

# THE EVOLUTION OF THE ITALIAN INDUSTRIAL SYSTEM DURING THE LAST THIRTY YEARS AND THE IMPACT OF THE NEW ENTERPRISE 4.0 IN THE ECONOMY OF SOUTHERN ITALY<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract:

The development of Enterprise 4.0 opened a very complex, articulated and, in some case, contradictory path towards significant changes of the traditional economic and social structure, where services, manufacturing and ICT are more and more integrated in building a new production and supply model. The European Union fully understood such an issue to be critical by implementing several initiatives and programs, while its Member States activated several tools in order to take part in what has been called the “fourth industrial revolution”. The Italian government launched the Piano Impresa 4.0, the “Enterprise 4.0 Plan”, aiming to define a strategic framework for the national industrial policies, turning the digital transformations industry is currently undergoing into an opportunity for growth and employment, by acting within several specific areas. Therefore Enterprise 4.0 is a topical theme, already making its impact felt on the management and organization of production systems. This is all the more true for a country such as Italy, affected, during the years of the major economic crisis (2007-2014), by a phase featuring both recession and stagnation, with a significant risk for the country to distance itself from the centre of global capitalism. Such a path has been all the more rough for Southern Italy, as its entrance within the new global arena corresponded with the end of the traditional policies of extraordinary intervention, while the Maastricht system Italy joined profoundly changed the traditional forms of interaction between economy and the State. Some changes have been recorded in Italy as a whole during the last three years. In Southern Italy, the engine for such a change has been a deep innovation and widening of production means and tools, whereas industrial policy instruments such as those connected with Industry 4.0 pushed this change forward in the whole of the country. This contribution intends, first and foremost, to analyse the evolution of industrial structures, both in Italy as a whole and in its Southern regions during the last 30 years. The Authors will consider the timeframe starting with the crisis of Fordism as a tool, until the birth of Enterprise 4.0. Using both qualitative and quantitative sources, we aim to produce an analysis (featuring comparative elements as well) on the long-term effects this new Industrial Revolution may have. By the same token, the Authors intend to consider the potential those enterprises currently based in Southern Italy have to join the new production models and sectors

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## 1. THE EVOLUTION OF THE ITALIAN INTERNAL GAP WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE INTERNATIONAL CHANGES DURING THE LAST 30 YEARS

Global economy is currently going through a phase involving deep changes in production models for the most advanced industrial countries, as well in the international geographical and economic situations overall. Indeed, the rebound of the economic cycle from 2008 onwards, features a revision in the relationships between production factors and their organization and management. We are currently living in a new phase of that globalization which started during the last 20 years of the last century. It did not only feature new protagonists, but a fourth Industrial Revolution as well, itself connected to the application of digital transformations to production. In such a framework, services, manufacture and ICT are more and more integrated in building a new industrial and distribution model. These three elements are going to be more and more critical in in shaping the new forms of international industrial competition (Schwab, 2016). The main objective of this contribution of ours is to provide a map and some guidelines useful in shaping research focused on highlighting the impact the new kind of enterprises arising from Industry 4.0 have on Southern Italy. In order to do that, our paper intends to enact a long-term examination of those transformation processes Italy underwent during the last three decades, from the crisis of the Fordist model to the economic stagnation characterizing the last ten years and further widening the gap between Northern and Southern Italy.

Therefore, an articulate framework arises, where critically negative elements overlap with other elements and situations having a strong positive potential, shaping the history and the perspectives of Southern Italy.

Such a path has only just begun and it is by no means set in stone. Several national and international market actors (for example and together with many others: public policymakers, the structures of the financial system, the investment in R&D and in technological transfers, as well as, speaking more generally, the build-up of an environment being favourable to innovation and private investment).

