

TOWARDS A SOCIAL DIMENSION OF THE COMMERCIAL GEOGRAPHY

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1. Introduction

Commercial geography and geography for economics - At the beginning of the 20th century the commercial geography "both comprehended and coincided with the entire dominium of what, nowadays, we call economic geography" (Nice, 1964, p. 387), later on it restricted and specialized its field of research in order to become first a branch of the economic geography linked to the geography of the peoples' circulation and, secondly, to come closer and closer to the urban geography.

In 1959 Toschi wrote «the sort of the commercial geography is curious as, in a certain sense, the matrix of the economic geography has been. In the mid of the twentieth century and even more in the second half of it, practical needs determined both the printing of a certain number of handbooks and the starting of the commercial geography as a specialized teaching in Higher Schools for Commerce» (1959, p. 214).

As a matter of fact we can fully understand the research fields of the commercial geography by reading the scientific publications of that period. One of the most important studies is the one synthesized by Tinacci Mossello in his «study of the regional and national productive specializations and of the following exchange of the surplus» (1990, p. 275). The commercial geography was well introduced in the liberal and colonial political contest of the period as it used to give the interested governments all the information they needed, both during the conquest phase and during the commercial development (Ibidem, 1990). An important confirmation of what we stated is given by Lanzoni, who, in the introduction of the handbook «Geografia commerciale economica universale»¹, stated that the aim of the book «was both to describe the countries and to study their peoples according to all the economic aspects, such as updated production, industries, communications, trades, migration and colonialism» (1898, p. 1).

The wide range of the commercial, economic and political geography came out also in the studies of Bonaschi «the necessity to excite the Commercial Geography's spirit of exploring, a geography that is about immigration toward any country, the free colonization or state property of our territories or of those territories under our influence, a geography that establishes the advantages that our commerce can gain if it will know places and peoples where it could or would be dealt; and last but not least, a geography that regards the spreading of exact concepts about all the above-mentioned arguments that are very important for the profit of our economy and morality» (Bonaschi, 1895, p. 288).

At the beginning of the 20s researches on inland commerce started thanks both to the studies of Roletto about «Le condizioni geografiche della fiera di Pinerolo» and to the researches of Mori (1932-1933) about the problem of food staff delivery to the cities of Rome and Zara.

2. The new commercial geography

Starting from the post second world war period the attention of the geographers to the matters related to commerce is evident by a series of printings by which the commercial geography finds its own identity.

"Thus, little by little in Italy the commercial geography was absorbed by the economic geography either as it was a part of that, or, moreover, by loosing its own identity and being quite bordered along the shadow borders of the geographers-economists' and of the economists-geographers' interests. Their interest consisted only of individuating the geographic moments of the economic facts, which before had been considered as facts of

¹ Lanzoni followed the content of the Italian printings of the 19th century, represented by *Commercial Geography* written by C. Marmocchi (Nice, 1964).

consumption, of production, of circulation in a general sense and as determinant genre of life". (Toschi, 1959, p. 214) Furthermore «commerce is a purely geographic phenomenon; it starts when different products coming from different places are convenient to be exchanged, and when the trade of the products from the places of production to the one of consumption is revealed. Such a trade is dealt by means of transport and conveyance (Ibidem, 1964, p. 363).

Toschi suggests how to apply the research to the commercial geography, "long thoughts are not necessary to be convinced that within a systematic scheme, proper of the commercial geography, both the geography for production and the geography for communication can be excluded. Those latter, anyway, can be propaedeutic but not exclusive to the commercial geography. On the contrary, that scheme will be sufficient, when it studies both the home commerce and the foreign one. Without any doubts there are interdependence and common characteristics between the two sectors, therefore the best systematic order consists of dividing the subject into three parts: a general part, a special part for home commerce and another special part for the international commerce. Moreover the latter will be divided again into: the analytic geography that studies the foreign trade of each single country and the synthetic geography that generally defines the international trade" (1959, pp. 215-216). In the years after the re-definitions/division made by Toschi they denounced the lack of attention towards the commercial matters. At the 21st Geographic Congress De Rocchi Storai stated «if there is some information about the market conditions in each study of general geography, there are very few statements about the international trade, the exchange of single product, the classifications of the countries according to their foreign trade, the market area, the distribution of the shopping center, peddling, periodical peddling and traditional fairs" (1971a, p. 193)

