

FORGOTTEN ITALY

SPACES AND IDENTITIES OF A CHANGING GEOGRAPHY

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Abstract

Forgotten Italian territories have primarily been understood as compact physical and conceptual spaces. Whilst the terms used to describe their boundaries and the key issues that they face have changed over time, they have been defined through homogeneous images: *Mezzogiorno (Southern Italy)*, *peripheries*, and *Inner Areas*. Such representation affects conceptualization as well as the measures taken to close the gaps between the forgotten territories and dynamic areas. In recent years, the numerous crises of the 21st century have shattered this representation and brought about a new geography of forgotten Italy, the *Italia di mezzo*. The new geography is not linked only to the North-South dichotomy and does not concern only the metropolitan peripheries and inland areas. The paper aims to show how being forgotten now is also a piece of Italy that has long been on the margins of public policy, undervalued by scientific research, but at the centre of the twentieth-century urbanization process.

Keywords

Mezzogiorno (Southern Italy), peripheries, Inner Areas, Italia di mezzo, marginality

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1. Resistance and Changes in the Geography of Forgotten Italy

The geography of the forgotten territories has changed cyclically. This paper argues that, over time it has included some regions and populations and excluded others. The geography of forgotten Italy has expanded and contracted constantly. Being forgotten territories means that the areas live on the margins of public policies, are excluded from plans and projects, have been bypassed by the development model, remain overlooked by research and studies, and have been neglected by cultural institutions and public opinion in general. The perception of 'forgottenness' also concerns territorial and social stigmatization processes, both exogenous and endogenous, to the territories in question. An area can be a forgotten territory if socio-economic and cultural development processes are always within a top-down governance model. One can also feel forgotten and a second-class citizen while being at the centre of the public debate. Being forgotten is a complex and not obvious condition with substantial social, economic, political, and spatial implications for societies and territories. This paper retraces the spaces and identities of forgotten Italian territories and describes their transition and modification over the years. Furthermore, the paper emphasizes the emergence of a new geography of forgetfulness today. It describes the fragility and potential of this part of the Italian territory concerning the rest of the country.

In the long history of the modern Italian state, the North-South dichotomy and the relative marginalization of the South (*Mezzogiorno*) have regularly characterized national debates. For a long time, a third of the country was understood as a forgotten homogeneous area. Research and studies have been periodically produced, and various public policies have been undertaken, with different timings and intensity, to reduce the gaps that such areas have with the rest of the country.

After the Second World War, some studies tried to escape the cages of the North-South dichotomy and the perception of the South as a single compact area. The reality of the *Mezzogiorno* is described through the metaphor of the *leopard skin* (De Rita, 2020), in which, alongside stationary areas there are others where it is possible to observe the dust of the dynamism of entrepreneurial, cultural, political, and civil bases. It is against this background of detachment from the idea of a compactly fragile and immobile *Mezzogiorno*, that in the 1950s, Manlio Rossi-Doria described *la polpa e l'osso* (the flesh and bone) of the South; with active coastal territories and a more marginal hinterland.

In the seventies, some scholars described another part of Italy that is no longer linked only to the borders of southern Italy. From this there emerged the geography of a *Terza Italia* (third Italy); the territories in the northeast and along the Adriatic coast. In these parts of Italy small-scale entrepreneurship emerged, creating a network among itself, with the representatives of interests in the territory, and general civil society. The *Terza Italia* of industrial districts became the new Italian industrial model.

Since the 2000s, the forgotten peripheries of the country's large metropolitan areas have been at the core of national and community public policies. But the geography of the forgotten places changed again in 2014 with the introduction of the National Strategy for Inner Areas, which was aimed at defining peripheral areas recognized through endowment and accessibility indicators for essential services, such as education, health, and transport.

The forgotten Italian territories have been broadly understood as a closed system. While changing from time to time; name, borders, and issues, have always been issued through a compact and homogeneous image: the *Mezzogiorno*, *peripheries*, and *Inner Areas*. This uniform image has affected the actions taken to close the gaps between the forgotten territories and the more active parts of the country. Yet, in recent years, the numerous crises of the first twenty years of the 21st century, have shattered this compact representation and have brought out a new geography of forgotten Italy. It is a new geography that is not linked only to the North-South dichotomy and does not affect only Italy's metropolitan peripheries and inland areas. The new geography highlights how to be forgotten and fragile is now also a piece of Italy that has long been on the margins of public policies and plans, underestimated by scientific research, and neglected by public and institutional debate: the *Italia di mezzo* (In-between Italy). *Italia di mezzo* includes half of the national surface; the area in which about half of the Italian population lives. This part of Italy includes coastal settlements, industrial districts, the *città diffusa* (urban sprawl), medium-sized cities, metropolitan belts, and rural areas.

The following sections of this paper explore the transition of forgotten regions in Italy in detail. The second part of the text traces the long history of the *questione meridionale* (the problem of the South) and the *Mezzogiorno* as a forgotten territory. The third part describes attempts to deliver a different representation of Italy, far from the north-south dichotomy, with the geography of *la polpa e l'osso* (the flesh and bone), of Terza Italia (third Italy), and the peripheries of Italy. The *National Strategy for Inner Areas* is at the centre of the fourth part of the text, which focuses on the progressive process of marginalization of some parts of Italian territory. The fifth part of the paper discusses the need to refer to *Italia di mezzo* as today's new forgotten Italy. This section illustrates the criteria for defining and mapping the *Italia di mezzo*. It observes its articulation and analyses some indicators that display its social, economic, cultural, and environmental condition. The sixth part situates the paper in the global context and describes the relevance of in-between territories in the international debate. The last part of the text focuses on the need to break down the geography of forgotten Italy and advance approaches capable of understanding *Italia di mezzo* (In-between Italy), not as a closed system but as an intermediate space between metropolitan and inland areas. In recent years this part of Italy has entered a process of delicate decline, and precisely because of its being intermediate, its destiny is a vital question for the future functioning of the entire Italian system.

