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The Perception of Identity in Territorial Governance: The Italian Case Study of Alto Mantovano Area

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ABSTRACT

The article collects and illustrates the results of the analysis on the perception of the Alto Mantovano identity, attempting to reconstruct it through the oral testimonies of territory privileged users, the Mayors. The text is structured in three directions. Firstly, an attempt will be made to identify the Alto Mantovano area, highlighting the difference between definitions “from above” and definitions “from below”. Secondly, the focus will examine the historical development of this area, as it is perceived, pointing out how this territory has stratified a specific identity which is proposed as an alternative to that of the main town, Mantua. Finally, it will focus on both similar and divergent points between the realities involved, giving three examples to prove that heterogeneity is possible even if there is the same identity recognition.

Keywords: Public History; Perceptions; Identity; Italy; Alto Mantovano.

INTRODUCTION

The area covered by this article is geographically located in northern Italy and, more precisely, in the south-eastern Lombardy region, just below the southern part of the Garda Lake ([Wikipedia.it](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garda_Lake)). The Alto Mantovano area is affected – in its dialectal inflection, its traditions, its historical events, even in its political choices – by its proximity to the province of Brescia and, in part, to that of Verona. The area has a typically agricultural economy, although the years after World War II saw an increase in industrial production and a dynamic tertiary activity. The most significant municipalities are Castiglione delle Stiviere, Castel Goffredo, and Asola, where the hosiery industry is particularly developed. However, it is in the tertiary activities that the deepest differences can be seen between the municipalities of the area, each with its own perspective on the attractive opportunities of the territory (Barozzi, Beduschi & Bertolotti, 1982). But, before analysing these differences, it is useful to try to provide a

better definition of the Alto Mantovano area. In order to do that, it is first of all necessary to separate two different levels of investigation. On the one hand, we have a definition provided “from above”, as may be the case with the site of the *Province of Mantua* (Provincia di Mantova) or the *Atlante Demologico Lombardo* (Varina).

The first provides an overview of the territory by presenting it geographically divided based on the juridical borders of the individual municipalities (Mantua, Alto Mantovano, Medio Mantovano, Oglio Po, and Oltrepò). The second provides a map that divides the province of Mantua into seven (7) rural areas, obtained from a geomorphological reading of the area: the Mantuan morainic amphitheater of Garda Lake; the Mantuan highlands; the lowlands of Mantua; the middle Mantuan plain; the Mantuan rice-growing plain; the Oltrepò of Mantua, divided into the area to the left and the area to the right of the river Secchia.

Alongside definitions “from above” are definitions “from below”. This contribution prefers precisely those “from below”, in an attempt to provide a more representative definition. Therefore, I interviewed the mayors of the municipalities participating in the *Terre dell’Alto Mantovano* project: Franco Perini (mayor of Casalmoro); Alfredo Posenato (mayor of Castel Goffredo); Alessandro Novellini (mayor of Castiglione delle Stiviere); Giorgio Cauzzi (mayor of Cavriana); Laura Marsiletti (mayoress of Ceresara); Sergio Desiderati (mayor of Guidizzolo); Giorgio Rebuschi (mayor of Ponti sul Mincio); Gabriella Felchilcher (mayoress of Solferino); Luciano Bertaiola (mayor of Volta Mantovana). The mayors, privileged witnesses of the area, were asked for a definition of the *Alto Mantovano* (Simeon, 1976).

