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# The First Outstanding 50 Years of “Università Politecnica delle Marche”

Research Achievements in Social Sciences  
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# Destination Europe: The Transformation of Agriculture Between Decline and Renaissance



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**Abstract** The objective of the work is to retrace the main contributions of 50 years of studies and research by the group of agricultural economists of the Faculty of Economics of the University of Ancona/Università Politecnica delle Marche. These contributions share a common vision: the transformations of the primary sector in Italy and in the Marche region, are the original result of two equally powerful but largely independent forces. On the one hand, a tumultuous manufacturing development, territorially unbalanced and passively suffered. On the other hand, the centrality assigned to the agricultural sector by a Europe under construction and which has made the primary sector a privileged laboratory, not only as a recipient of resources, but also as an outpost in the definition of policy strategies and design. The originality of the contributions of this group of scholars lies in the analysis of these transformations from an openly critical perspective towards the then prevalent, often unilateral and hagiographic, readings of a development model and a certain idea of Europe. That model is now at an end; and that idea of Europe must be overcome. It is therefore this critical perspective that makes these contributions still relevant and the driving force of present and future research.

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## 1 Introduction: On the Rhetoric of the “Widespread Development”

This chapter aims to summarize the main contributions provided by the agricultural economists of the “Ancona school” (i.e. Ancona Agricultural Economists, AAE henceforth) over the last 50 years, as well as the consequent main challenges for their future research activity. This group and different generations of scholars represented a sort of heterodoxy within the Ancona school in the way they investigated the Italian (and, then, European) regional development processes from a peculiar perspective, that of a “losing” sector, agriculture, and of “losing” territories, the rural areas. From this perspective, the major limits and unsustainable features of those development processes became progressively manifest and were analysed and pointed out in many different works, either journal articles or books.

The Faculty of Economics (and in particular its current Department of Economics and Social Sciences) of the Ancona University (now Università Politecnica delle Marche) has always been recognized among the national and international community of economists for one major reason: its tradition (the “Ancona school”) on studying the long-term development process of that part of Italy (the North-East-Centre-NEC or the “Third Italy”) based on localised systems of specialised small and medium enterprises (the “industrial districts”). Hundreds of books and papers have been written on this apparently successful and peculiar “way of development” and, for this reason, often designated as the “NEC model”. Not only has the school’s contribution been considered relevant but also significantly heterodox with respect to mainstream development economics allegedly incapable of seeing the specificity of this “model” and of understanding its foundations.

The contribution of the “Ancona school” to the identification and definition of the NEC model has been remarkable. After all, in the Faculty website this tradition and this “mission” is still very explicitly declared. It is written that “in their respective fields of interest [...] the Ancona scholars have always endeavoured to analyse the problems of the Italian economy and society [...]. The characteristics of Italy’s long-term development, the dualism of its labour market, the emergence of the Italian industrial districts and their relation with the civic values of the north-east and central regions of the country are among the achievements that have contributed to the recognition of the Faculty’s research within and outside Italy”. It is also worth remembering that the Faculty is named after Giorgio Fuà, maybe its most famous and valuable scholar. On the Fuà legacy, the Faculty website declares that: “Fuà studied the economy of Italy and especially of Marche; he was the first to interpret the Marche model of development and grasp its structural characteristics: a myriad of small businesses rooted in the territory”. Eventually, “Fuà was the inspiration behind and interpreter of what in later years was to become known as the ‘NEC model’” (Fuà and Zacchia 1984).

But, then, came the post-2008 great economic crisis. Allegedly unpredicted and unexpected by most researchers, the economist community was suddenly convinced that the crisis was a clear demonstration of the failure of mainstream economics, the

same mainstream that did not even see the successful “NEC model”. Unfortunately, the crisis dramatically struck also the NEC economy and society, and the Marche region in particular. After all, the global economy quite rapidly and successfully recovered from the post-2008 crisis. The Marche economy, and large parts of the NEC economy, never did. Therefore, it seems now intellectually honest to replace the word “crisis” with “long-term decline”. Even though it may seem bizarre, those same economists that celebrated the success of the “model” and have been very prompt in celebrating the funeral of mainstream economics after the crisis, never celebrated the funeral of the “model”. Apparently, because they did not even see its death or, maybe, because this could implicitly imply also the death of that whole tradition.

The real question is whether and how the Ancona school really contributed to the understanding of its own regional growth process and its apparently unstoppable decline. In fact, there was a heterodoxy within the school of alleged heterodox. This other “heterodoxy” actually came from those that over years criticised the emphasis on the NEC/Marche model suggesting its possible long-term fallacies: environmental degradation, excessive geographical concentration with consequent congestion, loss of sectors, inadequate integration with the European and global economy. Their main intuition was that such development process was not eventually pushing this part of Italy closer to the core of Europe: it was not becoming the Southern limit of the European core but just the Northern limit of its periphery.