2. The *Mezzogiorno* as an Extensive Depressed Area

The Italian territory, from unification onwards, has been characterized by a succession of exceptional expansionary phases as well as periods of profound decline. In the last 160 years, the alternation of growth and contraction processes has emphasized the profound differences between the different parts of Italy.

At the time of unification, regional disparities were relatively small, although structural differences were already present, especially in terms of education, infrastructure, and urbanization (Viesti, 2021). The diversity of the *Mezzogiorno* and the deep rift North-South had already initiated reflection on the presence of two Italies at time of reunification (Barbagallo, 2013). Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the volume *Condizioni economiche e amministrative delle province napoletane* (Economic and administrative conditions of the Neapolitan provinces) by Leopoldo Franchetti and *Le lettere meridionali* (Southern Letters) by Pasquale Villari called the southern problems to public attention as a national question. At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Giustino Fortunato fixed that current of heterogeneous thought and political action named *meridionalismo* (Fortunato, 1927) on the conditions of the southern Italian provinces and highlighted the contradictions and delays in the process of national unification. The unbalanced interdependence between the two Italies has represented the fundamental constant of the Italian model of social and economic development ever since (Villari, 1976). It is a constant that has initiated intense political and cultural confrontation that lasted throughout the entire twentieth century.

To try to settle national territorial imbalances there have been, since 1902, a series of differentiated state interventions, parliamentary inquiry commissions, and special legislations introduced for some areas of the South. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the structure of the Apulian aqueduct, the construction of the railway section Naples-Rome, the hydraulic-forest arrangement, and the hydrogeological reorganization of some areas of the South began. In 1904, Francesco Saverio Nitti, the economist and politician who served as Prime Minister between 1919 and 1920, worked on a special law for Naples that provided industrial development integrated with mechanization and agricultural production as well as public energy management for industrialization. It was a set of interventions and structural renewal programs that had broken the bleak legislative uniformity of Italy (Nitti, 1903) with legislation calibrated to the specific needs of Naples and the South (Barbagallo, 2013). However, the vision of modernization was not entirely fulfilled due to the beginning of the First World War and the national and international crises that thereafter followed.

From the 1910s to the 1950s, the southern question no longer seemed to be at the centre of the national agenda. Fascism sacrificed the economic interests of the South for the industrial development of industrial areas in the Northeast (Davis, 1999). The *Mezzogiorno* was reduced to a colonial market that consumed artifacts from the North (Dorso, 1925; Gramsci, 1966); it was an agricultural and migration basin. The South became the regime's great reserve of arms and grain, stuck in subsistence agriculture (Viesti, 2021). In the thirty years between the two wars, a rift between the two parts of the country opened which fatal for the South (Rossi-Doria, 1982).

It was only in 1946 that the national importance of the southern question and its industrialization re-emerged through the construction of the *Associazione per lo sviluppo dell'Industria nel Mezzogiorno* (Svimes) (Association for the Development of Industry in the South). In 1948, Svimes presented an extensive study on the conditions of the South, defined it as a *backward and depressed area*, placed it within the theory of *depressed areas*, and envisioned Keynesian-style development policies to favour the Mezzogiorno expansion (Molinari, 1948). In the 1950s, the *Cassa per il Mezzogiorno* was established. Together with some actions for southern agriculture, the *Cassa* launched the season of extraordinary interventions for the South. Through a financial commitment by the Italian State of a thousand billion lire over a period of ten years, the *Cassa* pursued the development of the depressed areas of the South through an inter-sectoral programmatic intervention based on agriculture public works and tourism. It mainly involved infrastructure, mountain, and agricultural transformation through a fundamental irrigation and reclamation program. Interventions that supported the southern industrialization process, (as alternatively advocated by Svimez), were excluded. Some scholars have identified precisely this exclusion among the main causes of the inability of the *Cassa* to reduce the gap between North and South (Saraceno, 1982). Between 1955 and 1964, 2.4 million people emigrated from the South, of which three quarters moved to the regions of the Center-North (Signorelli, 1995). Emigration from the South became the secret weapon of Italian capitalism and strongly contributed to the intense development of the North (Barbagallo, 2013). These were the years of the sociological discovery of the South (Galasso 1977). Carlo Levi, Renato Gattuso, Tommaso Fiore, Rocco Scotellaro, and Ernesto De Martino are just some of the many intellectuals, politicians, scholars, and artists who contributed to the description of the southern condition.

The much-desired industrialization of the South did not happen until the mid-1950s. In 1957, the *Cassa per il Mezzogiorno* was extended until 1965, with new measures envisaged to support industrialization by expanding state holdings in primary industries and the use of public enterprises as a privileged instrument of industrial policy (Bruno, 1994). In these years, the economic miracle of the *Les Trente Glorieuses* (The Glorious Thirty) (Fourastié, 1979) also affected the South. Between 1951-1971 the per capita income of the South grew at an average annual rate of about 6%; one of the best performances in the world (Viesti, 2021). This growth also generated substantial development in construction. Between the 1960s and 1970s, half a million new homes were built, of which almost half still existed at the end of the century (Svimez, 2011). These were also the years described in the movie *Le mani sulla città* (Hands on the city), by Francesco Rosi which, in 1963, suggested that some southern cities had favoured the strengthening of organized crime because of the weight of land rent and related interests (Viesti, 2021). The process of building expansion and, above all, the industrialization process carried out between the sixties and the mid-seventies has been told by many critical voices, coining expressions such as *cattedrali nel deserto* (cathedrals in the desert) or *industrializzazione senza sviluppo* (industrialization without development) (De Rita et al. 1966; Hytten and Marchioni, 1970).

