing of French regions).



Furthermore, there is a third factor that contributes to this Euro-regional wave, mostly in national states: that is ‘political mobilization’ bringing an in-depth redesign of the administrative and political structure of the state, on the basis of strengthening regional governments, political movements and societies, with also different identity implications according to the different countries, as the examples of Spain and, more ambiguously, Italy seem to indicate.

Concerning the controversial Italian experience, it is indubitable that a wide and intricate range of phenomena has deeply modified the role and structure of the regional spaces and the behaviour of regional actors (Salone, 2010): among them, the constitutional reform introduced in 2001, the Europeanization of public policies, and the highly differentiated responses given by the regions to the cultural, social and economic challenges pushed by the globalization[CE8].

Regionalist forces have characterised the Italian political arena since the ‘Risorgimento’, and animated also the political debate about the democratic Constitution at the end of the Second War, being represented in the most relevant political parties during the First Republic. Even an officially internationalist organization like the former Communist Party supported the role of the regions when they were enabled to govern through regional elections: the governments of some regions such as Emilia-Romagna, Toscana and Umbria have long constituted the test bed for proving the administrative capacity of a party which remained constantly excluded from the national government until the end of the Cold War.

However, the most impressive phenomenon was the *Lega Lombarda-Lega Nord* (Lombard League-Northern League), which partly inherited the electoral legacy of the Christian Democrats and took over in many local governments in Lombardy and Veneto. This right-wing and populist player brushed up the historical and moderate regionalism of Christian-democratic thought and placed it at the centre of its political agenda, interpreting a profound demand in the society of the Northern regions for a self-governing role (Diamanti, 1996; Giordano, 2000). In response to this input, the national governments have undergone an institutional reform in various stages.

While, generally speaking, the institutional context is moving more strongly towards decentralization of powers to local authorities (infra-regional levels of territorial government), a federal structure has also been designed (Bifulco, 2004).

Actually, since mid-nineties Italy has been experiencing a lasting set of institutional reforms that has been unfolding following different stages. Roughly, in this multi-decennial process one can ascertain two prominent strands: the first one spans from the 1990 to 2001, whereas the second one has gone from 2001 till nowadays (2016). The two strands have different features, which will be illustrated in the following lines.

On the one hand, between 1990 and 2001 the institutional context has been oriented towards a rather strong decentralization of public power from the centre to the local authorities: through the law 142/1990 the *province* had been strongly reinforced, along with a further empowerment of the regions within the republican institutional setting. Moreover, according to the next legislative Decree n° 122 approved in March 1998, the state still keeps some fundamental strategic functions concerning the spatial and infrastructural planning: « [...] guidelines for Italian spatial development, with reference to natural and environmental assets, geological protection, infrastructural networks, and public works, cities and metropolitan area systems aimed at developing the Mezzogiorno and the less developed areas of the country » [author's translation] (Rivière, 2007; Salone, 2010b). One could ironically underscore the fact that the functions in charge of the central state are just the weaker ones, or even rather disregarded by the public action, except for the public works of national relevance such as the infrastructure networks. In addition, the most recent reform of the Constitution of 1948, concerning the Title V, Part II, approved by a confirmative referendum on October 2001, has established an institutional setting where the distinct levels of legislative power – state and regions – should have been designed in accordance to a distribution of capacity which is inspired from a federal regime structure: national defence, economic and financial policy and international affairs remain under the responsibility of the central government, whilst all the remaining functions are devolved to the regional governments<sup>[CE9]</sup>, ruled by presidents that are directly elected by the region's citizens and are indicated in the common language as 'governors'. In real facts, the outcomes of the political negotiations between the parties supporting the governmental majority and the regional political elites, have been rather a mix of "exclusive and shared competencies" (the concurring competences above mentioned) between the central administration and the regional ones, with a persistent powerful role assigned to the municipalities that have been traditionally mighty in the country's history.

This already intricate framework has been made more complex by various national acts concerning the so-called 'fiscal federalism' that appears to be the essential tool for any new design of the administrative framework: actually, the art. 119 of the reformed Constitution states that « Municipalities, Provinces, Metropolitan Cities and Regions have financial autonomy for revenues and expenditures » (Ferlaino and Molinari, 2009). Owing to the increasing needs of the public budget, this aspect has been a slippery ground on which many changes have occurred over the years: particularly the property tax regime and the local services taxes have been frequently modified, due more to the emergency in public accounts and to the electoral cycles than to a consistent fulfilment of the constitutional reform of 2001.