Several works insisted on the agricultural foundations of that development experience (Bartola 1979, 1983a; Esposti and Pierani 1995; Sotte 1996; Esposti and Sotte 2011; Esposti 2012a).<sup>1</sup> The NEC model originated in regions that were still distinctly agricultural (in the Marche region in 1951 agriculture accounted for 60.2% of the total employment) and where the sharecropping contracts were widely adopted and often prevalent. By investigating the salient features of the sharecropping contract, and the underlying decision-making mechanisms in particular, these studies pointed out how the routine of managing a complex production organization with the consequent resource mobility made sharecropping the basis for the genesis and success of the region’s manufacturing business network and made the tenant the prototype of that entrepreneurial attitude.

According to this analysis, the determinants of the NEC model were rooted in its agricultural origin. It represented the key endogenous force of that peculiar regional development experience. A first main implication of this conclusion was that such “model” could not be easily replicated in other territories. So, maybe, it was not a “model” at all. A second major implication concerned the long-term sustainability of that development process. As there were the peculiarities of agriculture at the foundation of the entrepreneurial vitality of that economy, a lasting development could not be possible if not maintaining these peculiarities and, in particular, the integration between sectors (agriculture and manufacturing) and territories (the rural and the urban space).

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<sup>1</sup>For other contributions on this aspect see also Anselmi (1978, 2000).

In fact, the excitement, and a bit of propaganda, raised by the manufacturing success was so strong in those years that, instead of understanding the complexity of their relations with the territory and rural society, farmers themselves were asked to adapt their production processes and decision making to the industrial logic. Eventually, the NEC model forced agriculture to “industrialize” itself. This conclusion was at the heart of a second major original contribution of this group of agricultural economists. They provided clear evidence that the highly celebrated development experience was in fact destroying that integration and was, on the contrary, generating an internal dualism. This dualism was not only jeopardizing the long-term sustainability of that model, but it was also opening many critical, and more general, questions on the role of agriculture and of the rural space in the future of industrial and post-industrial economies and societies (Sotte 2008, 2013; Esposti 2012b, 2014).

## 2 On the Dark Side of the “Model”

Several studies and research projects particularly in the eighties and nineties revealed that the allegedly balanced development process was in fact substantially unbalanced and dualistic across sectors and territories (Bartola 1983b; Bartola et al. 1984; Esposti and Sotte 2002b; Esposti 2004). In the end, when seen from the perspective of the “losing” sectors and areas there was no real difference compared to the industrialization experience of the rest of Northern Italy and, more generally, of most of the western industrialised countries. Two aspects of this polarization, in particular, deserved attention: the decline of agriculture, the marginalization of rural areas.

While providing a fundamental contribution to the rise of that industrialization experience, the development process itself induced a rapid decline of agricultural activity and entrepreneurship. Attracted by the intense and localised growth of manufacturing, farming was progressively emptied of workforce (especially the younger and the more educated one), of capital and of entrepreneurial capacity. This led to an oversimplification of the agricultural production systems originally based on the strong complementarity between cattle breeding and cultivation that had also favored land fertilization, soil conservation and water regulation (Sotte 1987; Arzeni et al. 2001; Coderoni and Esposti 2014, 2018; Baldoni et al. 2018).

The primary sector passively adjusted to the general socio-economic evolution by acquiring, to remain viable and profitable, hyper-simplified and speculative characters: an “urban and industrial” agriculture that was functional to the areas of strongest agglomeration. The loss of competitiveness of such an “impoverished” sector inevitably weakened the entire agri-food industry (Esposti and Listorti 2009). The natural, physical and social capital accumulated within these farming systems over centuries was quickly sacrificed to make the “miracle” of widespread industrialization take place. But that “miracle” left agriculture almost without a long-term perspective, dependent on policy support, incapable of competitiveness on the global markets. A sort of vestigial activity.

But the dark side of the model was even more evident when looking at the territorial dualism it generated. One of the main contributions of the AAE was to emphasize that the widespread character of that development process actually resided in its initial spatial settlement. It was the centuries-old accumulation process, that eventually activated the rapid industrialization process, to be widespread, that is, diffused over space. In fact, the industrialization dynamics was strongly centripetal with a major concentration of resources, from people to infrastructure, in a limited urban portion of these regions. Therefore, it could be legitimate to refer to “rural industrialization” with the exclusive meaning of rural origin not of an actual involvement of the more rural territories, for instance the internal areas of the Apennines. On the contrary, these latter were substantially excluded by that convulsive industrialization and accumulation process.