Between 1957 and 1973, the *Mezzogiorno* was at the centre of Italian industrial policies. Since the Unification, a process of convergence between the southern economy and national averages took place for the first time (Del Monte and Giannola, 1978). Nevertheless, it was still not possible, despite this convergence, to structurally modify the development model of the South (Barbagallo, 2013). Social and political resistance to change, and an inability to involve the local population, (De Rita, 2020) brought the decade of significant economic expansion to an end, and the gap started to grow again (Saraceno, 1982).

At the end of the 1970s, economic and technological conditions changed on a global scale, and the priorities of Italian public policies switched. With the energy crisis and exchange rate instability, the attention of Italian industrial policy for the South shifted towards the need to reconvert and restructure the existing production system of the North (Barbagallo, 2013). Around the mid-1980s, the decree of the *Cassa per il Mezzogiorno* was not extended. Interventions for the South were no longer linked with the extraordinary intervention mechanisms of the *Cassa*. However, in November 1980, an earthquake in Campania and Basilicata initiated a new development model because of the economic and political impacts of the catastrophe (Becchi, 1988). It temporarily enabled new interventions and special procedures to be initiated which were exempt from administrative controls.

During the eighties, the southern question appeared to have been resolved. This was mainly thanks to the expansion of small and medium-sized enterprises from the centre-north along the Adriatic axis towards the South. However, in the 1990s due to the competitive problems of the Italian economy, containment of state

spending, and the need to reduce public debt, conditions in the South worsened. In 1996, the unemployment index reached 22%, and the gap between the Centre-North and the South began to grow again (Svimez, 1997). Once at the centre of national and European agenda, the *Mezzogiorno* went through a period of great recession mainly due to a lack of state intervention. The convergence process stopped, and from the nineties, public policies supported income rather than favouring long-term economic development (Viesti, 2021). Since the nineties, development policies for the *Mezzogiorno* have not delivered significant growth. Not even the *Patti territoriali* of 1995 (an agreement between municipalities, provinces, regions, and the social and private actors of a specific area), or the other forms of intervention envisaged have managed to build a coherent framework for the development of the South. New policies and efforts have progressively lost depth and incisiveness.

3. The Different Representations of the Forgotten Territories of Italy

After the Second World War, some scholars provided new themes and representations of the South. Among the most significant is Manlio Rossi-Doria's work, which describes a more articulated *Mezzogiorno* than the image of a compact depressed area. For Rossi-Doria the South was divided into two; *la polpa e l'osso* (the flesh and bone). The *bone* was that backward territory in which a large peasant estate still dominated and was concentrated in the inland regions of the South, whilst the *flesh* was represented by more dynamic coastal territories (Rossi-Doria, 1958).

Around the seventies, a new interpretative model of the Italian territory emerged, it divided the territory into three. The first large territorial area identified was the North-West; marked by large enterprise that have driven and imposed the national development model and its essential characteristics (Bagnasco, 1977). The second large area, the South, was identified as relative underdevelopment; a disintegrated economy and dependent on external conditions. Finally, third Italy, that of the central-north-eastern regions, was characterized by small enterprises which experienced development in different and particular forms (Bagnasco, 1977). The third Italy of the North-East and the Centre is also marked by a strengthening of industrial districts that will be the essential feature of the prolonged success of Italian capitalism (Viesti, 2021). A feature that will permit third Italy to withstand the economic turbulence of the seventies and eighties, unlike what happened with the extensive industry planted in the South and deriving from the North West (Calafati, 2012).

To cope with the effects of the significant turbulence of the 1970s and 1980s, the 1988 reform of the Structural Funds and the 1993 additions to Italian regional policies redefined the geography of Italian depressed areas and planned a new system of ordinary interventions. Law 488 of 1992 introduced new policies for newly depressed areas throughout the country (Viesti, 2021). It provided incentives for promoting development for those areas defined as *Objective 1* and regarded as underdeveloped regions. In Italy this corresponded to all the southern regions; home to a population of 20 million inhabitants. *Objective 2* was the areas severely affected by industrial decline, and *Objective 3* was the rural areas where development and structural adjustment were planned. In 1994-1995 a radical reversal took place. The territory between Milan and Varese, numerous intensely developed Veneto municipalities, and some Turin, Genoa, Trieste, and Reggio Emilia neighborhoods were defined as *depressed areas*. The new geography of the Italian *depressed areas* allowed one of the wealthiest and most industrialized areas of Europe in crisis to profit from economic and fiscal benefits (Barbagallo, 2013). According to this new geography, about 56% of the entire national population lived in officially depressed territories (Barbagallo, 2013).

In 2002, the *Fondo per le Aree Sottoutilizzate (FAS)* (Fund for underutilized areas) was established to encourage the competitiveness of areas whose potential was underutilized, with particular attention being given the South (Ministero dell'Economia e delle Finanze – Dipartimento per le Politiche di sviluppo, 2003). But the economic crisis, the lack of a general plan for the country's development, and the scarcity of investments in the South increased the gap between North and South. The *Quadro strategico nazionale (Qsn)* (National Strategic Framework) with a 2007-2013 programming integrated the financial instruments of the cohesion and development policy (European structural funds, national co-financing, additional national resources) and increased the funds for the FAS. In 2008 the FAS were diverted to the numerous emergencies produced by the crisis and were no longer linked to the *Mezzogiorno*.