On the other hand, after the global crisis of 2008 and the consequent 'Great Recession', the needs of keeping the control of the public expenditures, within the European Commission Stability and Growth

Pact constraints, and with the financial scandals that emerged in some regional and local governments, have pushed the issues of a reinforced regionalism out of the political debate, and, in contrast, given impulse to complaints about the misuse of public money by the decentralized powers. Table 1 reports the data on regional expenditure spanning from the constitutional reinforcement of the regions (2001) and the first effects of the 2007 crisis: the values have remarkably increased in the period, especially in the ordinary regions which new powers have been devolved to. The only special region which shows a huge growth of public expenses is Sicily. Furthermore, the regional expenditure per capita in 2010 is enormously variable, from the highest values of the special regions to the lowest one, scored by Lombardy, which is also the richest region in terms of GDP per capita.

Table 1 and graph 1: Dynamic of the Regions' expenditure 2000-2010 (budget in million Euro)

Source: author's elaboration of CGIA Mestre, 2013

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More recent official documents report that the indebtedness of the regions has been getting worse over the last years, owing to the burden of the public health especially in the Southern Italy (Corte dei Conti, 2016; Trovati, 2016). However, in spite of the undoubted role that regions play in the public budget (and in its waste, according a large number of studies), the main accused has been the weakest administrative level, the provincial one, which in the end has been 'redefined' – practically abolished as an elected public body – by the Law n.° 54/2014. The provinces have not been suppressed from the Constitution though (art. 114), following the rejection of the latest constitutional reform with the referendum on 4 December<sup>[CS10]</sup> 2016<sup>[CE11]</sup>.

The retrenchment of the public expenditures, the downsizing of the public administration and the whole rationalization of the public sector are the mantras of the current public debate and tend to put aside the goal of the 'territorialization' of public policies. This<sup>[CE12]</sup> tendency to reduce the relevance of the territorial setting within the political debate is also evident in the oversight paid to the urban issue, which has practically vanished from the national politics concerning both the regulatory policies – land rent treatment, common goods, etc. – and the inadequacy of the territorial governments in relation to the urban coalescence processes that have highly articulated the urban and regional patterns of the country, with the growth of the metropolitan areas, and other new inter-municipal local systems (Calafati, 2009).

This downturn of the regionalist arguments in the public debate, partially testified by recent surveys (Demos, 2016), may have been deeply affected by corruption episodes that involved regional officers and politicians, as some press reports and investigative books have denounced (Buccini, 2015), and also influenced by the switch of Lega Nord from a regionalist-secessionist agenda to a nationalist one. But, more generally, the crisis of regionalism has crossed the hard tendency – requested by the

financial austerity policies – to reduce the complexity and the slowness of the legislative mechanisms and to simplify the territorial state's tiers. The proposal of constitutional reform approved by the Parliament in April 2016 aimed at eliminating the duplication of legislative functions between the high chamber (the *Senato*) and the low one (the *Camera*), restricting to this latter the most relevant matters and committing to the former the role of representing the regional and local interests and the approval of European agreements and regulations.

Beside the simplification of the legislative procedures at the national level, another aspect, more relevant for the state/regions relations, must be underlined: the reform envisaged to abolish the overlapping matters in the legislative powers between the state and regions, which have so far produced a lot of legal controversies involving the jurisdictional levels such as the Administrative Regional Courts, the Council of State and the Constitutional Court. Amongst the overlapping competencies between central state and regions we can mention the following: international trade, energy, innovation, education, urban and regional planning, health, cultural promotion. Many of these would have been re-centralized, and a clearer distinction between state and regional powers would have been established. As the reform was approved with less than the two thirds of the Parliament, it was submitted to the popular scrutiny through a confirmative referendum held on December 4<sup>th</sup> 2016. The “No” won with a large majority and this rejection of the reform proposal represented a defeat for the Government and Prime Minister Renzi. Many factors, much of whom not directly concerning the matter of the reform, can be cited as heading to this result: the decreasing popularity of the Government for its failure in facing the long-lasting stagnation of the country, particularly in fighting the youth unemployment – 38,1%, the worst performance in the European Union after Spain (De Paola, 2016); the compact block against the government formed both by the left-wing and the right-wing parties, with a crucial role plaid by the populist movement *Cinque Stelle* and the internal opposition within the Prime Minister's Democratic Party; the fear that « with a new electoral law that has already been approved by parliament (but which could be reopened), the reform would give the next prime minister too much power » (The Economist, 2016).

The immediate political outcome was the Renzi's resignation and the very rapid nomination of a new government, supposedly brief in its duration and due to reform the electoral law, so as to organize new polls in Spring 2017.

