

ORIGINAL CHARACTERISTICS OF SICILIAN GEOGRAPHY

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Abstract: *Original characteristics of Sicilian geography.* The study of *Original characteristics of Sicilian geography* represents an innovative approach in the overlook of the biggest island of the Mediterranean Sea. This paper tries to illustrate Sicily as a plurality of different entities, which are to be sought in reasons that are economic, social and historical. The paper is focused on men and territory throughout history and on the modernization recently experimented, which has witnessed an incessant development of activities, an extensive expansion of services and infrastructures. The final part of the paper is focused on the idea of a plurality of “Sicilies”, which is the only way to form an efficient idea of a reality that has profoundly altered its territorial framework to donate, far from stereotypes and memories, the identity of an island differentiated and inconsistent.

Rezumat: *Caracteristici originale ale Geografiei Siciliei.* Studiul de față reprezintă o abordare nouă asupra celei mai mari insule din Marea Mediterană. Lucrarea încearcă să ilustreze Sicilia sub raport geografic ca o pluralitate a unor entități diferite care trebuie privite sub raport economic, social și istoric. Lucrarea este centrată pe raportul dintre om și teritoriu prin filtrul istoric și cel al modernizării care a generat o dezvoltare puternică, mai ales prin filtrul dezvoltării infrastructurii teritoriale și a serviciilor. Secțiunea finală a lucrării centrată pe ideea de pluralitate a Siciliei, singura cale de a contura o idee obiectivă asupra transformărilor profunde sub raport teritorial, pune în evidență memoria și identitatea unei regiuni insulare cu multiple diferențieri spațiale.

Key words: *territory, identity, memory, Sicily, Mediterranean Sea.*

Cuvinte cheie: *teritoriu, identitate, memorie, Sicilia, Marea Mediterană.*



1. INTRODUCTION

Sicily, for its marginal position in reference to the European continent, in the past, but sometimes still today, has been perceived inappropriately for certain anthropological and natural features, as a land in the midst of myth and mystery. Even today we hear of the ambivalence of this land, the east and the west, the interior and the coast, as different entities. In the past, there were marked differences, but investigating ancient peoples such as the Siculians and Sicanians, whom among other things not much is known, is really excessive. That Sicily has been a melting pot of peoples is an indisputable fact, but the explanation of what is negative and positive in this land is to be sought in reasons that are economic, social, historical and related to the nature of the soil, altitude, and transportation routes. The seaboard areas of alluvial nature favored by a milder climate, to cite a Sicilian metaphor, are the "meat" of Sicily, while the central part represents the "bone". It has been undoubtedly an important part of the backwardness of the South. In today's world the Sicilian economy has been considered like those typical of peripheral economies, marginalized from north-central Europe, furthermore if you consider that of the center of the island, the contrast appears much more relevant. In such a situation, with rampant unemployment and no modern industry which could revive demographics, the towns lose their inhabitants resulting in a feminization and aging of the population first of all, and almost total decadence afterwards. Sicily is such a fascinating land that it is easy to be overcome by the beauty of its rich natural and historical heritage. In the island's long history there is evidence of the presence of different populations that were attracted to this enchanted land and have left indelible legacies which have enriched Sicily's culture.

2. MEN AND TERRITORY THROUGHOUT HISTORY

Prehistoric Sicily with its rock dwellings and advanced activities scarcely altered the territory. The traces of the primitive abodes of the island's inhabitants, while suggestive, did not significantly change the Sicilian landscape. Instead, during the primitive era that culminated with the Greek-Punic colonies, there are large settlements especially along the coast. These are sporadic sites that valorize favorable areas for landing, fertile savage coastlines, accessible bays, and navigability. These first urban settlements, which arose in large part on the coast, reversed a practice that had involved the first populations like the Siculians and Sicanians. They did not expand, however, because of certain events that blocked their development. If we exclude Roman Sicily, with its rich deposits of grains and beautiful villas, like the *Villa del Casale* found in the centre of Sicily, the following period plunges the island into underdevelopment and darkness, lit by occasional but innovative Arabic and Byzantine presences that left traces in the construction of art works such as those used for economic activities. The fall of the Swabians smashed the hopes of Sicily and simultaneously central and northern Italy municipalities began to develop and flourish, where citizens gained essential autonomy, free from the protection of feudal landowners, who remained outside the bourgeoisie sphere and far from the urban middle class. The populations in Sicily, frightened by the explosion of social tensions, the unhealthy and insalubrious coastal environments where the spread of malaria, quite common in the wetlands of the coast, and pirate attacks, caused them to move away and take refuge in the inland areas, which, until the nineteenth century, formed the backbone of Sicily. Sicily

entered a form of catalepsy that lasted centuries. Thanks to this the island was the last of the Western world to liquidate large land estates.