In Italy, during the seventies, we witnessed a substantial slowdown and contraction of the metropolitan regions and the growth of the so-called *città diffusa* (urban sprawl) (Indovina, 1990), as well as small and medium-sized cities and rural areas. The severe crisis of the large manufacturing industries, the insufficient role of tertiarization, the real estate, tax and environmental crisis, the urban conflict and the problems of metropolitan government, as well as the spread of an anti-urban ideology were just some of the factors that justified the general metropolitan crisis (Dematteris, 1986). The Italian urban crisis lasted a long time, but only at the turn of the 21st century did specific policies towards these areas begin to be identified. In the last fifteen years, European resources for cohesion, such as *URBAN*, *PON Metropolitan cities*, and *Bando Periferie*, have been allocated to various fragile areas, including, significantly, the peripheral neighbourhoods located within metropolitan areas. (Di Matteo, Kërçuku, and Pessina, 2020).

4. *Strategia Nazionale Per Le Aree Interne* and Inner Areas

For about ten years, books and essays, seminars and conferences, networks, and associations have multiplied with their primary objective being the directing of research practices, and suggesting actions, and policies on the theme of inner areas. The last ten years have produced an ever-expanding body of inquiries, research, and literature. A cluster of reflections have described a renewed relationship between the territorial studies and the inner areas. Attempts are being made to put the issues of marginality and the demographic crisis of inner areas at the centre of public policies. The inner areas are an essential fragment of the Italian territory, account for 60% of the national surface and is an area home to about 15 million people. The explosion of research and studies was justified by the launch in 2013 of the *Strategia nazionale per le aree interne* (SNAI - National Strategy for Inner Areas which was promoted by the *Agenzia per la coesione territoriale* (Agency for Territorial Cohesion).

In 2014, a new season of public policies was launched in Italy towards some fragile peninsula areas, including mountain areas, areas that had suffered from depopulation, and localities that are sited far from essential services. SNAI intends to overcome territorial imbalances, give centrality to inner areas in policies and the public sphere, and present inner areas as an alternative model. The experience of the SNAI has been characterized by a place-sensitive approach in which, although there is a government direction at the national level, there is more attention given to local dimensions and the specificity of the contexts in which it operates. SNAI was launched with the help of European Territorial Cohesion policies 2014-2020 and developed by the *Unità di valutazione degli investimenti pubblici*, (Uval - Public Investment Evaluation Unit) within the *Dipartimento per lo Sviluppo e la Coesione Economica* (Department for Development and Economic Cohesion). This strategy follows the European objectives of territorial cohesion, and intends to guarantee every citizen, regardless of where they live, a minimum level of service provision (Carrosio, Faccini, 2018).

SNAI initially developed the geography of the Italian territory through a classification which was based on the different levels of spatial periphery and the presence or absence of essential services. The municipalities provided with those services that are considered crucial for citizens were defined as *poli* (poles): a hospital equipped with at least an emergency department, secondary schools, and a railway station. The inner areas were, in turn, divided into three typologies dependent upon how far away they were from these centres of essential services: ie. *aree intermedie* -intermediate areas (distance from the poles between 20 and 40 minutes), *aree periferiche* - peripheral areas (distance from the poles between 40 and 75 minutes), and *aree ultra-periferiche* - Ultra-peripheral areas (Distance more significant than 75 minutes) (Italian National Network of Young Researchers for Inner Areas committee, 2021). SNAI produced the geography of inland Italian areas and selected 72 Project Areas that would be allocated European cohesion funds and national funding. It was intended that the interventions would be guided to ensure that they were capable of improving essential services and developing new local development projects capable of systematizing unexpressed territorial capital.

One of the possible ways to describe the numerous studies on inner areas is by reconstructing three aspects. The first aspect describes the fragile nature of the inner areas within Italy. The last few years have shown even more clearly the territorial inequalities that exist in Italy today. The first months of the Covid-19 emergency showed how the distance from essential services (school, health, and mobility), the inadequacy of domestic spaces in the face of the crisis (Teti, 2020), and the delay in digitization (Monaco, 2020) had generated greater complexities and criticalities for those who live in inner areas.

The second aspect shows how the numerous studies converge in a shared call to consider inner areas as opportunities. The internal areas are places where there are already clear clues about the presence of subjects and actions undergoing a paradigm shift (De Rossi, 2018). Inner areas are places of social, economic, and political innovation, in which it is possible to recognize the vital capacity for reaction, resistance, and adaptation (Carrosio, 2019). The inner areas can articulate an Italian proximity model that contains great diversity (Cucinella, 2018). The inner areas are strategic places for national recognition, and they can play an essential role in the country's system because they contain significant social, economic, productive, environmental, cultural, spatial end energy capital (Cersosimo and Donzelli, 2020). Understanding inner areas as areas of opportunity means anticipating and accelerating the trends and significant changes that are already underway today (Boeri, 2021).

Finally, the third, more latent aspect concerns the studies' ability to register active places in inner areas comprehensively. A map allows us to reconstruct the geography of landscapes, stories, narration, ecologies, heritages, material cultures, and populations. The outcomes in inland areas show evidence of activism that deserves to be encouraged (De Rossi, 2018; Cersosimo and Donzelli, 2020).

5. The New Geography of *Italia di Mezzo* (In-between Italy)

We can also consider another portion of the Italian territory to be forgotten. It is a part that, over the years, has been the limited subject of public policies and studies. As highlighted in the reconstruction of earlier periods, in recent years – and having set aside the southern question - community and national policies have paid attention only to the marginality of the internal areas of the country and the dynamism of the metropolitan areas and their peripheries. Such a mindset has produced a clear gap in national territory. This paper tries to fill this gap and puts the question of *Italia di mezzo* at the centre of academic debate.