From their answers, it is possible to summarise that, in the thought of those who live in these places every day, ‘by *Alto Mantovano* we mean that north-western area of the province of Mantua, stretching out naturally towards lower Garda and closed off to the east by the river Mincio and to the west by the river Chiese’. This synthesis, of course, includes connotations that are more or less inclusive, but most of the evidence points to the prevailing proximity of interests with the territory of lower Brescia and lower Garda compared to the provincial capital. The image produced “from below” therefore contrasts with the interpretation proposed by national institutional channels. Local realities reveal a territory that sees itself as the product of a history that is in many ways common and of shared interests, both present, and future. The geographical definition thus gives way to a socio-economic interpretation, as emphasised by the mayors of Volta Mantovana, Bertaiola, and Casalmoro, Perini, albeit on opposite sides. Respectively, they say: ‘*Alto Mantovano* has always been understood as that part of the territory of the province of Mantua that looks towards the Brescia and Verona areas and, therefore, it should be understood as that area that goes from Asolano to Castiglione and ends in the hills overlooking the lake’ (L. Bertaiola, personal interview, March 14, 2016) and ‘in my opinion, *Alto Mantovano* is that area that naturally extends towards the province of Brescia and the lower Garda area’ (F. Perini, personal interview, March 15, 2016). To confirm this perspective, the mayor of Solferino Felchilcher, interviewed on the possibility of territorial unions, maintains that ‘it is not correct, if it happens, to choose to include this territory in the province of Cremona, in what could be a hypothetical Lombard canton, because I believe that *Alto Mantovano* should rather be linked to the lower Brescia and lower Garda areas. It is important in these choices to create a macro-region with similar interests, such as those we have with the Brescia area’ (G. Felchilcher, personal interview, March 12, 2016).

The different positions are also confirmed by the relationship between the Alto Mantovano network and that of the provincial capital, Mantua. While for some municipalities there is a synergy between the two networks, understanding the Alto Mantovano as a periphery of the Mantuan one in the strict sense of the term, for others, there is an obligation, forced by the abolition of the provinces delegated by the region to promote the reference territory, to create *ad hoc* promotional channels. In other words, on the one hand, there are the smaller municipalities, which feel the need to make use of larger territorial structures with greater funds, and on the other hand, there are the bigger municipalities that can (and want to) look to an autonomist distancing from the traditional network. Thus, in the multifaceted process of identity creation of the Alto Mantovano, and in particular of its identity in relation to the historical-artistic heritage, the words of the mayor of Casalmoro fit in as well: ‘we are not Venice, Rome or Florence. We have to promote a smaller territory, so we need to make it understood. Moreover, ours is travelling tourism. We, therefore, need to think of movement routes, to be able to attract people to certain heritages but, at the same time, to encourage them to go deeper to see others: we need synergy in this. Mantua itself is too small to stand alone in an Italy with an immense heritage’ (F. Perini, personal interview, March 15, 2016), as well as those of the mayor of Castiglione delle Stiviere: ‘If in the past the control room could have been the province of Mantua, which had the institutional task, transferred to it by the region, of promoting the territory and its projects, now that the province has dismissed this function there is a risk of a deficit in what should be one of the potentialities of our territory: tourist attraction’ (A. Novellini, personal interview, March 17, 2016).

As with any identity process, however, it is the intermediate positions that prevail, trying to make tradition and innovation coexist. There is no doubt that Mantua’s lack of attention to its surrounding area in the past can be seen in the backwardness of some of its infrastructures, but at the same time, the support provided by the provincial capital in recent times is praised. ‘Historically, there has been a lack of attention from the province, especially from the provincial capital. Indeed, feeling that it was the territory’s *caput mundi*, it probably ignored interactions with the municipalities, the distant provinces of the empire, which by natural vocation were more influenced by Brescia. Today, however, also for reasons of a different scenario, conditions changed and I believe also due to the merit of some political interlocutors, it seems to me that dialogue is strong and there is greater willingness’ (A. Posenato, personal interview, March 12, 2016). Among the different reasons supporting what has just been said, the different historical domination also seems to play a major role. Marsiletti, in fact, agrees in recognizing a division in the present, believes that ‘it is not a matter of greater autonomy from the capital, but it is more a different way of thinking of the people rooted in this territory, compared to the purely Mantuan and therefore more marked by a Gonzaga history. In our territory we focus very close attention on the Brescia area: the road, which is right on the border with Goito, was the old border of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and these territories were subjected to a different domination’ (L. Marsiletti, personal interview, March 21, 2016).

Mayoress Felchilcher is the ambassador of the synthesis between the different positions: ‘I believe that we should always look for strengths and connections because this allows tourists to discover new and connected things. It is unacceptable to divide a shared heritage; these are aspects that should be enjoyed together because, for example,

reading about the history of the Gonzaga family in Alto Mantovano also means learning about the history of Mantua' (G. Felchilcher, personal interview, March 12, 2016). It is therefore clear that civic administrations need to create a strong synergy between the two networks (local and extra-local) to properly understand the historical identity of the territory, an identity that is fluid and dynamic concerning socio-cultural changes (Dowling, 1993; Bramwell & Lane, 2000).