#### **4. The territorial development within a reinforced regional framework**

As in many other countries affected by the new-regionalist wave (Keating, 2003), in Italy too the institutional and new regional turn has recently played a significant role in the evolution of cultural

approaches to territorial development policies. The recent experiences as well as the current season of Italian planning are largely based on the above-mentioned elements, within which some instruments of negotiation among different levels of government and different local actors are definitely the linchpins<sup>3</sup>[CE13].

Table 2: Territorial levels of spatial planning tools according to the Italia legal framework

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Source: author's elaboration

Alongside the new-regionalist arise, with some schematic simplification the nineties can be mentioned as a crucial turning-point for Italian planning culture and practice (the institutional articulation of competences in spatial planning is shown at Table 1), in at least three main aspects:

(1) On a national scale, after the long and unsuccessful experience of the extraordinary intervention in southern regions (the so-called *Mezzogiorno*), the central government designed and launched several programmes of territorial development. On the one hand, a set of tools was designed for economic recovery of lagging regions based on competitive bidding for financial resources. The application witnessed a variety of local responses, the effectiveness of which seems to be strictly linked to the local endowment of social capital (Cersosimo and Wolleb, 2004). After the first implementation in the *Mezzogiorno* (for a critical review see Rossi, 2004), the areas affected by the programmes increased in number, crossing the borders of the less favoured regions (Governa and Salone, 2004). On the other hand, in many urban areas, programmes for urban regeneration were implemented by the central government, focusing on local public-private partnerships.

(2) On a regional scale, almost all the Italian regions have reinforced their technical bodies to face the new challenges of spatial planning, which is one of the most relevant aspects of regional competence. This improvement concerns new planning legislations, innovations in technical approaches and the shift to governance systems encompassing different levels of public authorities and social-economic actors.

(3) On a local scale, many municipalities, especially in metropolitan agglomerations, have been engaged in strategic plans, in which inter-municipal co-operation and a wide range of public-private partnerships have been experienced.

During the last decades, and particularly within the framework of the new European Cohesion Policy 2007-2013, the innovative aspect of territorial policies and other documents of strategic planning show the deliberate assumption of the local development paradigm at the level of regional institutions.

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<sup>3</sup> For an in-depth description of the negotiated policies launched within the so-called 'New Programming' – 1997-2006 – see Governa and Salone, 2004.

The dimension of the 2007-2013 regional policies can be found in the individual priorities, with a strong focus on territorial programming and planning based, therefore, on specific resources that are potentially traceable in the urban and rural areas and local production systems. The greater is the complementarity and integration between the services that the policy promotes in a given territory, the greater is the effect on competition and employment (National Strategic Framework, QSN, 2006, 25).

Many of the priorities identified in the National Strategic Framework, in fact, cannot be pursued effectively unless via a 'territorial declension'. This does not simply refer to the location of interventions and programmes within the regional space, but their construction together with the local territories, sharing not only the design but also the implementation.

This new task can be interpreted as an up-to-date slogan for building consensus for a set of goals defined at regional level, and this has been the case in many situations. Yet some policies that have been implemented in Italian regions show that there are serious attempts to build new institutional frameworks for multilevel governance in regional policies. Moreover, after a long series of unconditional appreciations of the New Programming, especially with reference to the experiences in the southern regions, a more critical attitude has appeared in the scholars' and policymakers' world, pointing out both the difficulties in implementation and the 'tautological trap' of considering the co-operation process as a result *per se* (Rossi, 2004). Despite these controversial assessments, the concept of involving the local society and resting on the institutional thickness, deeply influenced by an institutionalist approach (Amin, 1999), has been eventually developed and underpins now the place-based perspective theorized – and practiced – by Barca (2009) and others (Barca, Mc Cann and Rodríguez-Pose, 2012).

Explicit or implicit references to the 'local' and in particular to the notion of 'local system', are easy to find in the territorial action of a number of Italian regions over the last few years. The fertile encounter between the 'local' as a privileged dimension of territorial action and the consolidated methods of regional planning seem to follow two different but convergent paths: on the one hand, the construction of the 'local' in planning terms, resting on consolidated nuclei of local players co-operating in the field of negotiated planning; on the other, the definition of a reference framework for territorial planning hinged on local differences and the capacity of territories to cooperate with the regional institution.

The first path was traced during the decade from 1996 to 2006, when many regions applied the new programming principles fixed by the central government and experienced through programming tools such as the *Patti territoriali* (Territorial Pacts: for an analysis, see Governa and Salone, 2004). The availability of resources from both the Structural Funds and National Fund for Underdeveloped Areas

(*Fondo aree sottoutilizzate*, FAS) has allowed many regions to conceive and implement a new generation of integrated programmes, such as the Integrated Local Development Programmes (*Programmi integrati di sviluppo locale*) in Lombardy and Piedmont. More recently, the need to pinpoint new strategies for using European funds, for the cohesion period of 2007 to 2013, has further stimulated the initiative capacity of local territories.