Italia di mezzo has recently been conceptualized by a group of researchers, composed of Francesco Curci, Arturo Lanzani, Federico Zanfi, and the author of this paper, on the occasion of a public conference *Ricomporre i divari. Politiche e progetti territoriali contro le disuguaglianze* (Recomposing the gaps. Territorial policies and projects against inequalities), held at Politecnico di Milano in February 2020. Its conceptualization was possible through the definition of its spatial articulation and the use of 39 indicators that showed its socio-economic, socio-demographic, real estate, and environmental conditions.

Italia di mezzo is a portion of Italian territory that has long remained in the middle of the dualism of metropolitan cities and internal areas. The ultra-peripheral, peripheral, and intermediate entirely mountainous areas, according to the classification of the SNAI (National strategy for internal areas), are not included in the geography of *Italia di mezzo* proposed. The *de jure* and *de facto* metropolitan cities of Milan, Turin, Rome, and Naples, with the perimeter municipalities, are also excluded. The central municipalities of some functional metropolitan areas (as indicated by OECD) are not included, for instance, Brescia, Padua, Parma, Reggio Emilia, Modena, Prato, Pescara, and Taranto. *De jure* and non *de facto* metropolitan cities are also excluded, as in the case of Messina and Reggio Calabria (Curci et al. 2022).

L'Italia di mezzo takes on a decisive role if we consider its importance at a national scale: 57% of the Italian population lives here and it comprises 50% of the entire national area. However, it is a very articulated reality from a spatial point of view. It is possible to identify at least three different settlements. The first is characterized by *metropolitan fringes*; the second by *medium-sized cities* which are inserted in contexts of widespread urbanization and with various centrality levels; whilst the third type of territory consists of the *peri-urban and the urban-rural continuum* of minor polycentric urban systems: coastal settlements, valley and foothill conurbations, and agro-industrial territories in the plains and hills. If we observe the morphological and environmental aspects, we obtain an image that is far from the metropolitan polarities and depopulated mountain territories of Internal Italy. Three settlement patterns characterize *Italia di mezzo*. The first pattern concerns those parts of the national environment where it is possible to recognize a "Christallerian" geography of urban nuclei, medium-sized cities, small centres, and urban-rural filaments. The second pattern concerns complex linear urbanizations encompassing several medium-sized coastal centres, while the third is related to territories of widespread urbanization outside the metropolitan areas (Curci et al. 2022).

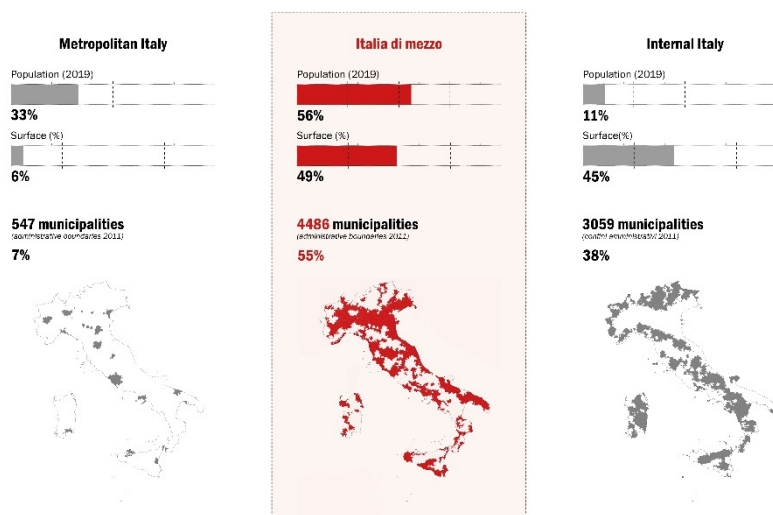


Figure 1 - *Italia di mezzo* in comparison with Metropolitan Italy and Internal Italy (Source: Curci et al. 2020).

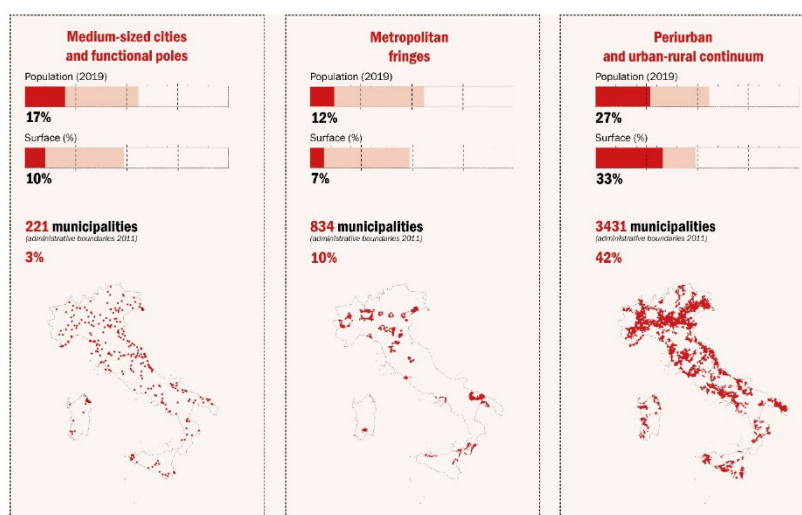


Figure 2 - The three different settlements composing *Italia di mezzo* are metropolitan fringes, medium-sized cities, peri-urban, and the urban-rural continuum (Source: Curci et al. 2020).