THE LOCAL IDENTITY

Since the end of the last century, the concept of local identity has been increasing in importance within the social science debate. The contemporary studies focus on the relationships between old and new territorial actors, not only political but also economic, social, and cultural (Painter & Goodwin, 1995; Pierre, 2000; Governa & Salone, 2004; Tafuro, 2013). It is from these relationships, in fact, that the specific identity of each territory is formed, shaped by the interaction between the established tradition and the perceptions of those who live the territory every day. "Places are cultural subjects, they speak, the dialogue with the contemporaries of the long process of anthropisation through the landscape, they give back identity, memory, language, material cultures, symbolic and affective messages" (Magnaghi, 2000, p. 66). In the light of what has been said so far, the question arises whether this is really the case, whether there is an identity to restore, and, above all, what this identity is in the case of the Alto Mantovano (Censis, 2006).

Looking at the territory as a producer of memory (Pivetau, 1995), but also of a genetic code at the local level that is rooted in the past and that, appropriately valued, provides meaning to the projects of the present and the future, the mayors were asked: does a local identity exist? Most of the answers showed that today there is no longer a local identity, cancelled out by the process of globalisation that in recent years has encouraged a cosmopolitanism set up to pacify campanilism (Arrighi, 2021). The mayor of Guidizzolo Desiderati says: 'I feel I am a Guidizzolo man because I was born in Guidizzolo, I live in Guidizzolo, but in recent years I have fought to create larger delegations at the municipal level. I am for municipal fusions. I am a Guidizzolo citizen, I repeat, because I was born here, but I no longer see my village tower as the place to which I must necessarily remain attached' (S. Desiderati, personal interview, March 13, 2016). Generally speaking, a personal (non-territorial) identity linked to the fact of being born in a particular place or an identity resulting from a different dialectal accent is accepted, especially for municipalities on the border with other provinces. The mayors of Pontisul Mincio and Volta Mantovana spoke in this regard. Respectively they said: 'Our dialect is more Veronese than Mantuan, just as Castiglione's is more Brescian. Maybe it's this' (G. Rebuschi, personal interview, March 14, 2016) and 'For example, a Volta citizen has a different language from Castiglione or Solferino, which are influenced by Brescia, while we take more from Veneto. From this point of view, language is a factor that identifies a population' (L. Bertaiola, personal interview, March 14, 2016). The responses, however, are oriented towards criticism of the campanilist thinking, and only one voice is broken in its favour by Mayor Cauzzi: 'there is undoubtedly a strong presence of campanilism that should not be there. If we go into the small, even the villages lose their sense of belonging to the reference municipality, even if they are in contact with a wider context. On the one hand, campanilism is a good thing because it is created by people who are very attached to their territory, who care about it. On the

other hand, in common sense it is negative: we are all men of the world, we talk about globalisation, for or against, but we have to look outside our own backyard. The older generations are struggling, the younger generations are forced. In the future, I believe we must try to retain the positive side of these forms of campanilism, their love for the territory, conveying it in a broader perspective' (G. Cauzzi, personal interview, March 11, 2016).

If it is true that, as Magnaghi writes, there are identities that have been forgotten today, which only places can restore, the administrations entrust the reversal of this trend to the rediscovery and enhancement of the history that has shaped their territory: not only places but also local personalities with neglected merits. On this front, cultural initiatives are promoted to bring citizens closer to the history of the area in which they live, focusing especially on the younger generations. To revive a sense of local identity 'the only way is to rediscover your own history, your roots, your values. The work we have done in recent years has been to promote the artistic and cultural heritage, and several initiatives have gone in this direction: helping the schools of Castiglione and the people of Castiglione to discover buildings or places that identify our history. At the same time, we have tried to highlight some little-known local personalities by illustrating their lives and the places where they worked' (A. Novellini, personal interview, March 17, 2016).