This form of economic organization had a valid *raison d'être* in the Middle Ages, but afterwards it should have yielded to other forms of economy and businesses that the new, intense and more evolved forms of human relationships required. This did not happen in Sicily. This blocked the economy, thwarted development, causing the land to depend on state protectionism to resolve its chronic problems. This state of affairs created in the minds of the Sicilians, especially aristocrats and bourgeois, a strong apathy towards searching for new solutions to problems and reluctance towards any form of economic activity that was not agriculture, which obviously stood motionless, crystallized by the big landlords, even if there was some opening with large leases, which soon led to an explosion of urban centers. These historical delays, exacerbated particularly in the interior of the island by the poverty of resources, scarce rainfall and poverty of the soil, created a secular state of backwardness that could not easily be overcome by individual initiative. In modern times the new production model and the emerging pattern of settlement eventually bond together. The prevalence of rural activities, tied to the exploitation of cereal regions, created strong local bonds and traced clear boundaries fueled by peasants that founded their roots in a dense network of villages, towns and farms.

This vital and dynamic Sicily with its economic and settlement system, albeit crystallized in space and time, is balanced by the extraordinary essentiality of an environment dotted with medieval castles, fortified towns, warning towers, tuna fishing boats, salt mines, and ports, which emphasize the lack of a nautical presence in the settlements. The description of Sicily by Camillo Camilliani, the most authoritative topographic document about the state of the Sicilian coast until the sixteenth century, provides extensive and detailed information on the changes and the state of the coasts in recent centuries. We must not forget that the analysis of Camilliani was finalized in the construction of a marvelous feat of engineering that was a defensive wall of about 200 towers for the defense of the island. In Doufur's "Atlas" that documents the coastal cities in manuscript maps (1500-1823),

Sicily's coasts appear somewhat desolate, dotted with fortified settlements and by constructions surrounded by towers, even if occasionally in the coastal selvedge the remains of what were the main productive activities and local economies can be seen. Then the explosion an authentic Sicilian renaissance with authentic artistic expression, full of festive theatricality, that leaves its vivid signs on the territory, like later with Baroque art that has its own place in the European landscape. This artistic promise rendered exceptional artistic achievements which are often overlooked despite its inexhaustible charm. In pre-modern Sicily the organization of the areas abide by an essential functionality: on one hand, the central area of the interior, with its strong economy and its "rural towns", as the German geographer Rolf Moneim defined them, and on the other the coast, a "peripheral area", that exported the minerals extracted from the bowels of the island and foodstuffs, home of the "marine" that irregularly dotted the coasts, and, finally, the great commercial and bureaucratic centres (Palermo, Messina, Catania), home of the emerging political *elites*. The years from 1861 to 1971 witness an about-face due to the transfer of economic activities, functions and population from the internal areas to the coast, on the occasion of a significant increase of the total population, excluding the period of stagnation during the decade 1926-1936 and a decrease of about 500,000 in the decade 1961-1971. Briefly, this century generates three major movements: the development of coastal areas with new farming

systems (vines, citrus, etc), the founding of commercial and industrial activities to the disadvantage of the interior and mountainous areas that were increasingly impoverished from a demographic, economic and urban position, and, to aggravate the situation, the crisis of the sulphur mines, which had been for a long time the cutting edge of Sicily's economy. Furthermore, the abandonment of the scattered country houses in favor of locations where the population tended to agglutinate, and the increment of foreign and sub-regional migration, the latter largely to large metropolitan areas subject to new socio-economic turmoil caused further transformation. All the above, however, tends to add on to the phenomenon of repopulating and re-appropriation of the coast.

The interior of Sicily had its source of wealth in sulfur, but its fortune, at the beginning almost unique in the world, lasted only for a short season compared to the period of rich grain exportation. This land, which for many centuries was marginal compared to the coast, with low population density, destined almost exclusively to pasture or to the cultivation of wheat, in a short time was "discovered" and "colonized" by other Sicilians, by people from Calabria, Puglia, and Naples. This visibility, for centuries denied, however, was closely linked to the cause that had determined it. The population boom in the areas of the sulphur mines echoed that which had occurred a few centuries before when, granting leased lands to settlers, more than a hundred and fifty villages were founded in Sicily.

