

# Marche region, a “marginal” area in Italy: Participation in and exclusion from the Mediterranean megalopolis

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### The characteristic features of Marche

In the wake of Jean Gottmann’s renowned work on the American East Coast (GOTTMANN, 1961), at the end of the 1970s a group of, prevalently Italian, researchers carried out a broad interdisciplinary study and advanced the hypothesis that a “Mediterranean megalopolis” might be preparing to arise in Northern Italy (MUSCARÀ, 1978). The study aimed at ascertaining the existence of the preconditions required for the estab-

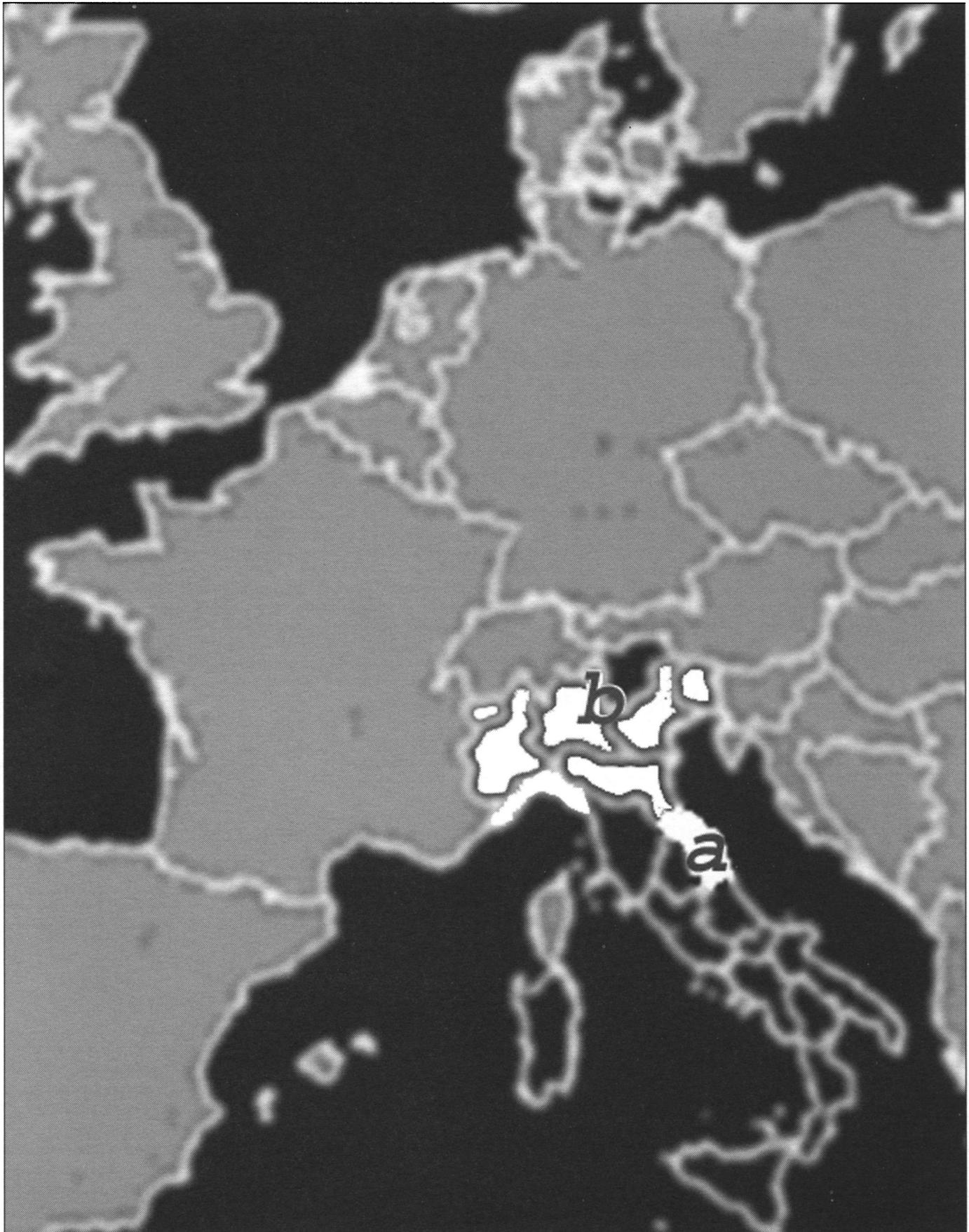
lishment in Northern Italy down to the southern borders of Emilia Romagna of a form of development affecting not only the land but also the economic and social sectors in line with Gottman’s “megalopolis” concept. The results were consistent with the simultaneous presence of a series of favorable conditions: structural economic indices, the urban and territorial geographic organization, and the presence and organization of higher-level services (advanced tertiary, or the so-called “quaternary” sector).