Ciaccio's point of view was not different, and as regards the international commerce, after the study of the period from the 60s to the 80s, a very interesting period for the economic status of each single country, she noticed a limited interest in the international commerce. "In general, we can say that the geographers do not consider their possibility to study the international trade alone, on the contrary they are convinced that it is very useful to evaluate the development of an area" (1980, p. 269). Researches about a specific production and the consequent corresponding trade phase go on also in the second post world war period. As regards that, we can say that printings are very important, numerous and wide as they range from agricultural produce to manufactures. Energy sources, in the moment of trade, «are studied in a very detailed way, above all by the Roman scholars of economic geography in the 60s, when the development of the Italian productive sectors needed the hard search of wide areas for supplying, while in the 70s there were too many studies about the ports considered as essential support elements for a developing economy» (Ciaccio, 1980, p. 270).

As Muscarà said, in the mid-60s, there was a lack of scientific printings: "about the small but complex network of collection and distribution that held both the home and the foreign trade in our country, about the interregional exchange and their way core" (1964, p.233) Some studies on the argument have been done both by Riva who methodologically reconstructed the agricultural market and by Muscarà who analyzed Verona vegetable market in its geographically relevant aspects such as the location and the economic functions. On the contrary Landini went on to determine the position on one of the key sectors such as the virtual function that is fundamental "to rationalize an urban organism" like the city of Rome. Dallari examines the consortium function on the farm production.

It is necessary, at this point, to analyze the terminological and methodological specifications that Landini wrote in order to fill the gap created by the literary production of the *general commercial* geography. "The wholesale market is the place where demand and supply can compare themselves, with a perspective conditioned by balancing function: from the location that does or does not favor the meeting; from the infrastructures that determine their level of accessibility and their area of influence; from the equipment that qualifies the power and the specialization; from the density and buying possibility of the people whose socio-professional status and distribution on the urban and extra-urban territory must be studied; last from the influx of information to the way the operators intervene" (1977, p 25). To underline the relationship between general geography and urban geography, Landini points out that the spatial analysis of the framework of the settlement must be built on the tertiary

activities, but the geographer must go beyond that, he must examine both the causes of inefficiency and the perspective in order to re-organize the sector (1977).

The research studies branch focusing at “the entity and the form of food supplying in the urban center” (Gambi, 1959, p. 670) has been scarcely followed. We can mention, among others, the studies of Gambi and Faggella in the 50s, they spoke about the supplying of milk in the cities of Rome and Naples. The steady and dynamic aspects of the home trade and, in particular, some organized forms of the periodical commerce such as fairs and periodical market. The latter in particular have been considered “*synthetic* economic phenomena of great interest that points out deep link with the physical and human environment” (Vallusi, 1971, p. 113). Those researches have tried to elicit “the relationship between typical connotations of the period market (season, attendance, lasting and dimension of each single event, and in a particular way, the geographical factors (dynamic demography, climate and orography” (Bergamo, 1989, p 23). As a whole the contribution on the periodical market and on the fairs differ greatly as regards style, content and method of investigation; the areas analyzed go from a single city to an entire region and the phenomenon is considered from a more or less wide historical point of view (Bergamo, 1989). Nice’s (1955) and Ferro’s (1963) contribution are considered pioneering. The former studied Tuscany and the latter studied the province of Cuneo.

The problem of the terminological indeterminateness of the words fair and market, has been discussed both by Nice (1955) and by Ferro (1963). According to the former only the agricultural produce are transacted in the market, the latter suggested to follow the local terminology because of the complexity of the problem. From Vallusi’s point of view the difference between the two words depends on the different extension of the two market areas: “only the periodical markets are interested in it, as they have a mere local role and only small geographic units, characterized by the same relationship that interact between urban centers and countryside; on the contrary, the fairs, with their long periodicity and their characteristic to be exceptional events, usually collects trade of wide areas, the influence of which overlaps the areas of numerous markets, and in case the of institutions specialized in commodities, they overlap the areas of other general fairs or of different specialization. In other words between fairs and markets there is a hierarchy similar to the one between regional and local centers, as they have elements in common” (1971, pp. 113-114).

