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Persone, Educazione e Welfare
nella società 5.0

Community Notebook
People, Education, and Welfare in society 5.0

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THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES
OF EVALUATION: FROM THEORY
TO PRACTICE

edited by
Laura Evangelista, Concetta Fonzo



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2. THE APULIAN SPRING, TWENTY YEARS LATER

di Gabriele Di Palma*

Abstract: The Apulian Spring has meant for a region of the South of Italy the attempt to reach an autonomous path to development. Twenty years later, is it possible to evaluate the main regional policies and the distributional effects on the population? The study aims to contribute to the debate on populism. According to the planning documents, Apulian Spring tried to transform economic and political regional institutions, making them more inclusive. Discussing the transformation of one of the least developed European regions in an attractive place can help understand the effects of progressive policies, in the age of right-wing populism.

Keywords: Apulian spring, realistic evaluation, populism, progressive policies, distributional effects.

Introduction

In 2006, the magazine L'Espresso titled its front page: "Io, schiavo in Puglia". The author of the article was Fabrizio Gatti, a journalist who pretended to be a South African migrant worker looking for a job in the fields of Foggia, Southern Italy, in Apulia. He reported work conditions as harsh as slavery for immigrant farmers harvesting tomatoes and living in a shack. In the

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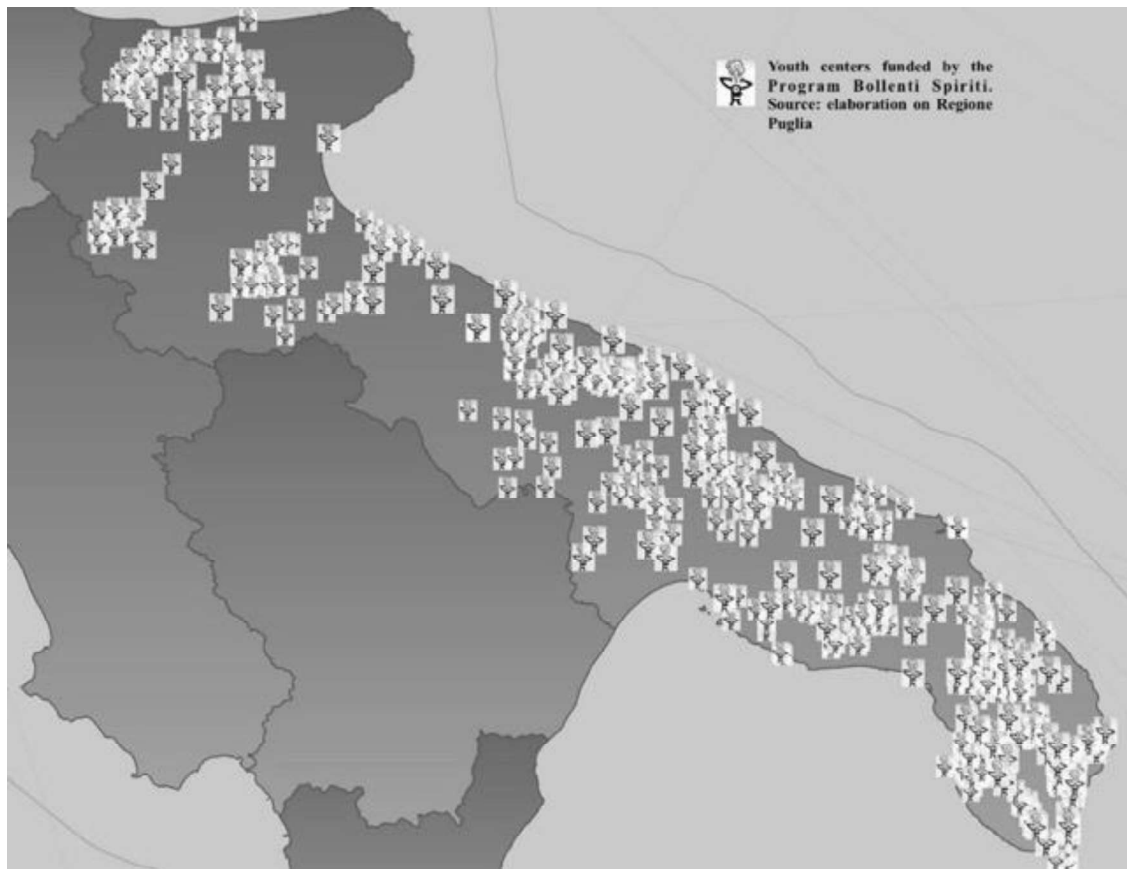
meanwhile, Apulia was changing fast and it was becoming one of the best-known tourist destinations in the world.

