

Social cohesion and economic development: some reflections on the Italian case

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The processes of globalisation, market deregulation and the retreat of the welfare state in advanced capitalist societies have revitalised the debate about how to reconcile economic development and social cohesion. This debate has been widespread in Italy, where great differences occur between local contexts as regards economic performance, the level of inequality and, more generally, the cohesion of the social fabric. Within this framework, this paper explores the level of both economic development and social cohesion in Italian provinces, through the analysis of secondary data. With particular reference to the Italian situation, the article therefore contributes to the debate on the focalisation and operationalisation of the two concepts. Finally, the complex relation between economic development and social cohesion is analysed, and its non-linear trend is outlined.

Keywords: Economic development; social cohesion; inequalities; North–South divide; Mezzogiorno; Terza Italia; Third Italy

Introduction

The economic trends of recent decades have revitalised the debate about the attempt to reconcile economic development with social cohesion. The great social contracts of the post-war period, defined at the time as Fordist, guaranteed, via the intervention of the state, an effective compromise between competitiveness, economic efficiency and growth on the one hand, and social equality on the other (Crouch 1999). In recent years, however, with the transition from a system characterised by so-called organised capitalism to a flexible model, new risks and insecurities have appeared (Beck 1992). Nowadays, advanced capitalist societies appear more deregulated than in the 1970s and 1980s, more differentiated, and more difficult to govern and to organise in a coherent and stable fashion. In other words, the issue of how to reconcile economic growth and social stability has resurfaced. This is an objective which seems much less taken for granted than it did in the industrial era, so much so that Dahrendorf has spoken, in relation to the commitment to align economic vitality with the containment of inequalities, of squaring the circle. The perspective seems almost to have been turned on its head, given that contemporary debate is increasingly pervaded by the idea that there exists a trade-off between economic efficiency and social equality (Tomassi 2009).

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The centrality of the relationship between competitiveness and social cohesion is also reflected in public discourse, in the policy area and in the legitimising rhetoric of supra-national institutions. The best known case is the Lisbon Strategy, which underlined the need for the EU to inject renewed vigour into its economy – more stagnant from the end of the 1990s than in the past – aiming at innovation, a knowledge economy, and environmental sustainability. At the same time this strategy tried to confront stagnation in levels of employment and the growing polarisation between, on the one hand, highly paid jobs requiring good qualifications and, on the other, poorly paid jobs for those with few qualifications (European Commission 2004).¹

Given the importance in international debate – in the political sphere as well as in academic and public discourse – of a joint reflection on economic development and social cohesion, let us now take a closer look at Italy. We can confirm that this theme takes on a particular importance in relation to the socio-economic structure of the peninsula. It is well known that Italy is characterised by profound regional differences in the spheres of production, economic performance and capacity for innovation. This also extends to social inequalities.

The areas of the so-called ‘Third Italy’, characterised by the development of small industries and based on a particular combination of markets, reciprocities and political exchanges, have also been analysed in relation to their capacity to stimulate economic development, thus maintaining social cohesion (Bagnasco 1988).² Furthermore, some recent dynamics have shown the difficulties of the economy of Italy faced with the challenges of innovation (Cerea, Cucca, and Rago 2010; Perulli and Pichierri 2010).

The research in this paper is closely linked to this strand of literature and can be located in the particular area of debate that we have outlined above. More precisely, the paper contains an analysis of the distribution in Italy – at sub-national territorial level (i.e. at provincial level)³ – of social cohesion and economic development and how the relationship between these two is established.

Our analysis is mainly exploratory and ‘ecological’ in nature. It is cross-sectional and has three principal objectives. First, we will try to make a contribution to the longstanding debate on the applicability of the concepts of economic development and, in particular, the concept of social cohesion. We will analyse the limits and the potential of creating composite indices from secondary data. Second, we will study how these two dimensions are distributed through Italy, interrogating the validity of some of the classic territorial divisions in the country – identified according to socio-economic variables – with particular attention to the South, traditionally the most problematic area. Finally, taking Italy as our point of departure, we will analyse the relationship between economic development and social cohesion, studying its intensity, development and shape, and taking into full consideration the differences between macro-areas.⁴

In line with our objectives, the paper is structured as follows: we begin by providing a review of the literature (Section 1) in which we will examine the major contributions on social cohesion and economic development as well as the relationship between the two. We will then look at the applicability of the concepts, showing how the indices used were put together (Section 2). Then we will move to the mapping of economic development and social cohesion in Italy (Section 3), and thereafter look at how they are related (Section 4). Finally, in our conclusion we will illustrate the main findings of our work, concentrating on some of the mechanisms which link development and cohesion, and some possible ways of analysing them.