It is rather obvious the link between the economic problems and migration, especially concerning inland Sicily, which was and continues to be quite conspicuous. After the failure of the sulphur mines, the only thing that remained was to return to the agricultural economy. Meanwhile, farming, apart from its age-old problems, was in the process of reducing its large workforce, made obligatory by the mechanization of agriculture, therefore it could not absorb the redundancies from the mining industry in decline. Emigration had been an option in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the recurrent abandoning of the island by the Sicilians continued to coincide with the cyclical crisis of agriculture and sulphur mining. The world of mining, despite the prevailing poverty not unlike that of the agricultural society, shaped Sicily's social body, which had always been agricultural, causing a form of social dualism, pitting two mentalities against one another and at the same time creating two antithetical cultures that equally stimulated each other.

These two different people, of two different cultures, implemented two types of migration: the farmers made their way to Argentina, with craftsmen and miners moving to the U.S.A. All, however, left their heart in Sicily, dreaming of returning with a nest egg to buy a house and land. Many returned fulfilling their own little dream, many departed once more, many more never returned. They married a woman from their country, created an American family with many children who spoke the family dialect. These people, now well integrated in the new world, feel the pride in being American and at the same time in their roots. This slow integration has cost blood and tears. Our people, who were marginalized because of their coarseness caused by not having had contact with the outside world and having always had an oppressive master's heavy hand on their head, conquered their place as a citizen like other emigrants. Those who remained, unfortunately, still today, see their numbers diminish because the road to the North is always well beaten. The land is ungrateful and does not offer much to her children who do not want to leave. Unfortunately, today our youth foresee a difficult future of hard sacrifice.

3. FROM SINGULAR TO PLURAL: THE NEW SICILY

In the period that separates us from the end of World War II, Sicily has experienced a rapid process of modernization. From a traditional, even archaic, social and economic background that lasted up to the late forties, pre-capitalist elements prevailed over capitalist ones where agriculture was dominant and the property belonged to large landowners, Sicily moved towards a competitive society, with agriculture (however weak) in an open market, with industrialization (albeit uncommon) that has historically played a decisive role in changing conditions and lifestyles, where cities have assumed crucial roles in the government (good or bad) of the territory. The shape of the island societies have also changed as a result, the countryside, since the agrarian reform, the "poor peasants" have given way to farmers; the city bred a large middle class that, enriched the forest of institutions responsible for the management and redistribution of public spending, afterwards, at least in part, dedicated themselves to private services, and new professions, acquiring a different social *status* and culture. In suburban areas, last of all, especially in recent years, there has been the growth of the labor class, and, a small part of the population, forms of self-employment in crafts, cooperation and particularly in tourism. Other transformation qualitatively more significant, though less obvious, occurred in the industrial sector. The variations in the percentage, both in terms of product and industry employment compared to Sicily's economy are weak because the development of modern industries compensated for the disappearance of independent activities, almost exclusively manual with low productivity and extremely underpaid, which was typical of the poor and fragmented market of Sicily in the early fifties.

From a quantitative point of view, therefore, the dynamics are far more complex than the numbers reveal, while from a qualitative point of view of craftsmen have been replaced in this pre-modern economy by the workers and employees in productive units and technically organized laboratories. After World War II a significant amount of unprecedented investments were centered in Sicily, especially in support of private initiative and construction of large infrastructure. This half century witnesses the process of "moving to the sea" that will lead to the birth of a series of new TOWNS along the coastal areas, replacing the older mountainous villages, now destined to a slow decay, but at the same time we are witnessing an incessant development of activities, an extensive expansion of services and infrastructures and, finally, to a throng of various functions.

It happened that in Sicily the most recent period, has undergone major upheavals. This was a change of a different nature, the result of heightened human pressure which is determined on the 'environment as a result of the economic and social growth. Several points of the island territory, with particular preference for coastal areas rather than internal ones, have become home to an industrial human choice, settlement, functional, tourism and commercial and often, they originated, there have been impacts and environmental emergencies notable. This resulted in a reshaping of traditional landscapes, which no longer reflect the character of yesteryear. In this framework were particularly significant: the insistence of the population in the coastal strip, which results in the development of an inextricable tangle of functional relationships and spatial pattern in a disorderly, dilation of the urban space, the coastal population characterized by the Metro and the decline demographic and socio-economic abandonment of mountain areas and inland, the growth of economic activities and infrastructure functional, the harm to the environment, increased

consumption of soil and the increase in urban and suburban traffic, the phenomena restructuring and "competition" between the urban and peri-urban areas, a new demand for environmental quality and greater concern for the preservation or restoration of green spaces; disordered responses of urban and regional planning related to the problems of transformation ' land use and growth of urban traffic, the reorganization and restructuring of economic and functional activities, an increased local players. However, greater accuracy of this assumption, it should be added that the massive transformation, born under new and more rapid process, have come to determine a wealth of landscapes, the result of contamination, the overlap of expansion and emergencies.