At a distance of some decades, Gottmann’s conceptual framework has substantially been proved valid and confirmed by the analysis of the Mediterranean megalopolis (fig. 1), even though economic, social and environmental conditions have arisen which have on the one hand favored an overall process of growth, and on the other resulted in urban “deconcentration.” Such phenomena can be interpreted as events within a more general urbanization process, although at the same time they may serve as indicators of the specific modalities of the process itself.

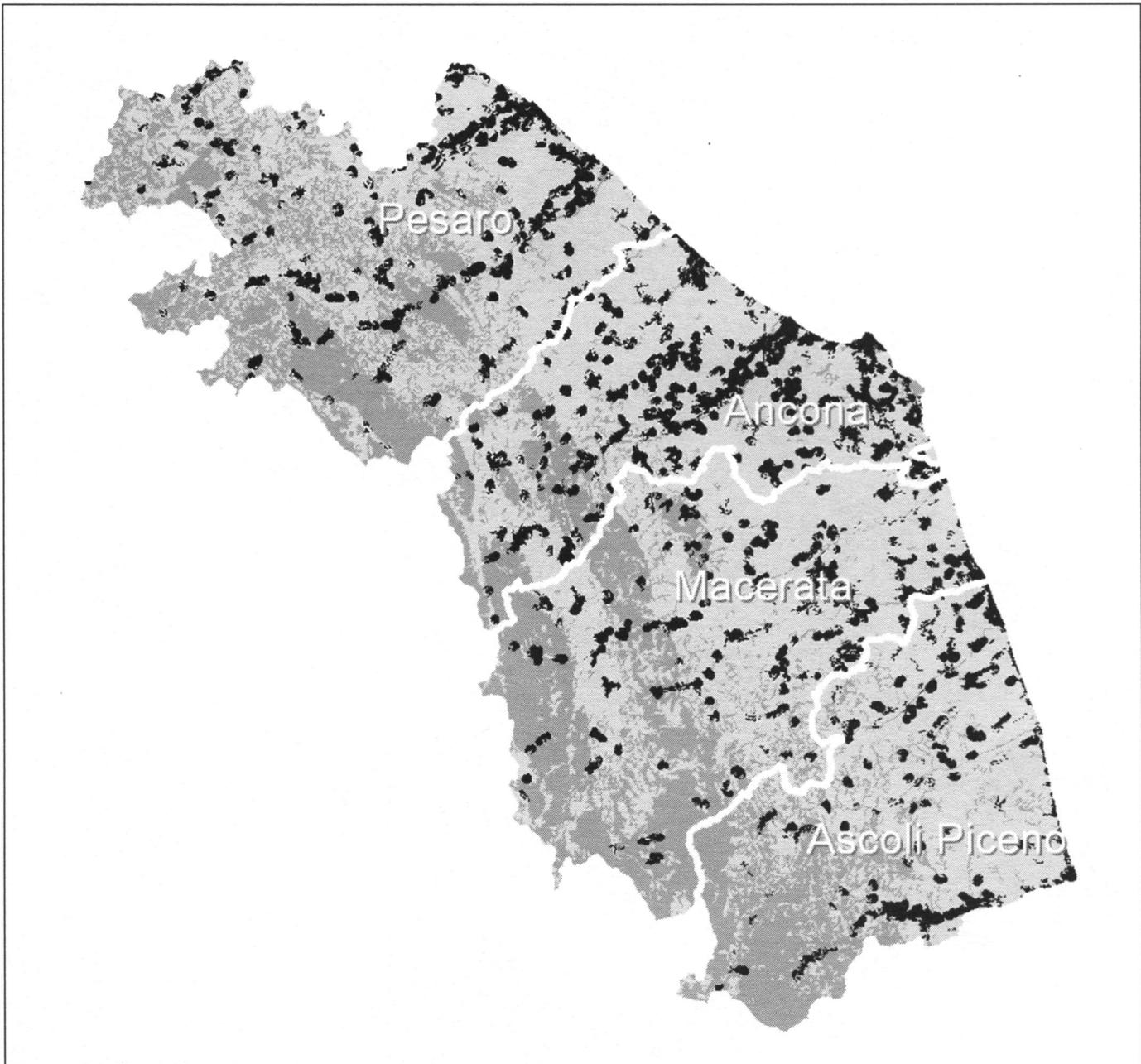
Regardless of the geographical scale selected by the researchers and of the urban development dynamics at work – which eventually did not allow the megalopolis to materialize completely – the research did not predict how Marche, which lies on the edge of this area (fig. 1), would be affected by this process. This study case can thus be of interest both:

- to investigate how different land dynamics can coexist within the process of megalopolis formation; and,
- to identify the specific forms of innovative evolution that have been at work in this area.

The causes of the specific character which the process of megalopolis formation has exhibited in Marche are multiple: they can be summarized with the fact that this region did not appear to possess all the traits and features that characterized the area involved in that special form of conurbation. Indeed, the views expressed more frequently, especially by research-



**Fig. 1:** Location of the study area – (a) Marche Region; (b) Mediterranean Megalopolis.



**Fig. 2:** The provinces of Marche Region – Pesaro, Ancona, Macerata, Ascoli Piceno. The urbanized areas are represented in black, the agricultural areas in medium grey and the wooded areas in dark grey.

ers in economics and sociology, stressed the similarities between the model observed in Marche and the area of the North-East Center (NEC) (fig. 2) of Italy, substantially neglecting the study of the relations between this region and the Po valley megalopolis. The NEC model has inspired a large body of economic as well as geographical and urban policy studies, including seminal contributions by the late Giorgio Fuà, as witnessed by the copious literature (see for instance FUÀ, 1980; FUÀ and ZACCHIA, 1983; ZACCHIA, 1987; FUÀ, 1999).

The NEC model, already foreshadowed in geographical studies by the identification of the features of what was called “*Italia di mezzo*” (intermediate Italy) (MUSCARÀ, 1967), essentially hinges on a combination of pre-existing social conditions and subsequent industrial development of local small and medium-sized enterprises, which resulted in a type of growth

that characterized north-east and east-central Italy, from Veneto to Marche. Whereas in Northern Italy the small and medium-size family-owned enterprises, deeply rooted in the rural economy and its social order, gradually began to experience the type of evolution and land transformation that could have led to the formation of a megalopolis, or a similar outcome, Marche remained anchored to the NEC model.

The specific issues at work in this part of the land refer to a special form of transition from a system characterized by interactions and exchanges between organization of the rural areas and the small farming centers, which were well structured and endowed with a definite social and cultural identity but poorly interrelated to the larger urban centers, to one prevalently polarized around the larger towns, especially close to the

coast (GOTTMANN, 1978). It is based on these reflections that the relative stability of Marche's land can be understood, as can the specific manner in which it has succeeded in participating in a wider growth process that probably has the features of megalopolis formation.

## The economy in Marche: Industry and agriculture

The strong processes of urban polarization observed in other areas have not taken place in Marche. For instance, the number of inhabitants in the main towns of the province has remained comparatively stable, whereas the high-productivity industrial areas have followed the decentralized organizational model. This evolution has no doubt been favored by land morphology and by the spontaneous formation on the coast of *carrefours*, as if echoing the concept of "teniapolis" introduced by Gottmann (GOTTMANN, 1978).