1. The debate on social cohesion and economic development

The concepts of social cohesion and economic development, as well as the relationship between the two, have been of interest to sociologists from the very early days of the discipline. Our

analysis must, as a matter of course, recognise from the very start the principal theoretical reference points, central to guiding the phase of operationalisation, as well as the analysis of empirical data. A detailed analysis of the debate on social coherence is, to say the very least, demanding (see Camozzi 2008; Chan, To, and Chan 2006; Friedkin 2004): it is a very broad concept, with unclear boundaries, to the extent that Bernard (1999) defined it as a 'quasi concept', 'a convenience concept' or as a 'hybrid mental construct'.

Different approaches emerge from the classic discussions of the term. In Durkheim's sociology, considerations on the forms of solidarity present in society occupy a central place (Rosati and Santambrogio 2002). The issue is brought into focus primarily in Durkheim's *The Division of Labour in Society*, in which he argued that the specialisation of occupations within society increases with the move from agricultural to industrial societies (Bagnasco 2007). This process leads to greater separation, but also to a greater interdependence between individuals, linked together in a kind of organic solidarity. The more advanced this solidarity is, the more effective it is as a factor in social cohesion.

The idea that society is a complex system, made up in turn of interdependent subsystems, is central to Parsons' sociology. The fundamental question that inspires Parsons' theories relates to the conditions that make possible social order and the efficient functioning of the system. His answer is to be found in the existence of a prevailing model of ethico-cultural values which are assimilated by individuals through the process of socialisation (Bonazzi 2008). It follows that the process of interiorisation of values, on the one hand, and the fact that social subsystems are interconnected, on the other, make a society cohere.

Finally, the contribution provided by Tocqueville (2000) to an understanding of American democracy is well known. In his journey to America he noted the number of associations that 'instruct' individuals to be more cooperative and, in more general terms, to foster cooperative tendencies. Associationism and forms of civic participation are here considered one of the fundamentals of cohesion.

The three classic authors briefly discussed above give an idea of the extent to which the subject of social cohesion is at the heart of complex theoretical explanations, and at the same time is a 'guiding concept' for empirical analysis. The more recent literature demonstrates similar characteristics. Among the vast variety and multiplicity of nuances, the most common and current definition of social cohesion implies, literally, 'hold together', 'the ability to come together' (Chan, To, and Chan 2006) or, more abstractly, 'something that we all value' (Rajulton, Ravanera, and Beaujot 2007). Furthermore, as Friedkin highlights, 'As often happens with issues that generate a lot of attention, the literature on social cohesion has become more and more confusing with the increase in the number of researchers dealing with the topic' (2004, 409). The matter is further complicated by the overlapping definitions fostered in both the academic and the political spheres, the first being more theoretical and the latter more policy-orientated.

Having outlined the basic arguments, this paper will now examine in detail the dimensions of the concept of social cohesion (Bernard 1999; Jenson 1998), moving through the abstract definitions to identify the key elements that can be empirically measured through suitable indicators. Some of these dimensions pertain to the individual sphere: from trust in people and institutions to the sense of togetherness, from the presence of shared values to the willingness to cooperate, to share knowledge and valuable resources. Others can be attributed to the characteristics of the whole of society: from the presence of a strong social fabric to the ability to access resources, from political and civic participation to the control of deviance and social exclusion, and finally the quality of the environment.

Due to the vast wealth of meanings, exact definitions can vary considerably. Additionally, where these definitions have an empirical goal, the choice of dimensions is affected, as this paper will show, by the availability of data. A good balance between theoretical articulation and empirical interpretation can be found in the contributions of Berger-Schmitt, who is supported by the European Commission (2000, 2002). The author links the concept of social cohesion to two fundamental dimensions: (i) the presence/absence of inequality and social exclusion and (ii) strong social ties and interaction. These definitions are used as a starting point to produce an index that is detailed in the following paragraph.

Moving to economic development, the main dimensions of the concept seem easier to detect and less controversial. Therefore the debate deals mainly with the limits of economic indicators in the representation of development as a whole, or with the underlying mechanisms, rather than concentrating strictly on operationalisation (Martinelli 2004). In this specific aspect, definition appears indeed to be very simple, relating economic development chiefly to the level of goods available to the population of a specific country or region (Bottazzi 2007). The first measure of development is therefore economic wealth in relation to the population (Bottazzi 2007). In this sense, the classic measure of development that will also be used in this paper is GDP per capita.