In *Italia di mezzo*, two combined dynamics increment the present gaps: social polarization, and demographic and urban shrinkage. Although present in metropolitan Italy and internal Italy, each of these dynamics in *Italia di mezzo* takes on its specificity.

From a socio-economic point of view, a stable manufacturing and agricultural profile emerges and a significant presence of services suitable for people and firms. *Italia di mezzo* is the territory with the most municipalities in the *de jure* industrial districts. We can observe a considerable presence of immigrants, strongly linked to the employment of medium-low labour offered by the manufacturing and agricultural industries, as well as via social and welfare care.

Italia di mezzo presents a trend in keeping with national averages with regard to in the social hardship profiles, such as the index of families in need of assistance, single-income families with children under six, and the old age index. However, there is still a difference between the North and South, with social hardship being more concentrated in the South. This also difference becomes evident if we look at Gross income per capita. However, there are some pockets of disadvantage and fragility in northern Italy with regard to socio-economic indicators.

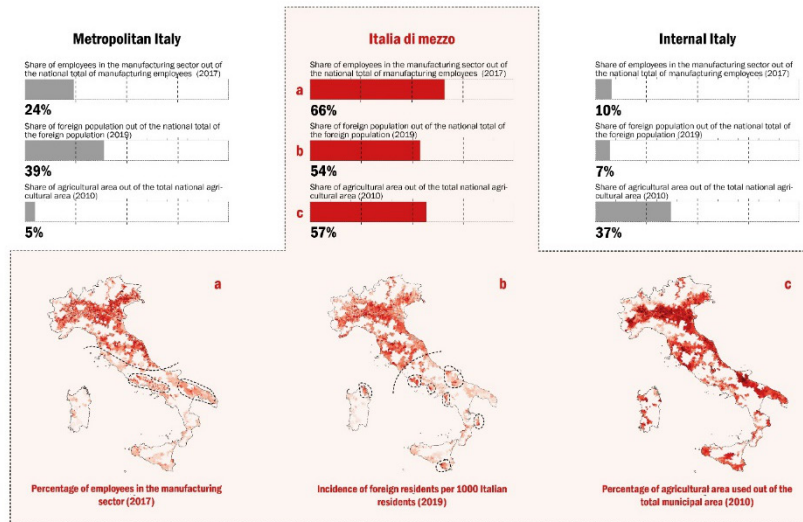


Figure 3 - Common features of the Italia di Mezzo (Source: Curci et al. 2020).

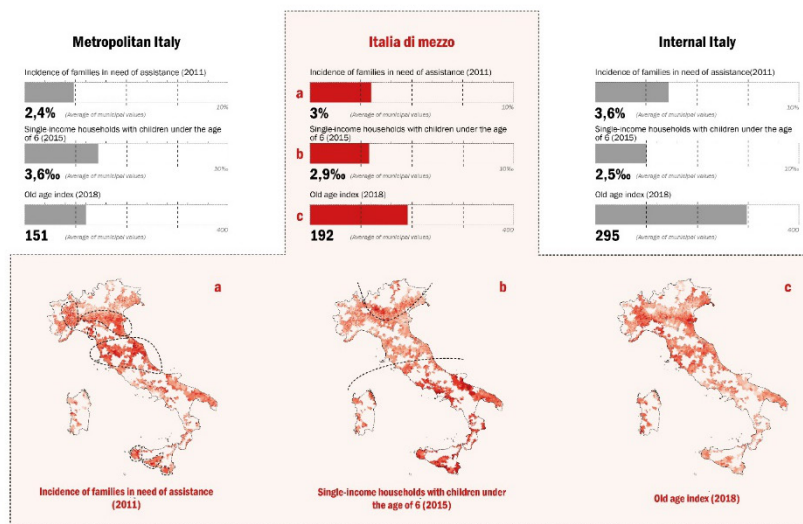


Figure 4 - Italia di mezzo "in the middle" for some social hardships (Source: Curci et al. 2020).

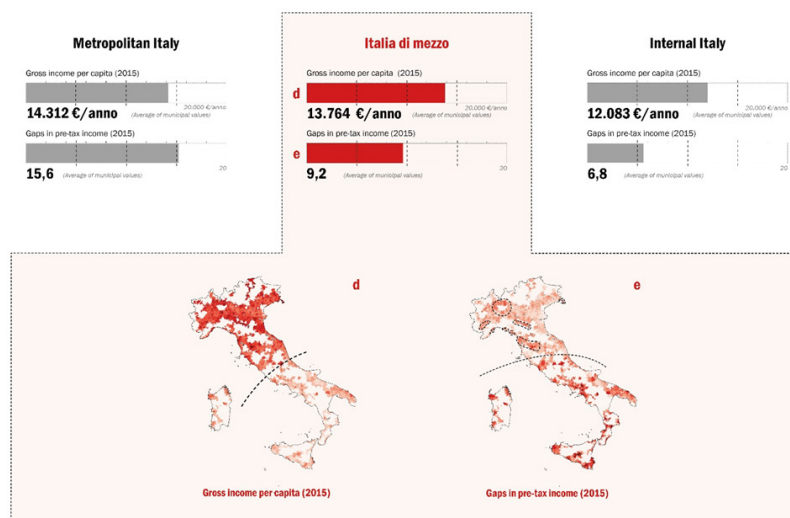


Figure 5 - Italia di mezzo "in the middle" for some social hardships (Source: Curci et al. 2020).

