1. Introduction

‘In the region which, approximately eight centuries ago, came to be known as Abruzzo, mountains decreed man’s fate. […] And the Abruzzesi people have remained bound to this community with its relatively unusual destiny, characterized by an unerring loyalty to their economic and social structure, stretching beyond the bounds of practicality itself. This would remain inexplicable were we not to consider the very factor constant in their existence, which is also the most primitive and stable of elements – nature itself’ (Silone, 1948, p. 7). It is with these words that Silone opens his work ‘Abruzzo e Molise’ – The Abruzzo and Molise regions - (Touring Club Italiano, 1980). Words, which despite the high regard afforded the great Marsican writer, we may be quick to disregard due to his, no doubt unintentional, but nevertheless deterministic tone. However, by substituting the term ‘territory’ for ‘nature’ (probably the concept Silone was referring to - although, evidently the term ‘territory’ as used by geographers was yet to become part of everyday speech and was possibly still to become widespread even among specialists) the writer feels we can begin to grasp an essential theme in the social and economic history of the region, which eight centuries ago (readers should note – this is not a recent occurrence), came to be known as Abruzzo (or the Abruzzi). On the other hand, in one of his later passages, the very same Silone introduces a human aspect into his analysis of the social, economic and identity-based evolution – in short, cultural evolution – of Abruzzo and its people. Nature and history have stood side by side in forging the region’s identity, and none other than mankind, as we well know, forges history. In fact, Silone maintains, “I am not claiming that Abruzzesi character is unalterable – having been born from history, it can also be unraveled and modified by history” (ibidem p. 12) or indeed the inhabitants themselves: the determinism of the initial assertions, now erring towards concession.

2. Abruzzo’s dual-track development

It is important to underline that Abruzzo represented one of the most backward areas in post-war Italy, at the time of Silone’s writing. Already in the 1970s – and from then on with ever-increasing intensity - the region was becoming increasingly detached from the Southern Italian socio-economic context. In terms of development intensity and trends, it bore greater resemblance to Central-Northern Italy (particularly the Adriatic side): proof of this being Abruzzo’s removal from the list of underdeveloped European regions in need of EC funding (objective 1).

In actual fact, Abruzzo’s development runs along a dual track, thus reflecting the duality of the region itself: coastal and inland, Adriatic and Apennine, industrial and rural – all in the same instant. On the one track, there is its endogenous fabric (in some cases typically district-based economy) of small and medium-sized enterprises mainly distributed on the coastal territories and in the valleys of Teramano and, to a lesser extent, Pescara, and Chieti. Culturally they belong to ‘Third Italy’ and organically are included in the so-called ‘Adriatic corridor’, in contrast - less stridently than elsewhere however - to the ‘heavier’ external matrix of industrialization, concentrated in distinct development poles particularly in Chieti and the Aquila basin. On the other track, there is the increased tourist value of the environment and towns, which within the context of human pressure is both suppressed and characterized by a wealth of artistic and cultural heritage, such as the cultural-historical richness of the mountain hamlets. This has helped limit the marginality of inland areas, and in some cases halted or at least mitigated the vicious circle of stagnation-emigration. A prime example of this is Abruzzo National Park, which fell prey to this type of movement during the 1990s (Iozzolino-Zarrilli, 1995).

It would therefore seem interesting to examine whether, and to what extent, Abruzzo development (clearly indicated by demographic, economic and social indicators) has also a
cultural matrix, originating from a certain ‘territorialism’, which is lived and developed on two levels. On the one hand the increased value of agro-pastoral and craft-based heritage, but also proto-industrial heritage lies, due to a historical and cultural link between the people and the land. On the other hand lies the increasing value of the territory itself, that is to say environmental and human heritage, which whilst it should be protected, should be allowed to develop rather than simply preserved.