The second path takes place ‘within’ the traditional planning instruments, which, owing to legislative reforms, and in the wake of necessary cultural changes in the disciplinary sphere, appear to be less and less based on a top-down approach, and increasingly opened to co-decision making, at various institutional levels. Within this context, some regions seem to be particularly engaged in taking forward the innovation process, particularly in the field of planning arrangements. Furthermore, this increased activism has become a channel for converging political issues in the national debate about federalism.

## **5. Critical remarks and conclusions**

After two decades of enhanced regionalisation in Italy, culminated in the rejection of the last reform oriented towards a re-centralisation of the powers, we can sketch some general remarks that enlighten controversial aspects of the current organization.

In the first place, the multiplication of administrative mechanisms and levels – from EU to local authorities, through a multi-level governance, and among equally empowered institutions, through horizontal cooperation – risks to produce ‘unintended’ effects, like a “democratic deficit” due to the excessive articulation (Castelnuovi, 2011) and to the “technocratization” of politics (Hadjimichalis e Hudson, 2007). Furthermore, it can foster the competition and the conflicts among the territorial actors, a dispersal of responsibilities and lack of accountability (Ferlaino e Molinari, 2009a), a growing imbalance between functions devolved and resources available at a decentralized level, a reduction of efficiency of the administrative mechanisms due to diminished economies of scale and scope at the level of general coordination (Rodríguez-Pose, 2008).

Hence a need emerges to equilibrate the new policies of the various regions through a more effective guidance by the central government, as Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones (2000) call forth in the British context, Janin-Rivolin (2010) in the Italian one and, more generally, by the research on the risks represented by a decentralisation realized without a clear definition of legal and fiscal responsibilities (Rodríguez-Pose and Gill, 2003). To these caveats, in the Italian case one must add the strong popular resentment provoked by recent scandals in regional and provincial administrations, which seems to lead to a total rejection of the decentralization model (Ainis, 2012), to throwing the

baby out with the bathwater, even more so if one thinks of the positive results of the devolution and the soft administrative readjustment (Ramella, 2010), notably in terms of reduction of the interregional disparities (Calamai, 2009).

A second critical aspect concerns the capability of regions to stimulate the creation of actors' networks within the sub-regional systems in order to promote and implement development programmes based on local resources. Not all the regional policies pursue these goals and, above all, not all are able to empower the local players to engage innovative programmes. Among the most interesting examples we can remember the experience of the Piedmont Region (2007) that recognized a number of local systems (AIT, *Ambiti d'Integrazione Territoriale*) as engines of local development. The mechanism envisaged that the Region ranked these territorial systems by four main axes which structure the Piedmont Region's action according to the guidelines of European Commission for the Cohesion Policy 2007–2013. These axes framed planning documents such as the *Documento di programmazione economico finanziaria regionale* (DPEFR, Regional Economic Planning Document: Regione Piemonte, 2005b) and the *Documento strategico preliminare regionale* (Preliminary Strategic Document: Regione Piemonte, 2005c) that assigned funding on a competitive bidding, giving priority to the territorial systems that presented programmes consistent with the strategic guidelines of the regional planning (Salone, 2010). Some of the actions planned under the guidance of local coalitions belonged to interregional and transnational cooperation programmes, clearly indicating a relational dimension transcending the territorial – local – networks.

A third aspect deserving attention by scholars and decision-makers is the possible re-composition of the current regional articulation in an institutional framework based on macro-regions larger than the present regions, as recently experienced in France. Many post-industrial regions seem actually to be subject to a re-scaling process towards broader dimensions which should foster their competitiveness: the evolution of the large metropolitan areas into global city-regions (Scott, 2001) and the regional urbanization process (Soja, 2011) well represent this tendency in the capitalist world.

In this perspective, some proposed reforms for the Italian governmental framework tend to suggest territorial aggregations on a higher scale, according not to a simple re-articulation of the regional borders, but to the definition of functional spaces that do not coincide necessarily with the administrative limits (Janin-Rivolin, 2010<sup>[CE14][CS15]</sup>). However, this institutional re-design is in turn heavy of possible consequences: to what extent can the administrative and technocratic institutionalization of the Italian regions be achieved in absence of strong regional identities? How much can the territorial policies of the regional governments contribute to region building process? Even though we can expect that the Italian regions can develop more their functional role than their cultural identity, one must wonder whether they will be able to concretely affect the “expectation



structures” of people (Paasi, 1986) – that are the perception, conception and action schemes by which people refer to the territory in the everyday life.

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