Considering long-term demographic trends, a recent phase of shrinking has occurred. Italia di mezzo has benefited from a long period of population and urban growth, which from 1960 to 2011 affected the metropolitan belt and fringe areas to the detriment of metropolitan and medium-sized cities. After 2011 this process has reversed, with a return to the city centre effect. Most of the peri-urban and urban-rural continuum brings its tendencies closer to Inner Italy. In these parts of Italy, it is possible to notice a new demographic, employee value, and real estate market shrinkage (Curci et al. 2020; Curci et al. 2022). This shrinking process is undoubtedly linked to a re-centralization of employment itself and is also partly related to the residential preferences of municipal markets. It is not a homogeneous tendency, as there are different situations in Italia di mezzo where it is possible to notice demographic and urban growth mostly related to tourist densification, residential replacement, and repopulation (Curci et al. 2020).

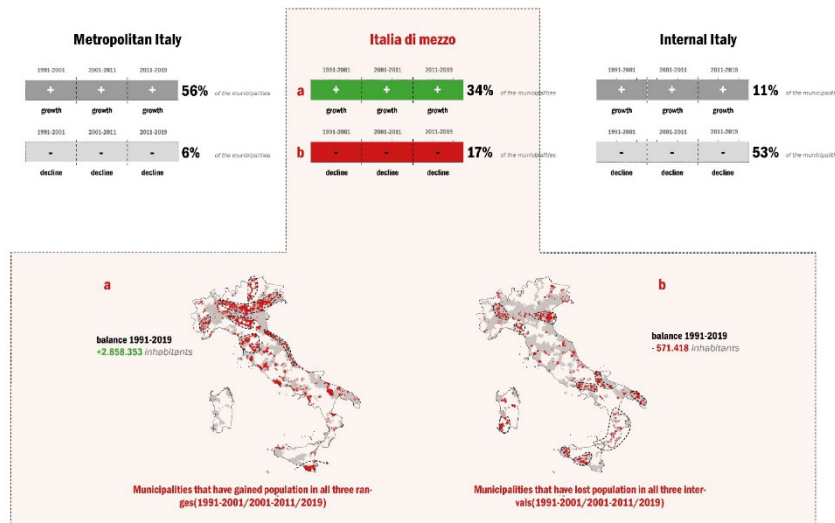


Figure 6 - An Italy that in many of its parts is entering in contraction processes, after growing. (Source: Curci et al. 2020)

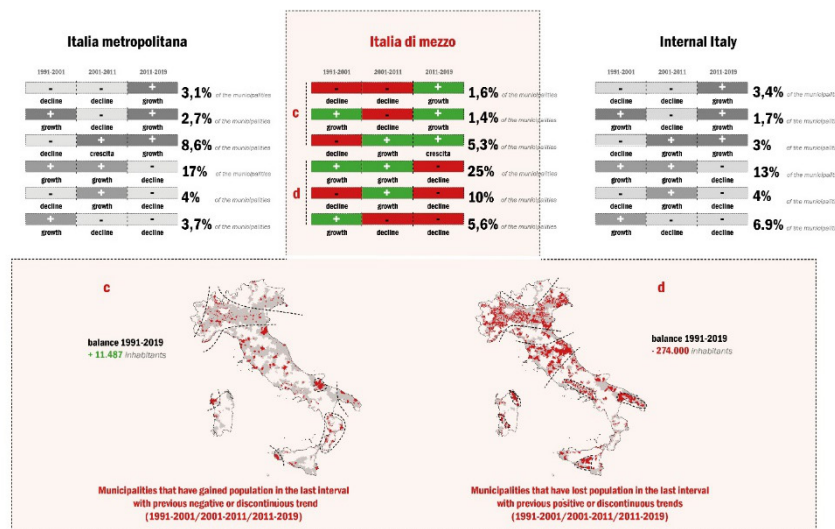


Figure 7 - Contraction in non-homogeneous behaviours. (Source: Curci et al. 2020)

Within the new geography of Italia di mezzo, a significant presence of environmental criticalities and settlement malfunctions can be recognized. In Italia di mezzo, the highest percentage of surface occupied by polluted sites of ecological interest and the highest number of industrial plants at risk of major accident hazards (RIR) have been identified. The PM10 pollution values reach very high indices, sometimes similar to those of the metropolitan cities of the Po Valley. Furthermore, it is possible to identify high artificial land cover per capita

and a high dependence on the car for mobility, which also has significant consequences upon the daily life of residents within these places.

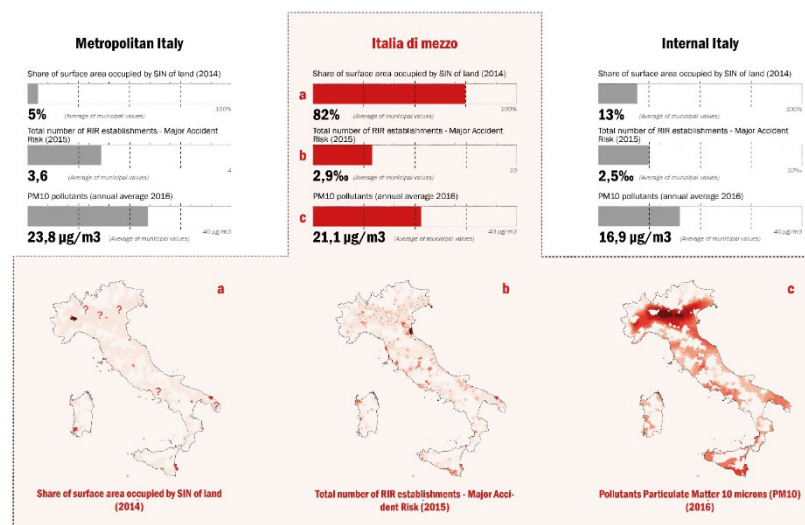


Figure 8 - Italia di mezzo with strong environmental problems, sometimes higher than metropolitan Italy (Source: Curci et al. 2020)

However, these critical issues fail to bring out this part of Italy in public, academic, and institutional discourses; defrauding its absolute central position in the national context. As a result, it remains ‘forgotten’.