The combined effect of its geographical proximity to both the Northern region and the capital could shed light on Abruzzo’s success: while its infrastructure may not be wholly inclusive it ensures good accessibility and its social context remains unpolluted by the negative characteristics of urbanization. The economy operates under ‘territorial rule’ – hence the territory is not ignored, negated or even destroyed but instead perceived both as factor of identity and an economic resource. This could therefore help to explain the success of the Abruzzo ‘model’ and its disparity with regards to the more widespread reality of Southern Italy, where such a model would be an exception to the rule.

In order to understand the cultural dimension in Abruzzo’s development trajectory, without remaining completely vague given the intangibility of the topic of the research, it is vital to analyze – even if only very superficially – the schedule and manner of the trajectory – in terms of its economic, social, urban, infrastructural and environmental components, in an attempt to confirm and, if needs be, refute initial statements. More precisely, the analysis in question also represents an attempt – nonetheless brief – to bring the Abruzzo research up to date, by considering the above mentioned points and using as a starting point the geographical research of the Chieti-Pescara University, conducted from the 1980s to the mid 1990s.

3. Abruzzo development trajectory

Returning once again to Silone, it is interesting to examine the brief passage in which the writer summarizes – and almost stigmatizes – the socio-economic climate in Abruzzo in the late 1940s: “It is therefore the mountains that are the most overbearing characters in Abruzzesi life, and their unusual formation explains the region’s principal paradox: since Abruzzo is situated in Central Italy, in real terms it forms part of Southern Italy” (Ibidem, p. 8). Therefore geographically Abruzzo is bound to Southern Italy, more so than in terms of history (or statistically). There is little doubt that the Abruzzi mountains are overbearing: we need only to consider the imposing dolomitic profile of the Corno Gran Sasso d’Italia at over 2 900m or the immense and evocative mass that is the Majella range, skimming 2 800m. Such examples allow us to understand the defining role the mountains have played in this region, providing confirmation without the fear of sliding into determinism. However, whilst Silone attributed the backward socio-economic climate to Abruzzo’s mountainous terrain, today it can be confirmed that the mountains, just like the protection of the surrounding landscape and the exploitation of cultural heritage, which has materialized here over the centuries, are no longer merely a potential development factor.

Without wanting to pre-empt a topic which will shortly be discussed, it should be underlined that to many analysts in the early 1950s, Abruzzo represented one of Italy’s most backward regions; even though others would claim its ‘midway’ characteristics, which put it a step ahead of the rest of Southern Italy, were in some way already straying from the exclusive ‘fordist’ parameters adopted to measure development (Staniscia, 2003). But already in the 1970s, the region was displaying economic dynamism virtually unknown among the regions of Southern Italy. Its economic progress has been associated with a fundamentally well-balanced pattern of settlement and a level of human pressure on the territory, which we would now consider, taking everything into account, to be ‘sustainable’. With that in mind, let us examine Svimez’s study (1981) of average annual variation rates of GDP per capita in the provinces of Southern Italy between 1973 and 1978. The study clearly shows Abruzzo’s accelerated progress towards Central/Northern levels. So much so that Abruzzo provinces became part of a subgroup of areas, which had reduced the gap between their own GDP and that of Central-Northern Italy and which seemed set to continue decreasing. Within the bounds of Southern Italy, only Sardinia and Matera find themselves in such a privileged situation, whereas Southern Italy’s principal urban areas display the considerably increased gap associated with a declining trend. Mazzetti confirms: “The magnetic effect of the Central/Northern industrial and urban concentration has played an important role in
Industrialization of Abruzzo. Abruzzo is actually within the Northern confines of Southern Italy; and in particular, near to the strip of Central, Adriatic Italy that during the 1970s became known for its vivacious dynamism. This was in turn embraced by small and medium-sized manufacturing initiatives in both traditional sectors (clothes, furnishings, furs, food, ceramics, bricks) and more innovative sectors (electronics). Abruzzo has been affected by a process of the ‘spontaneous spread’ of this development, which was also supported by laws intended to promote the development of Southern Italy, to the point where it has acquired an ability to attract in-comers – a new element in the demographic and economic events of the South” (Mazzetti, 1984). On the other hand the period led to Abruzzo being labeled a ‘hinge region’ – an area of socio-economic transition between Central and Southern Italy (Landini, 1982).