The complex social and economic situation which these different factors contributed to shaping in north-east and east-central Italy eventually evolved in line with the concept of "homogeneous areas of production" (LAMONICA, 1999). This resulted in an integrated development model characterized:

- geographically, by a number of areas devoted to specialized productions (with the presence of both manufacturing industries and a constellation of ancillary industries); and,
- socially, by the preservation of close bonds with agriculture.

This evolution was marked by the phasing out, since 1964, of the sharecropping system, the traditional economic mainstay of the region. This process freed a large labor force, as witnessed by the fact that in the 1980s employment in agriculture was down to one sixth compared with the 1950s, plummeting from 60 percent of the entire labor force in 1951 to less than 15 percent in 1985 (ZACCHIA, 1987).

The balance between rural population and resources ensured by sharecropping over the centuries had been deteriorating for a long time. Its decline had been initiated in the 19th century by a series of intrinsic and extrinsic causes. The agricultural crisis of the first half of the 19th century was precipitated by the fall (by 30-40 percent) in wheat prices brought about by cheap American and Russian wheat in the late 1880s. Nonetheless, the economic backwardness of Marche in that period was mainly due to the conservatism that marked much of the prevalent sharecropping system, which stifled all technical and entrepreneurial innovation. This system had for centuries ensured stable accommodation and the means for a generally dignified subsistence (PACI, 1987) for a large portion of Marche's population as well as the attentive and consistent care of the land, which, impoverished by centuries of intense exploitation, had become fragile in several respects. The 1964 law banning all new sharecropping contracts and providing for the phasing out of existing ones started a process which in a few years obliterated sharecropping.

A large proportion of the labor force thus made redundant was hired by small and medium-sized family-owned industries that were prevalently located in the hilly areas of the region. Being thus spared actual migration, the workers maintained close ties with their land and their rural origins. This situation is reflected in economic data such as the high incidence of part-time contracts and also the quality of labor relations, which generally eschewed social conflict (FUÀ, 1999). Added to the earnings from their work on the land, the salaries allowed the former sharecropping families to achieve a quality of life that they deemed adequate. This, in turn, allowed them to continue their work on the land and to live in the country, where accommodation was abundant. Indeed, in the early post-war pe-

riod the rural farmhouses eventually inherited by the former sharecroppers were estimated at 100,000 (ANSELMINI, 1985).

The situation was quite different in the mountain areas, the farthest from the sea, which for many years underwent a process of depopulation and desertion of fields and rural settlements. The historical gap between poor, inland mountain areas and medium- and low-altitude hilly areas, which originally opened under the sharecropping system as the gap between mountain areas with typically small individual farms and community use of land and woods on one side, and wheat and multi-culture hilly areas on the other, widened in the course of a period that has aptly been called "fractureless industrialization" (FUÀ, 1983). This gap persists to this day as an unsolved, crucial issue.

Marche's distinctive model of development was not, however, without drawbacks; indeed, it produced considerable consequences on environment and landscape quality which are now plain to see, especially in the low- and mid-altitude hilly areas which were its core. In the "mixed" farming family, several of whose members typically hold jobs in the industrial or the service sector, farming now tends – in terms of importance – to come after such other activities (FUÀ and ZACCHIA, 1983). With farm management ceasing to be a priority, the decisions regarding production are delegated to the upstream and downstream enterprises. In practice, in the framework of the NEC model the persistence of the bond with the land has entailed a number of adverse consequences such as the acceleration of soil erosion processes, increased load of chemical pollutants, flattening of the landscape eco-mosaic, dwindling of biodiversity, and relinquishment of some of the traditional rural buildings.

The process of modernization of the agricultural sector now taking place in Marche, albeit more slowly than in other regions, compounds this evolution. Modernization was required in the first place in order to raise unitary yields (especially of cereals) and meet the growing demand fuelled by national and (especially) European farm policies aimed at raising production. A further reason was to counter the changes that were profoundly affecting the productive, social, economic and cultural order of the rural areas: the shrinking of arable land due to the expansion of urbanized areas, the desertion of marginal farmland (especially in mountain areas), and falling employment figures due to the diffusion of labor-saving technologies, of which mechanization is but the most striking.

