

Cultural districts and economic development: an Italian experience for the countries of the Mediterranean

If we consider culture not just as artistic manifestation but as global image of the social and spiritual life of a people, we enter onto a concept that Unesco is also beginning to develop, what we in Italy call material culture and what in Anglo-Saxon countries they call intangible, that is a culture made of know-how. Culture interpreted as a system of local know-how, is something that approaches an Italian experience that can be of significant help to the economic development of countries in transition. It is the experience of industrial districts.

So then culture is the production of Murano glass, culture is the production of Caltagirone or Faenza pottery, culture it is the production of fabrics, because, at bottom, in fabrics or in fashion, the industrial dimension is very obvious in decades of accumulation of know-how, of creativity. If we dwell on these aspects, goods based on culture that have strong links with their locality, that make use of local technologies and know-how, we have a fairly wide panorama of what, paraphrasing the definition of industrial district, may be called cultural district.

If you let your mind range over the countries of the Mediterranean, it is easy to pick out many. For example, is a carpet the product of a culture? In my understanding it absolutely is; it is culture that is the expression of a people, of a centuries-long history. What is interesting is that the production of these goods often assumes the form of cluster, that is of district concentrations, as if to valorise to the utmost this know-how, these traditions, exploit fully the economies of neighbourhood. So if go to see where objects in glass, pottery or carpets are produced, we discover that they are not produced in isolated places, but often in district contexts.

But the problem is that still today very many of those productive centres don't manage to reach the threshold of success of the international market. So then what has helped the economic development of new cultural districts? I believe that one of the main elements has been the introduction of a special right of collective ownership: the right to appellation. In substance the problem of many of these products is building a reputation, first of all local, then international, around a collective brand name, that becomes the image, the icon of the product itself, that also becomes the spur to improvement in the quality of the product since the protection of a right means fighting the counterfeit.

These experiences need to be rethought and related to the scale of the administrations, of local and national experiences, however I believe that the Italian experience of districts is an experience that teaches the whole world that economic development in many cases does not demand colossal investment, the enormous cathedrals in the desert as they were once called in Italy, but requires industriousness, recuperation, making the most of very many small or very small business that know how to valorise and reconstitute a culture.

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