The “Apulian Spring” is the surge of progressive local governments in power since 2004. For more than 30 years, it was the Christian Democratic Party who used to hold the power, followed by Forza Italia. The Region was considered a feud of conservative parties. The “Gentle Revolution” – as the winning coalition used to call it – took place in a region among the least developed in Europe. Nevertheless, Apulia was perceived at mid-way between the productive North and the sunny desolate South.

Apulia proved to be one of the most important experiments in progressive public policies in Europe. It all started with the victory of a judge, Michele Emiliano, at the local municipal elections in Bari in 2004. He became popular by prosecuting organized crime. The next year, the wave continued with the election of a politician, a poet, a communist and a homosexual, Nichi Vendola. He defeated the actual Vice-President of the European Commission, Raffaele Fitto running for the Regional Presidency. After two mandates, Emiliano succeeded to Vendola as the President of the Region.

Vendola was seen as the leader of the New Italian Left, able to plan a sudden change in local policies. His government got popular for youth policies.

Figure 1: Youth centers founded by the Region



Source: Own elaboration on Regione Puglia data¹

Far right nationalist policies are perceived as being citizen-oriented. A debate on Apulian Spring, twenty years later, can be instructive for those skeptical about the new turn in world politics.

A realistic approach

The Apulian Spring has been a political upheaval pushed by civil society and by segments of middle class that were trying to

¹ Source: <https://dati.puglia.it/ckan/dataset/laboratori-urbani-spazi-pubblici-per-i-giovani>.

become actors of change. It was inspired, among others, by the Southern thought of the sociologist Franco Cassano, who was also one of the main promoters of Emiliano during his first electoral campaign in Bari.

Like the New Planning of the Centre-Left Government led by Prodi at the end of '90s, Vendola set up a comprehensive program based upon civic participation. The New Planning intended to use the “best forces of the South”; Vendola was looking for “a better Apulia”, the motto of his first campaign.

What were the mechanisms of change imagined, and what were the expected outcomes in that specific context (Pawson & Tilley, 1997)? Was the Apulian Spring able to improve the area and the lives of its disadvantaged inhabitants? The latter is an urgent question in the actual context, where the right-wing policies have gained consensus and pretend to represent the interest of the people.

It is possible to find, in the programmatic speech held by Vendola in 2005 at the beginning of his assignment², all the features of the future politics. The “Gentle Revolution” needed a “social mobilization” to become true. All the discourse rotated around civic participation: the regional administration had to become the vehicle of his revolution. For a region with scarce institutional capacity, increasing its level of efficacy was the first challenge. They needed a more rational planning, based on transparency and participation. According to Vendola, the resources of the regional agenda were people, culture and environment, strictly intertwined. Economic development had to be the result of the interaction of the three: emigration of young people had to be reduced thanks to regional programs; tradition and the environment were at the base of the touristic attraction and of sustainable food production; culture and

² Available at the following URL: https://www.astrid-online.it/static/upload/protected/N_Ve/N_Vendola-Una-Puglia-migliore.pdf.

creativity were going to be the ingredients of a peculiar Southern knowledge economy.

The Region intended to create industrial districts, thanks to cooperation and social capital. The welfare and the health care sector had to sustain vulnerable people. Well trained workers, traditional culture combined with a dynamic industrial sector, new infrastructures, a well preserved and beautiful landscape could attract foreign investments.

As a result of internal and external investments, the labor market should have overcome its traditional weakness. The main objective was to shape the place, to assure decent wages and to combine rural culture with the technological revolution.

Financialization and Inflation

As a corollary, the region promoted the financial industry, attracting firms through tenders for technical assistance to European Structural Funds, assigned to big players such as EY, KPMG, Deloitte. During the summer of 2024, the Region launched a tender for ICT services worth 240 million euros.

The strategy, together with financial aids offered to companies to establish new offices in the area, permitted to expand the sector, as with ATOS, Almayiva, Lutech, Deloitte. Meanwhile, real estate foreign investments increased, pushed by the touristification of the area.

The policy probably helped to reduce unemployment and sustain economic development.