Such deep economic and social transformations experienced by the rural areas, typical of the "phase of structural changes" (FABIANI, 1991) in agriculture, were thus in line with the evolution of rural society under the pressure of industrial development. They gradually pushed the region's farming sector towards an industrialization that was accompanied by the multiplication of capitalist enterprises which were characterized by high capital and low labor inputs, or were the inevitable consequence of, and the necessary support to, these changes.

At the time of this evolution, Marche was deeply marked by four centuries of sharecropping, which had revolved on the three pivots of farmhouse, land, and family, and had survived the Second World War. In 1951, sharecropping still accounted for 55 percent of farms and 70 percent of arable land, whereas capitalistic enterprises employing hired labor were a mere 4 percent and farmed less than 1 percent of the land. Thirty years later (ISTAT, 1982), the latter were not much more numerous, but they farmed 26 percent of the land. The long domination of sharecropping slowed the modernization of Marche's agricultural system, which in the first post-war decades remained weighted by a marked technical backwardness, especially in the agronomic sector. In the 1980s, the level of industrialization eventually approached the national average in

terms of saleable gross production, whereas labor productivity exceeded the Italian rates, owing both to declining employment figures and to the rising technological level of the technical inputs – indeed, Marche's farming machine assets are among the more substantial in Italy.

## Policy favoring industrial districts, agricultural development and urban networks

When, in the recent past, Italian industrial policy embraced the concept of "district" in Marshall's sense (SORI, 1999) as the basic articulation of the organization of production, Marche's agricultural system was already nearly ready for it. This regards the features described above as well as others, among which infrastructure – albeit this was among those awaiting completion (BALLONI, CUCCULELLI and IACOPINI, 2000). It is also interesting to note that the passage to the district economy was characterized by the rise, as in the whole of Italy, of new forms of enterprise, "the new protagonists," with the transformation of hierarchical relationships into exchanges within "collaborative networks" of structured groups of enterprises (BALLONI and IACOBUCCI, 2000).

The network concept appears suitable not only to describe the relationships among enterprises, but also the nature of the productive structure *latu sensu* (i.e. including the farming sector), of cultural relations, scientific development, and the organization of telematic services.

Indeed, the agricultural sector itself is taking a more integrated view of its role in the processes of development that involve the land. In fact, beginning in the 1990s the reference framework of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) changed radically as the problem of excess agricultural production escalated and issues came to the fore regarding the role of farming in the environment-land system, issues that can be subsumed under the concepts of "ecologically compatible agriculture" and "sustainable rural development."

Already in the 1980s, the CAP had had to grapple with problems caused by the traditional policy of agricultural incomes protection, which was effected almost exclusively through the support of produce market prices and had involved the introduction of increasingly restrictive production quotas. Farmers reacted by "passively adjusting," based on the signals from the markets and the European support measures, as well as in relation to the available technology.

In Marche, the farming model based on cereals and stock raising (alfalfa and wheat rotation, breeding of Marchigiana cattle, abundance of manure), which had gradually, if at times haltingly, become established since the second half of the 19th century, was disrupted when the CAP began to subsidize milk producers rather more than meat producers and to promote cereals and industrial crops; at the same time, technological development was driving agriculture towards a greater use of chemical fertilizers, greater labor productivity by raising the levels of mechanization, and the elimination of rotation feed crops in favor of industrial feeds based on cereals and oilseeds (soybean, sunflower). In practice, the CAP-shaped farming was standardized to the models of industrial development, it was ever more specialized, concentrated in space, and intensive, with labor increasingly replaced by capital inputs. The previous, varied agricultural landscape gave way to a dull land, poor in life forms and species.

The MacSharry reform of 1992 (EC Reg. 1765/92) began the CAP's restructuring by progressively reducing support for agricultural prices and offering financial compensation to farmers who agreed to change their productive strategy, signally by withdrawing considerable areas from cereal cultures ("set

aside"). A series of concomitant measures (EC 2078/92, EC 2080/92) are witness to the change in the philosophical and conceptual approach to the CAP. This change broke the social pact with farmers, which had characterized the European approach to farming since the 1950s and had pledged them to supply the whole range of agricultural products and at the same time look after the land.