Italy cannot sit out the current changes, as it most significant growth phases during the second phase of the XXth Century were strictly connected with the evolution of economical cycles in Western Europe (Osterhammel and Petersson, 2005; Eichengreen, 2008). As it is known, following the aftermath of WWII, the recovery and upswing of European economy was due to several factors such as the reopening of internal and international exchanges, the possibility for Italy to re-join advanced production processes and the widening of those redistribution policies able to juxtapose development, welfare and social inclusion. Therefore, the *golden age* had a hand in reshaping the previous structures, reorganizing production and enacting a twofold Fordist-Keynesian model, bound to reshape traditional schemes and relationships (Palermo, 2016). As one pauses to consider the impact – by no means only quantitative in nature – the European golden age had, the change in direction undertaken during the so-called “silver age” (1971-1990) is jarring. The recession of the 1970s took with it a significant slowdown in those internal convergence processes which had happened all over Europe during the previous twenty years (Crafts, 2007). By the same token, the *catching up* Western Europe had been experiencing over the United States stopped, as it may be inferred by examining the relative GDP-related ratio between the two areas. In 1973 this ratio amounted to 68,3% and it reached 68,5% in 1995 (Crafts and Magnani, 2013: 116-117). The crux of the issue does not only lie in the fluctuations the indexes undertook as much as in the paradigm shift undergoing during those very same years. The crisis of the *Keynesian Consensus* and the affirmation of the *Washington Consensus* are themselves a part of and overall rearrangement of those situations connected with the Cold War (Rodrik, 2006). Because of such a process as well, the new wave of globalization which started at the end of the XXth century brought along, according to O’Rourke and Williamson, an overall reshaping of market structures and significant changes in production relationships, questioning well-grounded assumptions (O’Rourke and Williamson, 2005), generating new opportunities, as well as strong contradictions, within the most advanced countries (Beck, 2000; Rodrik, 2011; Ocse, 2011).

The evolution of Italian economy and the behaviour of Southern Italy, as well as its gap with the Northern regions, should be read within its connection to the aforementioned dynamics (Palermo, 2018). After the extraordinary growth experienced during the *golden age*, an attempt was made, from 1973 onwards, to resist the onrushing economic crisis. This attempt was partially a success, but it had its contradictions and was nevertheless doomed to affect – sometimes beyond what the numbers suggest- the shape Italy faced the global challenges of the 1990s in (Boltho, 2013: 162 and following). Therefore, between the end of the *silver age* and the beginning of the new globalization, Italy was put between those pressure due to external restrictions (because of the new market openings and the birth of the Maastricht system), as well as to the emergence of some structural issues such as the burden of unproductive public debt and the plunge in work productivity, which shranked from the median value of 6,25% recorded during the 1960-1970 period to the 2,52% of twenty years later (Crafts, 2009). Within this framework, the shift in economy and politics Italy experienced during the early 1990s is a link between the end of a development model and the beginning of the stagnation Italy experienced in the era of the new globalization (Palermo, 2015), a moment affected by the poor attitude shown by the the Italian industrial system towards innovation. It is therefore crucial to notice that, maybe for the first time since its unification, Italy was unable to catch the recovery of the international

economical cycle during the 1990s. Therefore, a new, very complex, phase started, opening the current “stagnation era” for Italy, where the country experienced a significant loss in its competitiveness. Such a loss was deepened by the economic crisis begun in 2008, but was born before that. All of this opened an actual risk for Italy to move away from the center of global capitalism (Baffigi, 2013; Toniolo, 2013).