In the next 15 years, Abruzzo’s development trajectory was such that by the mid 1990s it had caught up with the national average in terms of GDP per capita, even managing to overtake Pescara (Cresa, 1996). It strengthened, modernized and to an extent internationalized the endogenous fabric of small and medium-sized enterprises situated on the coast and in the valleys, which stood alongside the endogenous and polarized industrialization, discussed earlier. In Abruzzo however this industrialization was causing anything but the usual devastating environmental, immigration/emigration and social affects which endogenous industrial policies had caused in many areas in Southern Italy. The urban populations: immune to ‘out-sizing’ (Pescara only just exceeds 100 000 inhabitants), towns are upgraded with urban functions, particularly evident in Pescara. These are however distributed evenly across the entire regional territory, with a ring of less important cities (that is the other provincial capitals, but also Lanciano, Sulmona, Avezzano, Ortona, Vasto, Giulianova) acting as ‘counter magnets’ to industrial, port, tertiary, cultural and tourist activity. This phenomenon of demographic decline is (of small, inland and mountainous centers) common to all of Southern Italy including Abruzzo – although at more controlled pace than in the past. Meanwhile, the focus shifted to the increasing value of the environment and the historic Abruzzo National Park was joined by the Gran Sasso-Monti della Laga and Majella, followed by the National Park institutes of Costa Teatina and Tratturi not forgetting the Velino-Sirente regional park and numerous other national reserves across the Abruzzo territory. As a consequence, Abruzzo earned itself a further accolade – ‘Europe’s Green Region’ – in recognition of the 34% (at least) of protected territory: a percentage much higher than the national average, which is less than 10%. In short, in the mid 1990s Abruzzo was seen as a potential "laboratory to study the protection of the environment and the increase in value of human resources, both on a regional and global scale’ (Landini, 1999, p. 8).

In the early part of the 21st century the Abruzzo context does not seem to have immediately altered from the context already outlined. Demographically, economically and socio-culturally Abruzzo still resembles Marche or Umbria rather than Campania or Puglia. Even the lows, which were already unquestionably present, and which formed an inherent and unforgettable part of the model, don’t seem to have entirely disappeared. There is a lack of innovation in the fields of production, development and management of small and medium-sized enterprises, which appear to rely too heavily on traditional sectors. These in turn are reliant upon technology and therefore risk losing competitiveness on the international market. It is also said however that by and large from 2000, Abruzzo has recorded decisively positive progress in terms of export, making it one of Italy’s most dynamic exporters. This is thanks to both the high performance of the electrical and precision instrument sectors, for the main part located in Aquila, and the notable increase in Abruzzo’s investments in Central and Eastern European countries, giving way to a flow of ‘outward processing traffic’ – that is to say the exporting of semi-finished increased capital-intensive goods and the consequent re-importing of high labor-intensive finished products. Returning once again to the ‘lows’, it is worth mentioning the transport system, which still seems to err too heavily towards road transport and is showing obvious signs of over-saturation especially along the Adriatic Ridge. The railway in the meantime has been relegated to second place with the airport and seaport infrastructure remaining heavily under-utilized. Not to mention the unsuccessful launch of the National park scheme, which seems to have been unable to significantly alleviate the domination of seaside tourism trade and the seasonal fluctuation it brings. Winter tourism too would seem to be reliant on the skiing industry, which is also prey to fluctuation – both from
one season to the next and within a single season due to snowfall. In short, Abruzzo still seems to lack a sufficiently densely distributed network of specialized functions spread across the territory and adjusted to the social and economic reality which the region would be able to and would like to express. And this above all from the point of view of research and development, financial services, company and strategic consultancy, as well as marketing and engineering consultancy, to the point where it has led some analyst to talk about a ‘functional deficit’ (Lefebvre, 1999).