Nonetheless, it would be worth considering what Kenneth Galbraith (1975/2021: 17) noticed from the inflow of gold and silver from America after Columbus: it caused, outside Spain, a high inflation. According to the author, workers lost purchasing power

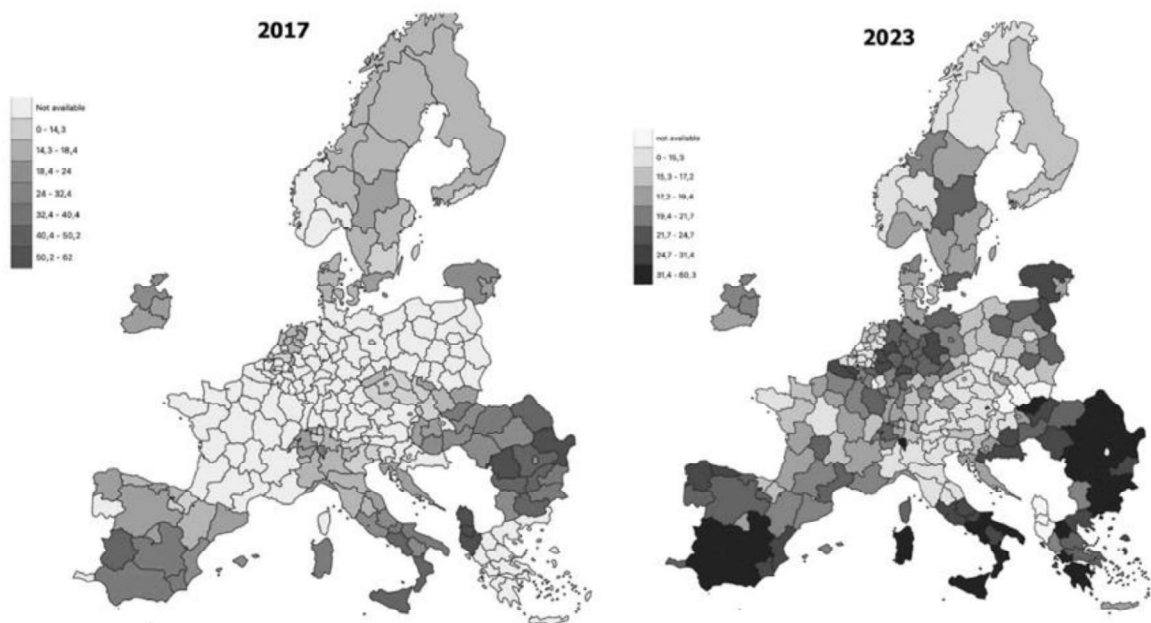
while firms were able to increase profits adjusting prices to the increased level, with smaller real wages to pay. Moreover, the flow of capital – especially in financial sector and luxury tourism – might produce what La Malfa (1973) noticed half a century ago: the imitation effect of affluent consumption by the weakest segments of the population, which distracts resources from essential goods and significant life investments.

A better Apulia?

Third Way Governments tried to find a new balance between the market and the state, leaving discontents on their way. The challenge of today's progressive policies is, among others, to answer the demands of citizens that find an answer in populist parties.

The Apulian Spring has been an unbelievable experiment to reduce the divide with the center of the continent. Today, we can think of it to pave the way for future political innovations. Was a place with a weak middle class, a strong organized crime, inefficient public institutions, able to reduce the gap? The outcomes might have been influenced by the context.

Figure 2: Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion



Source: Own elaboration on Eurostat data³

As shown by Przeworski (1991) in his work on democratic transition in Eastern Europe and Latin America, the speed and deepness of reforms affect the reaction of people. In Apulia, integration into the world economy has meant a sudden change for its inhabitants.

The building sector has been one of the pillars of local economic policies after the WWII; today, according to analysis conducted by real estate marketplaces and agencies⁴, the increase of rents and selling prices in Bari is among the highest in Italy.

It might be worth to evaluate the distributional effects of the regional policies. Ho (1999, 433) focuses her attention on «the trap of equating general improvement of an area to the improvements of

³ Source: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/explore/all/general?lang=en&subtheme=reg.reg_ilc&display=list&sort=category&extractionId=ilc_mdsl18.

⁴ See for instance Cassano N., “Casa, vendita o locazione a Bari gli aumenti più alti”, Repubblica Bari, 08/04/2025.

the life chances of those who are in a state of multiple deprivation».

The Apulian Government was looking for an autonomous path to development. It was trying to reach two main objectives: efficiency and equity. The objectives fluctuated, as the target groups of programs. Was the middle class, which sustained the Gentle Revolution, asking for a radical change or just to take the place of the old elite? Did it try to build a widespread wealth?

Sylos Labini wrote in his famous Saggio (1988, 83) that, in time of crisis, the alliance between the upper class and vast parts of the lower middle class can lead to fascism, while the alliance of the petite bourgeoisie with the working class can bring to labourist policies and radical reforms.

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