It has been well known that for some time GDP has been the subject of critical reflection, inasmuch as it excludes dimensions of well-being. Moreover, it includes expenditures that clearly have a negative influence on well-being, such as, for example, the money spent following accidents or on weapons.⁵ Therefore, GDP is often accompanied by a series of indicators and indices that try to show the state of the 'social health' of a population.

Economic development and social cohesion, analytically distinct in this paper, are, therefore, both used as key features of a broad concept of growth: it is not by coincidence that their relationship is the central issue in many economic and social science studies, and benefits from a political relevance that has often helped to stimulate interest. This line of research has once again stimulated widespread debate on the idea of intense growth in limited terms of economic development. However, this only illustrates one side of the argument: there is also the idea that growth needs to be considered alongside social failings. This view is naturally also reflected in the empirical definition of the 'measurement' of development: it has earned a growing consensus, and there is even a 'Social Indicators Movement' that aims to widen the scope of empirical findings beyond simple production to provide a broad spectrum of dimensions and variables (see Zajczyk 1997).

However, these concerns are not central in this study, as we shall measure well-being within the framework of social cohesion: therefore we adopt a concept of economic development that is as 'strict and pure' as possible, not superimposed on the concept of development in the broadest sense, and disregarding its influence on social capacity.⁶

Finally, the debate contains different positions on the relationship between economic development and social cohesion. Two main approaches can be identified, based on the way they connect the two dimensions. We will call them 'culturalist' and 'developmentalist'.

According to the first line of thinking, the dimension of civicness (the backbone of social cohesion or good citizenship) is seen as an independent variable. A celebrated source in this line of research is the work of Putnam (Leonardi and Nanetti 1993), on the performance of Italian regions. His basic idea is that substantial civicness occurs when there is a high level of 'civic involvement' and 'civic commitment', both of which increase commerce, credit, craftsmanship, and economic development (Ballarino and Schadee 2005, 243). Therefore, according to this research, economic development is a by-product of civicness, the origin being civic

development, which is then followed by economic development. This argument contradicts the economic-determinant literature (Fukuyama 1995; O'Connell 2003).

The second line of thinking has, instead, clear origins in the developmental paradigm. The idea is that economic development and social cohesion are inextricably and strongly linked, the prime mover being economic development. It develops the theory, supported by cross-national comparative research, according to which there is a curved-line relationship, usually positive, between development and equality. This can also be connected with 'positive change towards more civic and work-related values and attitudes among people' (Inglehart 1997; O'Connell 2003, 244). In other words, within certain limits, the growth of economic development decreases social inequality, and tends to increase social cohesion. A possible reference is the Kuznets curve; or rather the graphic representation of the second line of thinking where economic inequality grows during the first phase of development in a country, but then begins to decrease, reaching a certain level of average income and full industrial maturity (Kuznets 1955).

For the purposes of this study, we have given above a brief description of the two approaches, illustrating the polar extremes. In reality the issue is far more complex and there exists a variety of arguments, which usually consist of a mixture of the above approaches. They do, however, provide a basis for other arguments, which have gained consensus and have an important role in public debate on the process of policy-making. With regard to cultural rhetoric, the academic work of Putnam is well known, and is often used by the general public to idolise the civic culture and civic society that sustains them, neglecting, however, other aspects of social structure, and political and economic systems. The developmental arguments also provide some appealing stimuli for political discussions and are a source of popular understanding (Franzini 2010). Some of these, for example, have been used to legitimise the so called *Washington Consensus* that supports a policy of minimal economic intervention, for instance liberalisation of the markets and business, reduction in public spending and maintaining a balance of spending. These, it is argued, would create development which would then lead to the positive consequence of social justice.

The conflicting ideals of the 'developmental' and the 'cultural' arguments effectively illustrate the terms of the debate on the relationship between cohesion and development; nevertheless this can be misleading for interpretive purposes because it implies that they are mutually exclusive. We will expand on this point in the conclusion.

2. A hypothesis of operationalisation of the concepts of social cohesion and economic development

In this section of the paper we will break down the concepts into the relevant dimensions and the indicators selected to describe them, and we will then focus on the construction of combined composite indices.

First, it is important to clarify that in this paper the concept of social cohesion will be treated as a systemic property of a whole society and therefore will deal with both the individual and collective actors (organisations and institutions) that comprise the concept (see Guizzardi 2008; Lockwood 1999). In order to observe the levels of cohesion in any given local community, rather than in an individual's experience, it seems appropriate for the research to be conducted on ecological data. This paper does not aim to analyse aggregated data to infer the performance of individual elements, but to outline the characteristics of the contexts as a whole.⁷

The concept of social cohesion is, as illustrated in the previous paragraph, multifaceted. If each theory can be explored empirically, in some cases finding data (in particular of the subjective dimensions) can result in problems that affect the process of operationalisation

(Poggio 2007). This implies, therefore, the exclusion of some dimensions and a series of backward steps in order to reach a compromise between (i) the representation of the concept, (ii) the definition in the literature and (iii) the availability of data.