The modern genesis of new areal configurations that many distinct layers of the residual mix of large and dense historical events, is incorporated in the territory with incipient and pervasive landscape formations already defined or being defined. So much so, that they emerge in new forms in the re-emerging regional systems. This is the case of the disorder that supports the current guidelines of the settlement process, a consequence of the absence regional planning, or the report, released today, much more dense, and stays in flux, the result of the plot between the old and new which seems studded with vivid signs, territory, suspended between insularity and Mediterranean or, finally, the relationship between inland areas and coastal areas, the core of the history of the Sicilian territory, if only you look to its settlement and demographic events. Asymmetrical relationship, conflict, often in one direction, determined by the mobility in the long term, deeply rooted socio-urban food that has come to an imbalance between central areas and peripheral areas, creating a real reversal of settlement. So in coastal landscapes considered for a long time was followed by a repulsive their uncontrollable attraction is not just age contemporary has enhanced the positive traits and advantages. For the combined effect of all these factors facing the sea areas are changing their face and the impact on the sea. Some growth factors, spread in time and space, interacting with the local structures established, have given rise to new configurations in a network of discontinuities and imbalances.

The new development processes have disarticulated the old space, dominated by the regions natural and human activities, mainly covered by agricultural-handicraft, blasting the old homogeneity and permanence. From the breakdown and the reorganization of the traditional spatial warping has triggered a new regionalization, but it would be better to say, a plurality of autonomous regional and conflicting realities are difficult to interpret. We are breaking down the old warp territorial re-composition and kaleidoscopic landscapes of Sicily. A patchwork of territories or plural Sicilian countryside, as you prefer. But as often happens in Southern Italy, the contradictions are strong and obvious, the clash between the modern growth and the legacy of the past is always sharp and sometimes paradoxical situation generates. Sicily, however, did not know her well use this primacy of innovative experiences, because it is the region where you pretend to radically change everything to leave intact the substance of the state of things. Recently, rivers of ink have been written on the new island, but actually there is no doubt that this is about a region that is in great distress, economic and social, that undermine the possibility of building a future that can give a little 'trust. But this very negative reality when viewed with a lens shade sharper tells us that the process is reversed, you are putting in motion mechanisms for redemption, able to regain ground on the social and thus also economic.

Sicilians are facing a great task, difficult, dangerous and exciting at the same time in order to liberate this land from the terrible grip of organized crime (mafia) which had almost strangled it, regain full freedom of social, economic and political initiative. The

Sicilian landscape in its rich possibilities and fruition, carefully protected and enhanced, can become a great resource to win a new challenge: attune economic and social development with the preservation of the natural environment. Indeed, an intelligent use and respect for the historical and natural values of the landscape can contribute to a feeling of redemption that is so necessary in order to reclaim those enormous cultural and human resources, that once made this land so great.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The Sicilian universe is a world that transpires magic, history, culture, as well as dazzling natural beauty. Its territory, its people, its traditions and its activities, inland as well as on the coast, demonstrate completely original characters. A land where perfumes and colors change with the seasons, that bursts in a blinding radiance and at the same time closes in a inflexible intimacy. Sicily is double and multiple at the same time, pervasive and supple, but also rigid and austere, mysterious and impenetrable and at the same time expansive and loquacious. The variety of its manifestations suggest an approach that is thoughtful and prudent, but also tenacious and intelligent in order to overcome the difficult and complex situations to understand and surpass the inevitable rough start, the blunders and misunderstandings, first impressions. A modern fact-finding survey of Sicily finds a polycentric, multi-faceted, multi-dimensional Sicily or a plurality of "Sicilies." This point of view is now sustained by leading intellectuals and scholars, finding strong roots in literary readings (Consolo, Bufalino, etc) likewise in territorial studies (Sestini, Manzi, Guarrasi, Champion, etc). This vision surpasses the archaic idea, which lasted for too long a time, of a dualistic Sicily noticeably divided, the result of medieval and early modern critical traditions. Today, it seems that the idea of a plurality of "Sicilies" is the only way to form an efficient idea of a reality that profoundly altered its territorial framework to donate, far from stereotypes and memories, the identity of an island differentiated and inconsistent.

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