The focus on young people is further confirmed by those who believe that 'it is above all the love of the young people who live in our area that should be valued and encouraged so that they can appreciate it and not forget it. Often it is our young people who lack historical and cultural knowledge of the area in which they live, and without this, it is difficult for them to understand what they experience every day' (L. Marsiletti, personal interview, March 21, 2016). Study, culture, teaching, and making people understand that the place where they live is rich in historical and cultural terms, are the objectives for reconstructing an identity that those who have lived in these places, perhaps for decades, have not been able to understand. "In order to be able to take care of places, it is necessary to be able to see them, to be able to recognise them, to know how to interpret the values, the reproductive rules, the deep identity" (Magnaghi, 2000, p. 79). If identity is not created by passively sharing a territory, but derives from the collective action of the subjects involved (Bourdin, 1994), each territory must therefore base its development activities on its original nature, innovating it, if necessary, according to the new logic that the subjects involved. On the relationship between tradition and innovation, there are three ways forward: radical change, fixity, compromise (Clementi, Dematteis & Palermo, 1996; Turco, 2010).

Castel Goffredo focused on radical change, which between the mid-19th century and the first half of the 20th century saw the predominance of rural life. In 1926, the Noemi hosiery factory was founded by Delfino and Oreste Eoli. In a few years, the scenario changed and the number of workers gradually grew to 700 on the Eve of World War II. Despite this, to a foreigner, the municipality still appeared predominantly agricultural, with many green areas. By 1976, the situation had changed profoundly: Castel Goffredo was an industrial district with 49 industrial companies and 261 craft businesses employing over 4000 people. In the 1990s, local hosiery production accounted for 70% of national production and 68% of exports (Camerlenghi, Rebonato & Tammaccaro, 2014). This territorial process has meant that today's administration is naturally inclined to invest in the industrial sector rather than, for example, in the

tourist-cultural sector (Meadows & Randers, 1972). 'Like all territories, we have some [historical-artistic] peculiarities but I do not believe that these can constitute a sufficient element, or not strong enough, to generate those spillovers that are instead expected' (A. Posenato, personal interview, March 12, 2016).

Cavriana, on the other hand, proceeds from the opposite side, that of fixity. Here, agriculture has maintained its role as the driving sector over time and, while on the one hand, this has made it possible to preserve the landscape from industrial encroachment and to establish an environmental constraint in 1967, on the other hand, as the mayor confirms, this trend has limited the development of an alternative economic sector, such as tourism. 'We have always had some difficulty in promoting our territory, perhaps because we are a town born with a purely agricultural culture. We haven't done what Garda Lake did over time, which started out by focusing on tourism, but we're trying to catch up in recent years' (G. Cauzzi, personal interview, March 11, 2016). As evidence of what has been said, the mayor points out that the time for lunch is culturally fixed between 12 noon and 1 p.m.; this means that restaurants only open at that time and bars close at 12 noon and reopen no earlier than 6 p.m., at the end of working hours. This excludes a large part of potential tourists who, used to the rhythms of Garda Lake, find themselves disorientated and without the proper facilities in the area which should attract them. At a time when 'agriculture has always had a strong development, but for some years now it has been struggling to move forward, farms are experiencing an ageing workforce and young people are finding it difficult to emerge, the fear is that the old farmsteads risk being abandoned and the land left uncultivated' (G. Cauzzi, personal interview, March 11, 2016). The development of the tourism sector could, in this case, be the right way out. It is clear, however, that habits are not changed so suddenly, but require a gradual process that involves devotion (Burns, 2004).

Volta Mantovana goes halfway between what has just been seen for Castel Goffredo and Cavriana. "There is no predominant sector of the economy and if in some ways this represents a weakness, for others it is also strength. Our territory has survived, or almost survived, all the various sector crises that have occurred over the decades. Indeed, this has not allowed it to reach the same levels of prosperity that have characterised other territories in certain specific moments, as happened in Castel Goffredo with the hosiery industry, but these high levels also translate, in periods when the production situation changes, into major problems of pauperisation' (L. Bertaiola, personal interview, March 14, 2016).