6. The National and International Debate on “In-between Territories”

In Italian literature, except for the work of Bruno Menegatti and the l’Associazione dei geografi italiani (AGEI - Association of Italian Geographers) (Menegatti, 1986), the topic of Italia di mezzo has never been investigated in its entirety. Recently, however, some scholars, including the author of this paper, have proposed its first comprehensive description. Five clusters of studies can be identified which have described disconnected parts of the geography of *Italia di mezzo* defined in the last sections of this paper. The first cluster reflects on industrial districts and their subsequent evolution (Fuà and Zacchia 1983; Calafati 2009; Bianchetti 2019). The forms of widespread urbanization and their recent transformation are at the centre of the second research group (Indovina 1990; Clementi et al. 1995; Fabian et al. 2012). The third strand of research concerns the roles of medium-sized cities’ spatial, social and economic structure (Camagni 1993; Dematteis and Bonavero 1997; Mascarucci 2020). The fourth research group concerns the environmental impact in the intensive agriculture regions (Cannata 1989; Basile and Cecchi 2003; Bevilacqua 2018). The latest and most recent family of research concerning the Italian context discusses the geography of discontent (Di Matteo and Mariotti 2020; Carrosio 2020). In current international literature, the geography of discontent is intertwined with territorial perspectives upon some national elections. A growing literature is investigating the correlations between the geography of discontent and places where the perception of social and regional disparities is more acute (McCann 2020). Rodríguez-Pose talks about the revenge of places and people that “don’t matter” (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Other scholars have reported on unemployment, immigration, and the crisis of the welfare system as the main determinants of discontent (Dijkstra et al. 2020; van Leeuwen et. al, 2021), whilst Florida instead underlines the role of urban density as an explicit factor that describes the geography of discontent (Florida, 2021). Even in this case, however, there is no reference to a physical and conceptual space that can be considered to be an in-between territory.

Nevertheless, a cluster of studies can be traced within international literature that have explored the in-between territories. Although different from the Italian context, this group of studies permits introducing a new physical and conceptual space in the middle of the centre-periphery dualism. In France, the debate on the forms of intercommunal in rural territories has allowed the concept of *Tiers espace* to emerge (Vanier 2000).

In Switzerland, outside the urban agglomerations, there are the *territoires intermédiaires* (Ruegg Deschenaux 2003). According to the Dutch National Agency for the Environment, the *Tussenland* (middle land) can be found in the Netherlands (Wandl et al., 2014). In Germany, the term *Zwischenstadt* (middle city) describes the new form of landscape city between the city and the countryside (Sieverts, 2003). Recently in the Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography, the research group coordinated by Thilo Lang has also investigated the impacts of political debates and regulatory considerations of metropolisation within the complex centre-periphery dualism and has elaborated further upon the concept of peripheralization. For Lang, peripheralization is a socio-spatial process linked to territorial stigmatization and suggests a need to conceive the continuous contraction of the regions of East Germany as a form of peripherality (Lang, 2012). Furthermore, articulating the concept of peripheralization makes it possible to withhold the various spatial categorizations based on structural distances. These somewhat vague categorizations do not capture the local realities of the territories considered in-between or non-core regions (Leick and Lang, 2017).

A debate with different intensities has tried to expose the dynamics, the places, the nature, and the capabilities of the in-between territories, and has further tried to place the same at the centre of the political, academic, and administrative debates. This is a debate that introduces the theme of the relational nature of intermediary territories, as in the case of *Italia di mezzo*.

7. *Italia di Mezzo* as a Relational Space

The territories within *Italia di mezzo* require more thematization by policies and programs. There is scarce attention on mitigating the conditions of social and spatial discomfort. At the same time, introducing infrastructural projects and logistics hubs indifferent to the territory is systematic. Even if it is possible to find in the parts of *Italia di mezzo* a discreet presence of socio-economic programs for local development, the latter often remain trapped in a unilateral perspective of economic growth. It is a run-up to the growth paradigm that remains detached from considering social inequalities, especially the one linked to urban and environmental crisis.

The long history of Italian public policies has understood the forgotten territories as homogeneous physical and conceptual spaces. An oppositional and dichotomy logic prevailed in the representation of Italy, north-south, and metropolitan areas-inner areas. However, tracing the long history of changes in the geography of forgotten Italy, the need to understand forgotten territories no longer only as homogeneous spaces with rigid boundaries emerges. Moreover, it is necessary to consider *forgotten territories* as intermediate spaces between other parts of the Italian territory.

There is a need to both dismiss competition between territories and to increase cooperation and coexistence. A new pact between territories is needed. A new alliance is required; an alliance capable of emphasizing the polycentric character of Italy, thinking of *Italia di mezzo* as a connector, not an opposition. It is necessary to configure *Italia di mezzo* no longer only as "average" or "in the middle" but an "intermediary" between metropolitan areas and internal areas.

This is for two primary reasons. First, they can provide support and help to the less densely populated inner areas. Secondly, by exploiting their infrastructural and social capital, they can offer opportunities for decongesting denser metropolitan areas. It is necessary to represent this forgotten *Italia di mezzo* as a relational space, recognize its fragility and potential, and transform its oblivion into a national issue because its future affects the whole of Italy.

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