In 1989 Mattana pointed out that «terminology matter [...] has always influenced researches about peddling because of frequent and past mixture in the use of the words "fair" and "market". Without any doubt the lack of any information about the subject in our juridical system has determined the use of the same generic definitions for institutions with very different aims» (1989, p. 7). By considering both the historical evolution of the phenomenon and the legislative framework Mattana divides the fair events into two groups: the traditional fairs and the exhibitions. “The former ones are of both ancient origin and recent institutions but were already active in the first half of the 20th century and are easily distinguished according to their functions as they deal with either agriculture and zootechnic trade, or with more general trade. Exhibitions are quite always recent institutions and their list, in the official sources, gets longer and longer year after year. Some of them, as regards their functions, are similar to the traditional agricultural and zootechnic fairs; some others have various characteristics” (1989, pp. 8-9).

Traditional fairs have been studied by many geographers; on the contrary pattern fairs are less studied. Vallusi, at the 20th Geographic Congress presented the first article on the subject, exactly about the influence of Trieste Fair, in 1971. Later on (1971) De Rocchi Storai went on examining both the historical evolution and the factors that determine the Italian local exhibition in order to give them an organic classification. Sala analyzed again the same classifications in 1996. Peddling trade is scarcely studied. We mention only Migliorini’s (1954) and Barbieri’s (some years later) researches about the work of immigrants from the Italian mountains.

3. What is the future of the Commercial Geography?

Researches about the home trade point out, in a very clear way, how the commercial geography’s tendency is towards the urban geography. By analyzing the scientific printings in a chronological order, we can see that the first researches about the home trade date back to

the end of 50s by Mori. He studied the different figures related to the trade operators in the Italian cities. Merlini considered the structure of trade in Emilia Romagna. As regards the topographical maps, Scotti and Scarin researched the distribution of the shops in the urban contexts. The spread in Italy of both Christaller's theory and of the international geography about trade location within the city is due to the detailed researches of Bonetti who, in 1967, gave a methodological survey of the German and British literature. Whereas, later on (1971), at the 20th Geographical Congress, he introduced the location of the retail trade by stating that "according to Christaller's theory, it is possible to establish a hierarchic order of retail trade. That hierarchy is established according to the strength of the centripetal tendency of each single retail trade. A list of the retail shops can be established by taking into consideration the strength of the centripetal tendency. It corresponds to the wideness of the area influenced by each single retail shop". (1971, p 36)

We can say that in the second half of the 60s «also in Italy the geographic research on the home retail trade, initially born as a specification of the economic geography, had a fundamental impulse [...] thanks to the interaction with the other studies about the urban geography, and in particular thanks to that branch of the urban geography that did not follow the predominant morphological approach impressed by Toschi» (Loda, 2002, p. 418). The same link between the commercial geography and the urban geography is underlined by the definition of the city as *a place of connection between the geography of production and that of consumption* (Berry, Landini, 1981). This behavior towards the commercial geography can be seen also in Bonetti's studies «*one of the most interesting aspects of both of the urban and economic geography is the location of the retail shops. In a certain sense it refers to the functional division of the city which is a field proper of the urban geography*» (1971, p. 27).

Further theories, such as that of Tagliacarne and of Riva, confirm that the market areas represent the connection of the commercial geography with the urban geography. The latter intends to demonstrate that «through the mutual interference between man and environment there are functional relations which cause geographic organisms individualized in their character and alive in their experience» (1958, p. 182). Riva himself goes on by defining the market area as «functional regions whose structural characteristics are pointed out and expressed by the phenomenon of the commercial attraction between the urban center and the corresponding area around it» (1958, p. 15). About the same market area Toschi argued by stating "this is a field where the interests of the geographers and of the cultivators of the new science named "analysis of the market" meet and should cooperate" – he went on by defining the market area as a "special region", he said that it consists of a *region where the connection of the interests and the commercial activities about a specific place take place*» (1959, pp. 360-361).