Subsidized farming prices aimed at reducing the income gap between urban and rural populations as well as at preserving the well-established functions of the agricultural sector, which traditionally absorbed large amounts of labor (including excess labor from other sectors) and represented an important political-electoral reservoir (BUCKWELL and SOTTE, 1997). In the 1990s, however, the elements on which this pact rested disintegrated: aggressive farming methods and excess of high-energy inputs (e.g. fertilizers, pesticides, weed killers) had an adverse impact on land, air, and water. Yields increased wildly, resulting in excess production, employment figures plummeted, thus also squeezing the vote reservoir, and consumers woke up to the issues of the quality and healthy nature of agricultural products; finally, new forms of farming began to become established, some unrelated to the land (landless farms) and others prevalently directed at supplementing non-farming incomes (part-time farms).

All of this indicates that a new pact between farmers and society is sorely needed, a new system aimed at boosting the competitiveness of the agricultural and food-producing sectors without recourse to protectionist measures, and at improving the relationship between farming and land with a view to better protecting the environmental resources, enhancing their value, and re-qualifying products (BUCKWELL and SOTTE, 1997). Over the last few years, the CAP has acquired a closely integrated character and has begun to highlight the local, specific features of the various areas. It is also acknowledging and rewarding the role played by farmers in environmental and landscape protection and in the enhancement of their value within projects aimed at the balanced development of agricultural and non-agricultural activities in rural areas (sustainable rural development). Such new policy elements are currently being implemented in Marche (though not easily or rapidly) in the framework of the regional plan for rural development (PSR). Its provisions, though largely confined to the strictly agricultural sector, span several years (2000-2006) and may thus be expected to direct effectively the future evolution of the region's countryside.

The core of the current debate in agriculture has therefore shifted from product quantity to its quality, specifically to the need for enhancing the bond between specific areas and their typical products. Farmers are also being stimulated to acquire entrepreneurial skills loosely related to production (externalities, multi-functionalities), like the promotion of rural tourism. This form of tourism is characterized by an interest not merely in agriculture, but also in the landscape (cultural and natural), culture (traditional and diffuse museums, customs, traditions, civilization, art and literature, wine-making and gastronomy), as well as in their harnessing for leisure activities.

In this framework, an analysis and evaluation of the resources of rural areas (activities which, alas, have not consistently inspired planning at the various levels) should aim at enhancing the value of the individual resources as well as of their synergies (e.g. ecologically compatible agriculture and protection of the environmental equilibrium, productive activities and agricultural landscape, historical and architectural heritage, rural tourism). For instance, what would be the chance of success of rural tourism, hence of farm economy diversification, in an area lacking typical products and quality certification? The real challenge thus lies in the concurrent availability of a series of elements: quality food products, a valuable agricultural land-

scape, theme itineraries, cultural and recreational initiatives connected with the local traditions, and whatever else is apt to attract a large and varied public, especially to areas that have remained excluded from the process of agricultural industrialization, i.e. inland hilly and mountain areas.

Such new interest in the development of agriculture *latu sensu* (i.e. including its non-productive functions) could make some traditional activities (like mountain stockraising) more competitive and lead to the establishment of a system of networks (related to ecology, culture, naturalistic activities, the landscape) integrated with the local territory that can restore the link between more and less economically developed areas.

This type of network, clearly an aspect of the concept of material and virtual networks, is consistent in various features of the Mediterranean megalopolis, such as past and present infrastructure, services, and urban extension, whereas in the case of Marche's marginal areas the material networks appear less solid.

More recent geographical studies (DEMATTEIS, 1999) have shown that, if one excludes the scanty, large-meshed urban structure resulting from the historical arrangement of rural settlements, Marche is in fact closely connected to the more substantial network system of central-northern Italy. Thus, despite the considerable differences between the northern, central and southern areas of Marche (which indeed originally consisted of four distinct administrative regions), the overall character of this region appears once again elusive, strongly biased towards innovation (especially of a technological and entrepreneurial nature) under some respects, and under others still solidly bound to a development model that is largely local.