In this sense, reference to the Berger-Schmitt definition (see Section 1 above) represents a satisfactory solution, in that it insists mainly on systematic aspects of social cohesion, overlooking the subjective dimensions of trust, which can be difficult to explore on a provincial level with secondary data.

The two central dimensions of the definition (the presence/absence of inequality and social exclusion and the strength of social ties and interaction) have been previously categorised into four fields: (i) the polarisation of distribution of resources, (ii) exclusion and disadvantage; (iii) participation and (iv) civicism, and all of these have then been operationalised across an array of indicators (see Table 1).

Regarding the distribution of resources, indicators from the more traditional fields of study have been chosen: income, housing and education, in which both the level of polarisation of distribution and the presence of bands of exclusion will be considered. We have extended the field of study to include relevant topics such as work, deviance and health. As for the dimensions of links and participation, the indicators used are borrowed from the best known analyses of the phenomena (see Cartocci 2007; Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti 1993) with additional data on recycling. These data present some problems: membership and recycling are affected by the services on the ground and by institutional intervention. Therefore, we have to deal with indicators which are partially invalid and do not fully flesh out a multidimensional concept like civicism: however, they do allow us to collect some information.

Deciphering the concept of economic development is much more straightforward, by virtue of the choice to concentrate on so-called *hard* dimensions, without superimposing the general idea of development, therefore excluding the sphere of well-being (see previous section). Moving through the abstract theories we have identified three dimensions and their indicators: (i) the volume of production, of which the indicator is GDP; (ii) wealth, indicated by family assets, and (iii) employment, expressed by the rate of employment (see Table 2).

The indicators illustrated are then put together to form two composite indices, one relative to economic development and the other to social cohesion. For the latter an intermediate index is then calculated, relative to the dimensions listed in Table 1 (polarisation, exclusion, participation and civicism).

By referring to the classic conception of operationalisation of complex concepts (Lazarsfeld 1969), the construction of the additional indices starts from an elevated number of variables. This entails difficulties and raises some methodological issues. The empirical analysis of these complex phenomena requires an unavoidable, but necessary, process of simplification. As Marradi states, 'Every time you want to combine one or more indicators, the semantic complications increase almost exponentially, the decisions necessary to reduce the typologies are always problematic and the intellectual control at the heart of the process and of the results decreases' (Marradi 2007, 186). With the various risks in mind, we offer, in a schematic form, some comments on the construction of the indices used:

- In the absence of empirical evidence or references in the literature we have chosen to attribute equal weight to each constituent dimension of the indices (0.25 in the case of social cohesion, 0.33 for economic development).
- The variables used have been normalised in the variation field, attributing a value of between 0 and 100. This choice can involve the risk of increasing the gaps if they are

Table 1. The concept of social cohesion: dimensions and indicators.

Dimensions		Indicators
Social cohesion	Disparity, inequality, exclusion	<p>Polarisation of distribution of resources</p> <p>Income</p> <p>Housing</p> <p>Education</p> <p>Income</p> <p>Housing</p> <p>Education</p> <p>Work</p> <p>Deviance</p> <p>Health</p>
	Links, relation, participation	<p>Exclusion and disadvantage</p> <p>Participation</p> <p>Membership, voluntary</p> <p>Vote</p> <p>Recycling</p> <p>Daily reading</p> <p>Blood donation</p>
		<p>Gini's D* index of taxpayers for bands of income (2005) – Elaborations on data from the Finance Ministry</p> <p>Gini's D* index of housing occupied by residence for state of conservation (2001) – Elaborations on Istat data</p> <p>Gini's D* index of residents with educational qualification (2001) – Elaborations on Istat data</p> <p>Taxpayers under €10,000/year – val % (2005) – Elaborations on data from the Finance Ministry</p> <p>Buildings in poor state of repair out of the total occupied buildings – val % (2001) – Elaborations on Istat data</p> <p>Illiterate and without educational qualification out of total of residents – val % (2001) – Elaborations on Istat data</p> <p>Inhabitants aged 0–59 unemployed in families – val % (2004) – Istat</p> <p>Index of delinquency – violent crime (2003) – Istat</p> <p>Chance of life at birth – average based on sex (2004) – Elaborations on Istat data</p> <p>Volunteers in organisations out of 10,000 residents (2001) – Istat</p>
		<p>Electoral participation – average value (2001–2006) – Elaborations on data from the Home Office</p> <p>Tonnage of recycling out of total of refuse produced – val % (2005) – Elaborations on data from Arpat</p> <p>Readers of news per 100 inhabitants (2002) – (Cartocci 2007)</p> <p>Blood donors per 100 inhabitants (2002) – (Cartocci 2007)</p>

Table 2. The concept of economic development: dimensions and indicators.