At the beginning of the 70s *L'Atlante Economico-Commerciale delle Regioni d'Italia* edited by SOMEA was published. Soon it showed its relevant geographic meaning as it gave the possibility to analyze the framework of the urban setting with particular reference to the commercial areas and to the index of the consumer's need. At this point it is obvious to wonder if the home trade geography, as Toschi indicates, has lost its own identity, in order to become a branch of the urban geography. Anyway, the attention of the geographers is shown also through the research both into the territorial differences of the commercial phenomenon and into the interdependence among the same trade activities and the other phenomena proper to the economic reality (Della Capanna, 1975).

The analysis, of the home commerce, from a methodological point of view remains fundamental, in order to evaluate the grade of efficacy of the distributive function, by the way, Landini pointed out that the necessity to "evaluate the entity of the work-force used and, moreover, its profitability, both linked to the firm dimensions, to the division of the sectors responsible for commodities, to the business turnover and to the possible economies, scale economies and external one, that the firms are able to carry out" (1979, p. 3).

Eventually the attention of the geographers has not been stranger to the commercial planning, as a matter of fact, in some cases, they have been directly involved in the theoretical stage. The first commercial plan of Turin, for example, has been planned by Adamo and Dematteis (1976), that of Montefalcone by Pagnini (1976). The latter has also taken part to the planning of many commercial projects of Friuli-Venezia Giulia and of Veneto. Also Viterbo has worked on the commercial plans of Mesagne and Castellana. Recently issue of Bersani

Bill (31st March 1998) seems to stimulate the interests of many researchers about the problem of the commercial policy (Bullado, 2002). In the last twenty years researches about the commercial sector tend to fall in favor of the studies on the advanced tertiary and on the quaternary. "As a matter of fact, Della Capanna, in his studies about a period that goes from 1960 to 1980, listed 178 headlines of Italian geographic researches about commerce (Della Capanna, 1980), the number of the researches about the following twenty years falls drastically" (Loda, 2002, p. 419).

- 1) the scarce familiarity of the Italian geography with an empiric geography,
- 2) the difficulty to collect statistic figures,
- 3) particular epistemological reasons,
- 4) the difficulty to distinguish between the traditional interpretative categories of the geography and the new concept of space determined by the great distribution, or made more visible by the latter, through what Hopkins (1990) calls "the simulated landscape"; are all the reasons of the lack of interest of the Italian geography in the economic sector in our period, just when a rapid and deep process of transformation starts (Buzzetti, 2000), moreover, it modifies not only the place of commerce and the consequent urban setting but also the behavior of the consumer (Loda, 2002, pp. 420-421).

4. What is the future for the Commercial Geography?

Of course, Landini's thesis is always worthwhile when in the first 81s stated that "contribution of the geographic research to the problem of the commercial tertiary in general and in Italy in particular, must regard two fundamental aspects, the structural and the gravitational one. The first is applied through the analysis of the inner composition of the sector and of the major or minor standard and efficacy by which it covers and serves the territory. [...]" (1981, p. 11). The second aspect has «an equal important role for the commercial geography [...] in order to individuate the regional setting and the distribution of demand "weight" among the different centers, according to the importance of their tertiary equipment and according to the amount of the commercial services. The latter should correctly come from the approachability to the centers themselves, to the density and mobility of the population distributed on the nearby territory and finally to the eventual changes that the planning should make on the city network in order to create a hierarchical urban framework» (Ibidem, 1981, p. 12).

Therefore we have to evaluate when they will come to a reassemblage of the commercial function with the game one (Corna Pellegrini, 1992; Bullado, 2003), which will both lead to a «new, unitary *geography of the spare time and of the retail trade* and, perhaps, to a small positive development of a civil way of life» (Corna Pellegrini, 1992, p. 209)

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