Within this long-term view, the Southern Question and the issues connected with its industrial crisis mirror the global Italian situation. Mostly because of the measures contained within the extraordinary interventions and of the activities carried out by the Cassa per il mezzogiorno, itself the main engine of those interventions (Felice and Lepore, 2013; Felice, Lepore and Palermo, 2015), the development Southern Italy experienced during the 1950-1971 period was a cornerstone of the *catching up* Italy achieved compared with the most advanced economies (Lepore, 2013), enacting the Fordist-Keynesian paradigm by providing incentives to investment in southern Italy, through the action of significant public industries and the support the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno gave to private initiative. A model which, as it has been reminded «far from supporting a mere “passive modernisation” of the productive apparatus of Southern Italy, promoted the growth of industrial capital and stimulated the growth of a more advanced market»; such an approach arose from «the cooperation between the men at the Svimez, and the Bank of Italy and at the World Bank, having the experience of the Tennessee Valley Authority as a beacon, but going beyond that as well, as the Italian state was able to manage itself like a firm in that case, multiplying the occasions for productive investment». (Lepore, 2018: 33). From the beginning of the 1970s onwards, during the same time when the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno knew a period of crisis (Felice and Lepore, 2013) and given the regression of the relevant institutional and normative frameworks of reference, the convergence between Northern and Southern Italy ground to a halt and the gap between the two areas began widening again. Svimez calculated that during the 1971-1991 period, the dynamics of the per capita GDP gap between Northern and Southern Italy grew from 33% to 40% (Svimez, 2015). The new widening of this gap can be inferred by the variations in the progression of investments as well: during the final years of the Italian economic miracle the industrial allocations in Southern Italy— considered their average levels per citizen – are more than those present in the Central and Northern regions of Italy (Graziani, 1987), while this value took a plunge during the 1970s as the allocations in Southern Italy shrank in 1978 to the 54% of the level recorded in 1973. Those in the Central and Northern regions of Italy went on the uptake since 1979, reaching 100,3% compared with 1973 (Pescosolido, 2017: 171 and following.).

Nevertheless, the further, critical, consequence of the crisis of the 1970s lies in the industrial and economic realignment following the end of the Fordist-Keynesian paradigm: in the Central and Northern regions of Italy several firms joined those new forms of enterprise organization making up the backbone of the economic rebound those regions experienced several years later, giving birth to the so-called “fourth capitalism” described by Mr Colli, and able to stand the challenges of new competitiveness for a long time (Colli, 2002). In Southern Italy, on the other hand, several forms of *top down* support towards industrial districts still continued (Pescosolido, 2017: 169-171). This slowed down the catch-up a part of the manufacturing system in Southern Italy was carrying out concerning the renewal needed after the post-Fordist paradigm. Such a process was rife with contradictions and doomed to explode when the changing system and the pressure on public budgets forced a quicker disengagement by the Italian State. In such a context, that part of Southern Italy featuring in industrialisation similar to that of Northern Italy during the end of the economic miracle (Pescosolido, 2017: 168), moved, at the end of the *silver age*, according to Mr Sapelli, towards an «elusive industrial society» (Sapelli, 1997). In such a situation, the entrance of Italy within the Maastricht system, made up by immediately binding convergence parameters and by the definition of a liberalist normative framework, modified the traditional forms of interaction between the State and the economy. Therefore some policies arise, which, albeit being innovative in answering the needs of Southern Italy, don't reach their expected goals (Coco and Pasciullo, 2018). It is not by chance that the period before the 2008 economic crisis featured an overall decrease in the regional gaps within the majority of EU Member states except Italy (Barucci, De Vincenti and Grillo, 2010), while the last global crisis produced a further increase in the gap (Svimez, 2017) instead. It is true that Italy, from 2007 until 2016, saw its gap with the rest of the Euro area grow in a range beyond 10%, trends in Southern Italy were particularly negative; the GDP in Centre and in the North of Italy went down by del 5,8% cumulatively, that of Southern Italy plunged by 11,3%, i.e. almost twice, bringing a significant widening of the gap between the two parts of the country with it. This gap actually grew by 5,5% (Svimez, 2017).

## **2. LOOKING FOR A NEW INDUSTRIAL MODEL: BETWEEN FORDISM AND POST-FORDISM**

What happened in Italy and we described above are themselves part of a wider process of change the productive assets are undertaking at the international level. The current Industry 4.0 revolution could be an answer to those issues Italy experienced between the shift from the crisis of the Fordist system and the post-Fordism enacted during the last 20 years.