4. The development factors

Abruzzo development model therefore consists of both highs and lows. However there seem to have been sufficient highs to enable Abruzzo to be crowned a regional development ‘success story’ in the more general evolutionary, and ‘involutionary’, sphere of Southern Italy. On the other hand, in the Italian Geographical Society’s 2003 Annual Report, Abruzzo displayed a ‘reasonable’ degree of territorial competitiveness – evaluated on the basis of variables ‘considered representative of organizational models, corporate culture and entrepreneurial factors, economic culture and local administration’s efficiency’ (Italian Geographical Society, 1999, p.110-111). It rates higher than Marche, even if it is not as ‘good’ as Tuscany or even ‘strong’ like the majority of Northern Italy. Southern Italy’s other regions however display ‘weak’ (such as Molise, Puglia and Isole Maggiori – Sicily and Sardinia) or non-existent (as is the case with Campania, Basilicata and Calabria) levels of territorial competitiveness.

The factors fundamental to Abruzzo’s distance from the context of Southern Italy are numerous and have been amply analyzed and attentively evaluated in geographical, economic and sociological literature. In short, we can reaffirm that the strong Central-Northern zones’ relative proximity to those of the so-called ‘Third Italy’ – thanks to the motorway which ensures effective links along the Adriatic Ridge with the capital and a balanced urban network (which in the unfinished ‘1980 Project’ actually became the ‘alternative metro’, potentially redressing the balance in Rome) triggered a virtuous circle in which the potential for territorialism to a large extent became reality: that is the emergence of a fabric of small and medium-sized enterprises which retain strong bonds with the district, Val Vibrata in the Teramo province probably represents the most notable and successful example, owing its raison d’être to the pre-existence of craft and cultivation (cultivation of hemp led to widespread textile craft). Just like today’s prevalent pattern of the increasing value – in many forms – of rural traditions; agro-pastoral, gastronomic and vineyards, but also those related to arts and crafts, which are following the same route as the previously mentioned dual environmental protection policy. Whilst its contribution in redressing the balance in terms of the flow of tourists and more generally the alleviation of demographic and economic marginalization of inland areas remains limited, it appears to produce positive results in the mid-long term. And here the government’s passage seems simple: fundamental even. In Abruzzo, much less than in the sad reality of Southern Italy, the government has appeared decisively more conscious (and therefore respectful) of the territory’s characteristics and potential. Straying now into sociology, authorities exist which also number safe social fabric among development factors, that is to say solid family relations, deep-rooted trust between business people and between the latter and the more general socio-economic context (Staniscia, 2003). I would like to add another determining factor: the absence of organized crime, or at least a presence not so dramatically tangible, invasive and inescapable.

5. Conclusions

At the close of these ‘geo-cultural’ reflections concerning Abruzzo’s development model, I would like to respond to the opening question: is it possible to number, among the driving forces behind such a model and in marked juxtaposition to the Southern Italian context, the presence of strong identity and culture-related dimensions, that is to say culture and awareness of the territory and its potential and value? In light of the considerations made I would be tempted to simply respond yes, but would prefer more cautiously to consider these reflections as a starting point or more so a pretext to further study. To close, let us once again recall Ignazio Silone and reaffirm that for centuries now, Abruzzo has no longer been a land of saints, cenobites and bandits whose fate is decreed by the mountains. Undoubtedly the words
of Alberto Savinio in his travel journal ‘Dico a te, Clio’ (Speaking to Clio) recounting his 1939 journey between Abruzzi and Etruria are evocative and maybe contain some grains of truth: ‘In Abruzzo roots are more alive than elsewhere, wiser than the stony gaze of the ‘Mothers’ that Faust descended into the center of the earth to question’ (Savinio, 1992, p. 22).

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* The custodians of the fixed and eternal essences that all specific existences originate from.