The starting point is, as for all the municipalities in the area, poor agriculture. However, from the mid-20th century onwards, with the irrigation of the hills, selective farming such as vines and specialised farming such as kiwis began, which, combined with the agri-tourism activity, have transformed the landscape, making the ongoing transformation profitable. Alongside these activities, the proximity to the lower Garda area has made it possible to focus a great deal on tourism as an economic resource and, since the 2000s, the municipality of Cavriana has in fact begun to invest considerable capital in this sector, both for the redevelopment of decaying buildings and for the promotion of the area. Taking these three municipalities as a point of reference, one can then place side by side each situation with the other realities of the Alto Mantovano which, depending on their morphology, have developed an economy closer to the primary, secondary or tertiary sector, even if the latter sector is the least explored (Blank, 1989; Kenny & Meadowcroft, 1999).

THE VOCATIONS OF TERRITORIES

Vidal de la Blache introduced the concept of the *'Life Genres'* (1883) to explain the diversification of local territories and landscapes. It is a way of life that takes the form of paths already marked out, habits established by heredity, organised and systematic habits, which increasingly deepen their furrow, imposing themselves by their acquired strength on successive generations. In other words, there are historical preconditions that play an important role in subsequent development: what Vidal de la Blache calls the *'Vocations of Territories'*. Based on the testimonies collected, we can ideally reshape the Alto Mantovano according to economic data, mediating between classifications "from above" and interpretations "from below". In this way three areas are obtained: a southern one (Asola, Castel Goffredo, Castiglione delle Stiviere) characterised by a strong industrial development; a central one (Casalmoro, Cavriana, Ceresara, Guidizzolo, Medole) where extensive agriculture and the expansion of the industrial sector towards the south prevail; a northern one (Monzambano, Ponti sul Mincio, Solferino, Volta Mantovana) which is instead focused on tourism in the low Garda area and on selective agriculture. The strengths and weaknesses of the local economy are linked to the three areas (Governa, 2014).

For the municipalities of the hill and foothill area, the landscape is undoubtedly one of the strong points. A green landscape, preserved from industrial interference, contrasts with its surroundings: industrial development in the south and tourist needs in the north. For the municipalities in the Po Valley area, on the other hand, the strengths are represented by industrial development, small-scale craftsmanship, and, lastly, agriculture, which remains the area's historical vocation. On the other hand, the weaknesses include the lack of communication routes which, while contributing to the isolation that is harmful to development, also promotes economic growth based on mono-sectoral activities of whatever type, creating a phase of the severe recession that is difficult to overcome when the leading sector goes into crisis (Purvis & Grainger, 2004). Contrary to Castel Goffredo, whose entire development over the last fifty years or so has been geared towards the manufacturing sector, leading today to a critical moment, in Castiglione delle Stiviere 'in recent years, we have seen the development of chemical, metalworking, and manufacturing poles, as well as the alimentary sector, which, having undergone different economic cycles, have compensated each other. This has led to a production cycle that was less strong when things were going well, but which today suffers much less from this phase of recession' (A. Posenato, personal interview, March 12, 2016).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, an attempt has been made to define *Alto Mantovano* based on the awareness of the many subjects that represent it. A definition that takes into account both geomorphological data, the *Alto Mantovano* as an area in the north of the province of Mantua, bounded by the Chiese river to the west, by Garda Lake to the north and by the Mincio River to the east, and economic data, the presence of three production macro-areas (industrial, agricultural and tourism) to which are linked the problems of stagnation of traditional activities, and socio-cultural data. Each witness has therefore added to the common feeling his meaning which, as a result of his experience and his particular reality, is shareable according to the intention with which it is formulated,

however divergent from the others. A diversity balanced, however, by a common history, namely the dominion of the Gonzaga family in the medieval past and the Risorgimento developments thereafter, which reinforces the links between the municipalities in the area.

Moving between campanilism, cultural *milieu*, and economic interests, what emerges, therefore, is a territory that feels connected by a history that is in many aspects similar and which, despite the different vocations, is perceived as culturally coherent. If the assumption is true that there are elements that only a specific place can deal with because only that place can perceive them and properly understand them, then it is not out of place to try to isolate those elements that, stratified over time, on the one hand, have made possible the creation of a collective identity of the *Alto Mantovano* and, on the other, have laid the foundations for the local development processes in force at present. What has emerged from the brief analysis presented here is that knowing a territory involves not only knowledge of the physical places but also, and above all, the relationship it has with its history, its culture, and, above all, its users.

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