As it is known, the success of the Fordist model is due to the concurrent rise of the new mass society on a global scale during the early 1900s (Settis, 2016). The mechanization of production processes and the scientific organization of work as inspired by Taylor required the existence of a market focused on mass consumerism, a new system to reproduce and manage workforces, as well as a society being fully modern, rational and inclusive. Two world wars, the great crisis of 1929 and the Russian Revolution are all a part of this long and complex change, featuring a confrontation between completely antithetical civilization models. Following the Allied victory in WWII, the Fordist-Keynesian paradigm achieves its ultimate affirmation within the complex political structure created in Bretton Woods in 1944, guaranteeing financial stability, high wages and therefore those certainties on the medium and the long term being able to help spreading an economy of scale focused on big factories as their cornerstone. From the 1950s until the 1973 oil crisis, within a context where new mixed forms of economy were attempted by a plurality of political actors and protagonists of Western capitalism, an unprecedented expansion was recorded. Such an expansion came to be also because of the constant growth in work productivity within big companies. The Keynesian welfare state itself became sustainable because of that. Mr. Harvey described the structural limits of Fordism through the concept of “rigidity”, in order to explain those constraints arising from medium- and long-term injection of monetary resources and those big industrial plants requiring a constant and sustained growth in goods usage and consumption (Harvey, 2010). Such a rigidity concerned industrial relationships, as well as the role of Western States, less and less able to manage competition and to effectively respond to the re-emergence of the economies of Southeast Asia. Such a rigidity was sorely tested by the first oil shock in 1973, when economy collapsed on itself in stagnation and entered an unheard-of recessive phase. Following the decision by Richard Nixon to abandon the convertibility of the US dollar in gold (1971) and the success achieved by Margaret Thatcher (1979) and Ronald Reagan (1980), the Fordist-Keynesian paradigm enters its final crisis, being supplanted by the new *Washington Consensus* paradigm, itself representing, at least until the 2007 crisis of *subprime* mortgages, the economic *mainstream*. Therefore, economy enters a new phase, featuring a significant shift on finance in its focus and what Mr. Harvey calls “flexible accumulation”, itself characterized by a significant flexibility in production processes, on the labour market and in consumer models. Since the end of the 1980s onwards, Western economies enter a season of *great moderation*, featuring relative stability intertwined with great dynamics of industrial renewal and integration of the global markets, itself preceding the decade of financial and economic crisis started in 2007 (Bernanke, 2004; Clark, 2009). As the Fordist paradigm represented the completion of modernization, post-Fordism became the material base for the affirmation of a new cultural climate, postmodernism (Jameson, 2008). The industrial model which developed following the affirmation of the *Washington Consensus* and having the new globalization of both the markets and the production factors as its main context is currently being further redefined – this does not mean that it should be abandoned- considering also the affirmation of Industry 4.0 and the new, currently undergoing, industrial revolution.

In Italy, the end of the Fordist-Keynesian paradigm – whose effectiveness allowed Italy to take part in the *golden age* – had deeply critical aftereffects. The progressive shrinking of the role of big public and private companies, the poor attitude towards innovation and the use of competitive devaluation as a substitute for the interventions towards improving production processes shaped a manufacturing system being able to support the growth of the country for a limited time, leaving it unable to rise to the challenges of globalization during the 1990s and the 2000s. As it has already examined elsewhere in this text, «despite the growing importance of services during the 1980s, industry still made up 26% of added value and employment [...]», mostly focusing on traditional sectors, but featuring a still significant contribution towards the production of machinery and in energy-related products. «Such features remain constant for most of the decade, but the contribution of industry to the total shrinks to 23%, considering both its added value and the people it employs» (Accetturo and others 2013: 6). From the 2000s onwards, the plunge in Italian competitiveness is also compounded by its progressive industrial crisis. Even before the 2008 crisis, «the added value for this sector grew slowly (by 0,8% yearly in real terms on average during the 2000-07 period); its bearing on the whole of the economy went down by 2 percentage points (to 21% in 2007). The overall weakness of the main manufacturing services affected these dynamics [...]» (Accetturo and others, 2013: 7). Therefore, at the end of 2012, industrial production in Italy shrunk by about 24% overall compared with the first quarter of 2008. Such values are significantly worse than those recorded by its main European competitors, France and Germany first and foremost. Therefore, such dynamics seem to have become a structural, rather than a situational element, especially considering two factors being able to justify such numbers, especially when considered together with others: stagnant productivity and the loss of competitiveness Italy experienced on the global markets (Ciocca, 2004). Amongst the other factors influencing such a context the reduction in company sizes, energy-related costs and the various critical infrastructural and institutional issues may very well be considered.