This original view on the dualistic nature of the “model” led this group of scholars to less hagiographically envisage its long-term perspective and this eventually turned out to be somehow prophetic. According to this evolutionary interpretation that process could not be sustained simply because it was taking advantage of a secular accumulation that was itself leading to a quick end. The strength of its genuine accumulation process was, in fact, secondary compared to the transfer of capital accumulated over centuries in its overlooked agricultural and rural space. Meanwhile, the inevitable slowdown, and then extinction, of the industrialization process was expected to increasingly reveal its drawbacks, the growing consequences of its unbalance: environmental degradation, urban congestion, increasing inequality, social conflicts, loss of economic and social resilience (Esposti and Sotte 1999, 2000). Paradoxically, while the successful development process had to be regarded as transitory, its drawbacks could become permanent features of these economies and societies.

It is worth noticing that the risk of extinction of that development experience has been envisaged by several scholars since the seventies. In these cases, however, the main argument was the progressive disappearance of a series of advantageous external conditions and, therefore, the loss of competitiveness in the new global landscape. The original contribution of the AAE, and of a few others (Calafati 2008), in fact, insisted on the internal forces of the model and, therefore, on the fact that extinction rather came from the exhaustion of its internal drivers. Essentially, it was self-extinction.

### 3 On the Renaissance of Rurality

On this rural perspective of the regional development processes, the nineties opened new and somehow unexpected research lines on which the AAE concentrated most of their attention over the decade. These topics can be grouped under the name of “rural renaissance” and express the new interest on the rural dimension of the post-industrial development, thus also on the role of agriculture in this respect. As a matter of fact, this new interest did not originate within the scientific and intellectual

debate on the Italian regional development. It actually came from the international context and, in particular, from the attention paid by European Commission, OECD, World Bank on the peculiar development trajectories of rural territories especially when they did not experience any significant involvement in major industrialization processes (Esposti and Sotte 2001b; OECD 2006).

The research challenge for the Ancona scholars was not limited to understanding whether and how those rural local systems were excluded from the abovementioned accumulation and agglomeration processes. There was something much more general. The key research question concerned the future of post-industrial economies and societies and the role of agriculture and of the rural space within the post-fordist organization of production and consumption. The exclusion from an intense, and somehow disruptive, industrialization process could become a strategic asset for many territories. Rurality was no more a synonym of backwardness and marginalization. The increasing demand for higher quality products as well as for higher living standards, also from an environmental perspective, together with the emergence of new technologies strongly attenuated the burden of distances and small scale, making many rural territories increasingly interesting and even desirable for businesses and professions which were once exclusively focused on large urban centers (Esposti and Berloni 2001; Esposti and Sotte 2001a, 2002a).

These new opportunities could be seized particularly by those sectors with prevalent “rural” features, agriculture in the first place. A new generation of farmers, female farmers included, and a new a generation of farms diversifying the activity across different agricultural and non-agricultural businesses (the so-called multifunctional agriculture), started to emerge (Sotte 1997, 2006; Finocchio and Sotte 2006; Arzeni et al. 2014). To this new agriculture and rural economy were assigned new social functions sometime summarized under the term “stewardship”, that is, ensuring, on the behalf and in the interest of the local and global community, the adequate provision of vital public goods and services, from climate change mitigation and food safety to landscape and conservation of cultural traditions.

Like the process it aims to investigate, this research agenda is still in progress looking for regularities, determinants and appropriate metrics. Nonetheless, the main merit of the AAE, in this respect, was to envisage the new post-industrial and post-fordist pivotal role of the agricultural and rural space starting from the NEC experience. This new role could mitigate and even revert those polarizing forces and their consequent dualism eventually making the “diffusion” not an original character of the development process but, in fact, its desirable outcome. Ancona scholars not only investigated the main features of this rural and agricultural renaissance and the critical role of non-conventional factors (research, knowledge, education) in this respect (Esposti 2000, 2002, 2004, 2011a; Esposti 2012c; Esposti and Pierani 2003; Esposti and Materia 2016); they also identified the conditions to make this renaissance viable also for those local rural contexts so strongly depleted by the allegedly “widespread industrialization”. For this new generation of farms and farmers to emerge within these impoverished local contexts, an active role of the “state” was needed through the design and the implementation of appropriate targeted policies.