## Decentralization and globalization: New prospects for the urban system of Marche

If these characteristics (which stem from its belonging to a local model) have allowed Marche to evolve in a distinctive way, also eschewing some of the adverse consequences of the post-industrial model of development, they are also irresistibly drawing it into the global growth process. The problems that entails from the strictly urban standpoint are those connected with overall sustainability. Although many of these problems are shared by the vast majority of urban areas, they also exhibit specific local features (HALL and PFEIFFER, 2000).

Exclusion from the megalopolis that failed to arise in Northern and Central Italy, or anyway from an evolutionary process characterized by specific conditions, has, as mentioned above, penalized Marche in the decades in which this process was at its peak. One instance of this is the unbalanced growth of the road infrastructure, which in turn produced a disequilibrium in land use and demographic concentration between coastal and inland areas that hampered economic growth, brought deterioration of the coastal environment, and led to the cultural isolation of mountain areas.

Nonetheless, elements have recently been emerging that allow one to make a different assessment and to consider the consequences of this exclusion even positive in some respects. Indeed, where urban development is concerned, a sum of factors has prevented the formation of large, congested urban areas. And even though Ancona has been legislatively qualified as a "metropolitan area," the minor towns included in such an area have maintained their autonomy, participating in the overall development but preserving their social cohesion and cultural identities.

This also applies to areas outside the metropolitan zone, for instance the area along the Pesaro-Urbino road, where the dif-

ferent municipalities, far from being passively sucked in, have contributed to creating the embryo of a functional, rather than structural, network. These processes of reorganization, albeit not giving rise to urban concentrations, have nonetheless prevented the depopulation of those areas and their evolution, always possible, into degraded peripheries.

It may thus be safely stated that this social and economic system, though not producing outstandingly successful areas, has been able to create an island of comparative stability capable, by virtue of its considerable ability to restructure, of nimble reactions to the changes in the world economy despite its close ties with it. The shoe-manufacturing industry concentrated in the provinces of Macerata and Ascoli Piceno, the manufacturing area around Fabriano and Jesi, and the concentration of furniture manufacturers around Pesaro are witness to this ability (SORI, 1999) (fig. 2). In these and other instances, the passage from one economic phase to the next has been ably negotiated by connecting the industrial economy to a network of services, thus enhancing product quality and their added value (LAMONICA, 1999).

Further positive consequences are related to land organization. Indeed, whereas the early phase of urban concentration along the coast, favored by the Adriatic infrastructural bundle, resulted in the depopulation of the mountain areas, things changed again after a period of stabilization, with repopulation of the areas immediately inland, the eventual recovery of many areas abandoned by farmers, and a renewed awareness of the need for preserving the agricultural landscape and enhancing its value. These areas are important for the local economy, signally for tourism, and will become even more so if the processes of ecologically compatible re-qualification of agriculture can in the future take place in a balanced, sustainable manner.

## Conclusion

Thus, once again Marche is an area of transition between the geographical North and South of Italy as well as between its different social paradigms, half-way between a "fast-paced" and a "slower" lifestyle, between a secluded agricultural past and a networked future. Its equilibrium can become more stable or weaker depending on the political choices which the local governance shall make to manage the local complexities and their connections with the global economy. However, to exploit these features to the best, this governance needs to become culturally more aware and to take part in the new processes without confining itself to recording them.

The first and foremost issue to be addressed is infrastructural development, which has also been penalized by Marche's comb-like morphology, and which should establish a connection to the main national and international traffic routes (REGIONE MARCHE, 2000). This should not only be accomplished at zero environmental cost, but should also be seen as an opportunity to establish an organizational model able to enhance the quality of the region and of its people's life.