The effects following the end of the Fordist-Keynesian paradigm and the crisis in the mission Italy chose for globalization were even more grievous for Southern Italy, as the industrialization this area underwent in the 1950-1973 period was based on the strength of the aforementioned paradigm. During the *silver age*, the crisis of big public industry and the end of the most fruitful phase of the extraordinary interventions brought with them the shift from what has been termed a virtuous “supply Keynesism” (Lepore, 2013), towards new redistribution

policies featuring a short action span, something made easier by the fragmentation of decision-making centres and by the rise in locally-based visions (Lepore, 2018<sup>2</sup>). Such a process, within the dynamics of the Italian industrial system we described before, featured a long tail during the last twenty years and was unable to effectively move – except some impressive particular cases- the industrial fabric of Southern Italy as a whole towards the challenges the post-Fordist production management poses (Coco and Pasciullo, 2018). It is therefore no wonder that, as Mr. Lepore reminded, between 2008 and 2014, «manufacturing in Southern Italy, after a resizing, due to the influence of globalization on its productive assets as well suffered a further contraction (by 29,8% overall) in its productive output [...], whereas the same contraction the rest of Italy experienced stopped 9,5%, del comparto nel resto dell'Italia. Furthermore, despite the fact that a reduction in the capacity for accumulation affected both areas in Italy, this reduction was much more significant in Southern Italy. Indeed, during this contraction phase, gross fixed investment plunged by 34,9% overall in Southern Italy, whereas they contracted only by 23,4% in the rest of the country, with a difference of 11,5% between the two areas. Therefore, Italy clearly experienced a “double divergence”, widening both its internal gap and the difference in development the country has compared with the rest of Europe» (Lepore, 2018<sup>2</sup>: 65-66).

### 3. THE IMPACT OF ENTERPRISE 4.0 FOR THE ECONOMY OF SOUTHERN ITALY

Considering the aforementioned scenario, it is self-evident how the potential for Southern Italy to experience an economic upswing in the near future has the reconstruction of a unitary industrial strategy amongst its cornerstones. Such a strategy should also feature a high degree of compatibility with the European context, all the while making Northern and Southern Italy complementary to each other. It goes without saying that this challenge is harder now than in the past, and is not only because a very relevant part of the Italian production structure must bridge the gap it acquired with the rest of the ward during the last 15 years, but also because the global context is surely more fragmented and features the ascendance of new competitors, as well as the weakening of our common European home. This is also due to the recent recession and the substantial institutional deficit the EU still shows in its buildup (Fabbrini, 2017). Therefore, an adequate response to this challenge should not “only” choose and enact the best available opportunities, but also identify and pinpoint the best methods and tools to be used in order to become an active part in the current changes and innovations, within a scenario filled with both potential and risks.

Considering such a situation, careful observers may very well spot some new elements which may be useful in connecting Southern Italy with rising economic cycles again, especially in the framework of the revolution connected with Industry 4.0. And this is true, first and foremost, within the macroeconomic milieu. Parallel to the economic rebound Italy experienced during the last three years, its Southern areas underwent a partial, but meaningful, inversion in the main trends connected with its economic conditions. For the first time after seven years, the GDP for Southern Italy did not go down (Svimez, 2017). «The distance Southern Italy has with the rest of the country, measured considering the per capita GDP compared with the Central and Northern regions, began shrinking again [...]. Considering a specific timeframe – as Mr. Lepore wrote –, between 2015 and 2017, Southern Italy started its economic recovery, as it grew more quickly than the rest of Italy during the last two years. [...] The economic upswing Southern Italy is currently experiencing, despite being not homogeneous, is starting to show structural features, first and foremost because of a change in manufacturing. After the significant disappearance of those enterprises being less efficient, including those smaller in size but unprepared to face such a lasting and deep economic crisis, manufacturing is leading the way and seems to provide a powerful impulse towards a stronger, more integrated and innovative context» (Lepore, 2018<sup>2</sup>: 67).