For this main reason, most of the research activity of the last two decades of the AAE actually concentrated on this renewed role of the “state” and on the analysis of the consequent agricultural, rural and regional policies. It was clear, in particular, that dealing with agriculture and the rural space, the “state” was actually the European Union and these policies were most exclusively the EU policies (Buckwell and Sotte 1997; Esposti and Bussoletti 2008).

## 4 On Why Europe Matters

From their peculiar perspective, the AAE pointed out the centrality of the EU and of the respective policies when many of their colleagues still barely recognized the very existence of this European dimension. This merit actually depends on the fact that until the late eighties, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has been the largely prevalent, if not the only, EU policy. In fact, the CAP is still granted about 40% of the EU budget. Therefore, already in the seventies, the AAE could apply their long-term experience in the analysis and assessment of national and regional agricultural policies (Orlando 1965; Bartola and Sotte 1983; Bartola and Sgroi 1984) also to this new dimension that had to become soon the only real policy for the agricultural and rural space in Italy.

The contribution of these Ancona scholars to the analysis of the CAP is remarkable and internationally acknowledged as it reflects a long-term, and still ongoing, research agenda on this topic. This contribution can be summarised in two main aspects. First, several of their studies highlighted the implicit contradiction, or dualism, of the CAP design and implementation (Esposti 2007, 2011b). Since its start in the sixties, the largest part of CAP expenditure (in fact, for many years, the only one) was concentrated on farmers income support either through market intervention (price support) or via direct payments. This major stream of the CAP (currently known as its “first pillar”) constituted a main force in the direction of the over-simplification and loss of entrepreneurship of agriculture already underway in the NEC area. In practice, the CAP has represented one of the key facilitators of the abovementioned dualism of the NEC model: the level of unit support (that is, per hectare) was, and still is, higher in more urban areas and lower in the most remote and peripheral rural ones.

At the same time, however, in its initial intentions and even more clearly in the sequence of reforms started in the eighties, this EU policy was expected to provide a major impulse to the rural and agricultural renaissance contrasting that dualism, therefore to be the outpost of a necessary territorial and sectoral rebalancing. The birth of the Rural Development Policy in the late eighties (currently the “second pillar” of the CAP) was hailed as a critical breakthrough in this respect. The AAE deeply investigated this long internal struggle of the CAP between its conservation and its real reform and published many empirical studies clearly demonstrating how this dualism had a locally specific impact on agricultural activities, on its environmental

implications and on the rural economy as a whole (Arzeni et al. 2001; Lobianco and Esposti 2010; Coderoni and Esposti 2018).

A second contribution of the AAE regarding the CAP was a deeper understanding of the forces actually leading to its design and implementation. In advance of at least one decade with respect to the broader debate on the EU weaknesses and uncertain future perspectives, they have shown how the EU policies actually are the outcome of a complex interaction between EU institutions, between Member States and between the former and the latter. This interaction eventually leads to a compromise that not only can explain the abovementioned dualism of the CAP, but also motivates the extreme complexity of its implementation within the local contexts. Several studies clarified how subsidiarity may eventually produce a highly complex governance of the EU policies whose possible outcome can also be their ultimate re-nationalization and, therefore, a substantial loss of significance of the EU dimension itself (Sotte 2005, 2007, 2010; Bonfiglio et al. 2016, 2017).

The bottom line of this research effort, in fact, goes beyond the relevance of the CAP itself. It has more to do with the need of appropriate theoretical backgrounds, approaches and methodologies in performing a rigorous policy evaluation. It is the local level, that is where beneficiaries and recipients actually operate, the context where policies should be actually evaluated but also where assessing the impact of a single policy is extremely complex. First of all, because its impact can never be isolated from the effects of the other concurrent (and sometimes contrasting) EU, national and regional policies. Secondly, because its impact depends on that sort of “collective intelligence” that is always strongly local specific and thus makes the impact of the policies substantially heterogeneous across space. The paradox, in this respect, is that several EU policies are aimed to build this local “collective intelligence” but their effectiveness in fact depends on its existence (Esposti et al. 2002; Arzeni et al. 2003; Camaioni et al. 2016).

The most recent contributions of the AAE concentrate on the theory and the practice of policy evaluation using the EU policies, and the CAP in particular, as a sort of privileged laboratory. Some relevant works, in particular, have applied to the so-called quasi-experimental *ex post* evaluation methods (Esposti 2017a, b). This research agenda is still trying to extend policy evaluation by also taking into account its implementation, the unintended and deadweight effects, its interaction with other policies, its influence on economic agents’ behaviour. Taking all these aspects into account requires multiple and complementary methodological approaches on which the future research activity of the Ancona scholars is expected to provide further relevant contributions.

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