The strengthening of the existing network requires a cultural growth capable of exploiting the interdependences between local situations and global requirements and the reinforcement of the economic structure by the creation of centers of excellence that can sustain the high-technology drive of productive activities. This should however also be mirrored in tangible improvements in urban quality through better architecture and management of the resources of urban areas. That which has so far been lacking in Marche's process of development is the most profound of the revolutions caused by urbanization (GOTTMANN, 1978), something that in Gottmann's opinion occurs in the fields of aesthetics and the art of living. Gottmann inherently connects this transformation with the development

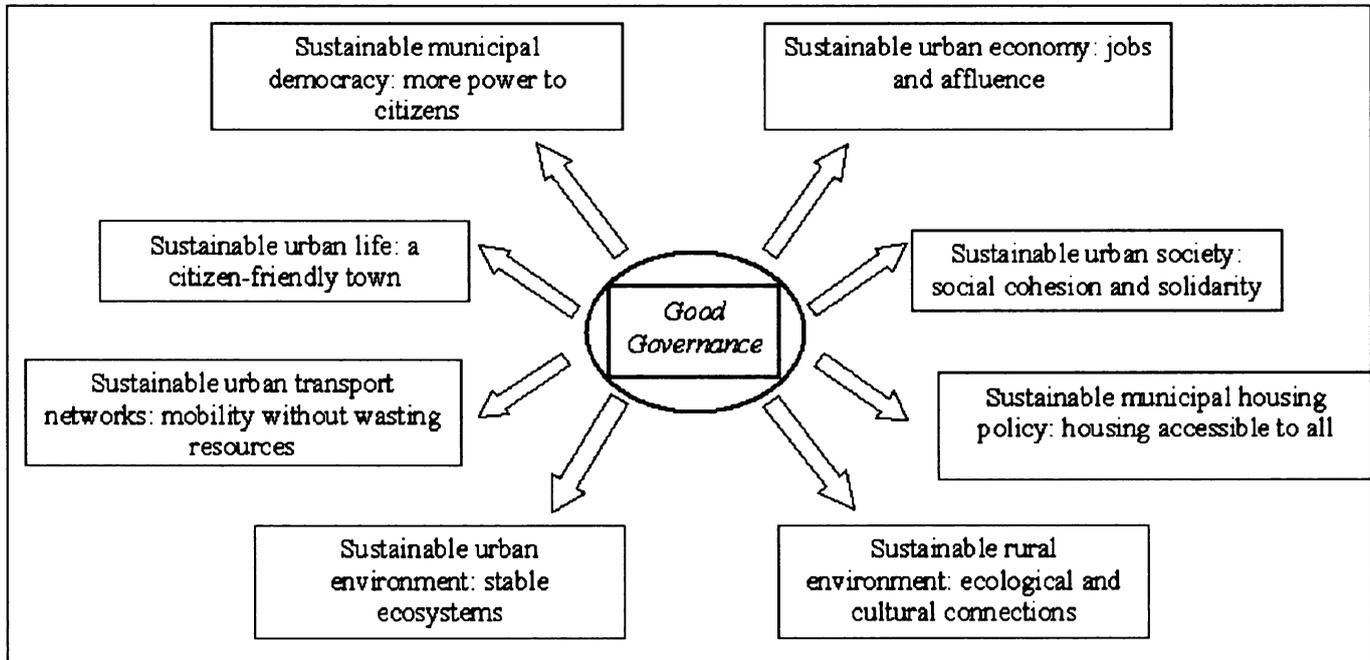


Fig. 3: Good Governance: a wide concept with sustainable development as its core objective (Source: Hall and Pfeiffer, 2000, modified).

of the "quaternary" sector as the central element in the new urban economy.

This growth should aim at establishing a suitably articulated governance resting on some essential principles: co-existence of subsidiarity and solidarity, introduction of new forms of partnership between local administrations and society, the identification of priorities, decentralization, improvements in ecological efficiency, and implementation of a truly ecologically compatible urban management (fig. 3).

It is thus essential that the parameters underpinning the choices of a governance thus articulated correctly value the transition areas, which are indispensable for the consolidation of the "central" areas within an overall process of growth which should envisage, and indeed seek, an ever closer connection between economic requirements, social needs, and the preservation and support of environmental quality.

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