The second important element resides in the situation and in the potential of the productive areas in Southern Italy. Nowadays, those areas feature several degrees and variations of management and links between big companies, multinational undertakings and a strikingly various situation when SMEs are concerned. For the first time since 2008, Southern Italy experienced the contemporary growth – and this more than in Northern Italy- of both the internal and the external demand, with a slight increase in work productivity as well (Svimez, 2017). Such numbers are due to several elements, themselves able to explain the “resilience” the SMEs in Southern Italy seemed to exhibit, especially in the face of the crisis which began in 2008. Reading the data in depth, it may be observed that 26% of the *scale-up* enterprises in Italy (i.e. those recording a growth of more than 20% in their employees or in their sales) are based in Southern Italy. Therefore, it is not by chance that this area has experienced a new boom in start-ups, especially those managed by younger people or by women. This data are twofold, as they surely show the crisis of traditional employment, but also a new attitude to enterprises in the area. It is particularly important to notice how, according to the Censis-Confcooperative report, three regions in Southern Italy, namely Sicily, Apulia and Campania experienced the birth of more digital enterprises in their territory compared with Northern Italy (Lagravinese, 2018). Therefore, it seems that enterprises in Southern Italy may receive very well all those activities offered by the revolution called Industry 4.0 A recent research (Sorrentino and Varaldo, 2018) highlights the following three main factors for that: R&D expenditure (which remained steady during the recent crisis years, despite a lesser presence of sizeable undertakings in southern Italy, especially when compared with the rest of the country); the presence of those

enterprises (which remained significant even during the 2010-2014 period), having introduced important innovations in their products and processes (the so-called “successful innovators”) as well as the aforementioned spreading of digital enterprises.

The third element any analysis on the potential southern Italy has to join the new industrial revolution currently underway must take into consideration lies in its overall conditions. The available support to the development of Enterprise 4.0 and the many ways to be a part of what has been termed “the fourth Industrial Revolution” are elements being shared within the European context and variously implemented at the national level, as it is, for example, the case with the German Platform 4.0, the French program called Industrie du Futur and the High Value Manufacturing the United Kingdom is currently carrying out. In Italy, the national plan called Impresa 4.0 (Enterprise 4.0) proposed by the Italian Ministry of Economy took upon itself the main goal of building a strategic framework of industrial policy aiming to shape the current digital transformation of industry as an opportunity for groups and employment, focusing its interventions in specific areas such as: launching industrial investment, especially in the development, knowledge and innovation; supporting enterprises to lead them grow in size, without overlooking innovative forms of enterprise; the definition of standard protocols and interoperability criteria and EU level; network safety and privacy protection; constructing and enacting infrastructure; effective channeling and allocation for all the relevant financial resources, as well as the evolution of guarantees and collateral for enterprise credit lines. Furthermore, the attention for these new production processes may very well be joined with the new capacity public policymakers have shown during the last three years, especially where and when the exit strategies of 2011-2013 were accompanied by the search for new tools able to support feasible policies for industrial development both in Southern Italy and in the country as a whole, going beyond what is often an useless –if not specious– confrontation between those supporting austerity and those in favor of deficit spending.

Should all these elements become structural components of the policies to be enacted in the near future, the economic cycle could be reversed. The effective allocation of resources remains an issue, as reminded by Svimez time and again, especially concerning the destination of those funds the Italian government made available with its Industry 4.0 national plan. There is an actual risk for those funds to be mostly allocated to the regions in the Centre and in the North of Italy (Svimez, 2017: 410-415). Nonetheless, such an analysis could be mitigated by the knowledge that, given the current revolution, the challenges connected with innovation and with supporting a competitive relocation of undertakings in Southern Italy must be addressed by the relevant institutions through a complex and effective “toolbox”. Such tools range from the SIE Funds, to the EU Cohesion Policy Fund, to the Industry 4.0 Plan, to the Special Economic Zones (or ZES, from their Italian acronym) up to the policies regulating the access to credit. By the same token, the enterprises in Southern Italy should be able to enter the game again, making the most of those tools, using a bottom-up approach.

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