	Dimensions	Indicators
Economic Development	Volume of production Wealth Employment	GDP (2005) – Istituto Tagliacarne Family assets (2005) – Istat Rate of employment (2005) – Istat

small, but permits a more efficient comparison between cases. Furthermore, the distortion effect is weakened by the territorial scale and by covering the whole population (Italian provinces).

- The intermediate and final indices are obtained respectively from the average of the indicators and of the dimensions, but have a theoretical variation field of 0 to 100. The dimensions of polarisation of distribution of resources and exclusion, in the constructions of the overall index of social cohesion, are considered to have complementary values.⁸
- The indices of polarisation have been calculated using the measurement of dispersion of the Gini D^* index for ordinal variables (see Leti 1983), an operator that reaches its maximum when the observations are equally distributed in the two extreme modalities, and the minimum when the observations are concentrated in the same modality:

$$D^* = 2 \sum_{k=1}^{K-1} [f'_k(1 - f'_k)]$$

where f'_k represents the cumulative frequency relative to the k^{th} modality.

- The variables used to construct the indices show a very strong correlation between them and the indices themselves. If on the one hand this renders the indicators ‘redundant’, on the other hand it seems to confirm the existence of a common root, or of a hidden dimension.
- Strong correlations exist between the variables used and the numerous variables that were considered in the first round of sorting, and then excluded from the final index. These can also be used, on a theoretical level, to describe the concepts being studied. The possibility of constructing different indices without substantially altering the results, according to the principle of interchangeability of the indices (Lazarsfeld 1969), is a confirmation of the validity of the choices made.
- The robustness of the indices used for the analysis was tested by comparing them with other indices that were produced from the same variables but with different methods, according to the additional procedure applied to the standardised variables rather than to the normalised variables and across the analysis for principal constituents. In both cases the indices obtained a correlation higher than 0.90 with those used.
- The index of social cohesion is expressed within a timeframe that is more extensive than that of economic development. As a result of the limited data available and the fact that this study had to resort to the use of the census as a source of data, the first index is made up of indicators between the years 2001 and 2005, the second on data taken only from 2005. Despite the fact that the two dimensions are measured in different timeframes, they are actually relatively contemporaneous. A choice of this kind will probably result in the relative stability of some of the variables used to describe cohesion, especially those used from the census. However, the relationship between the provinces, in terms of economic

development, does not seem to be particularly altered in the period referred to. The added value per capita for every year referred to and the GDP per capita of 2005 show correlations that never fall below 0.98.

3. Cohesion and economic development indices of Italian provinces: the relationship between internal dimensions and territorial representations

In line with objectives of this study, we will in this section survey both of the key findings that emerge from the analysis of the indices and of their territorial distribution.

With regard to social cohesion, two processes appear to be necessary: the analysis of the relationships between the various constituent dimensions of the concept and of the relative index, as well as the examination of their territorial distribution.

An important fact that should be highlighted is the existence of strong relationships between all the reconstructed dimensions – in particular the strong positive correlation between the index of exclusion and that of polarisation of resources, and between the index of participation and that of civiness. On the other hand, the two indices that pertain to the dimension of inequality are negatively correlated with the indices of links, as shown in Table 3. The resulting index of social cohesion illustrates, therefore, a higher internal coherence, since it is made up of deeply interconnecting dimensions.

The results appear to confirm the ideas suggested in the literature. At national level the provincial contexts that are characterised by a high level of inequality and exclusion show a limited creation of links, participation and civic feeling. Strong correlations, as expected, are also found in the indicators, particularly relating to income, housing, education and deviance (we will expand in the following section on the correlations at national level).

We will now consider the second objective of the descriptive phase of this study, the analysis of how the values of indices for the 103 provinces in Italy are distributed throughout the national territory. It emerges that there is a divide in cohesion between the North and South with the North-East taking a slight lead (see Figure 1). Within this area there are some niche territories, distributed in a random fashion, where cohesion is slightly higher: for example Ravenna, Reggio Emilia, Parma, Vicenza, Treviso, Siena, Livorno. These are some of the provinces of the Centre-North-East that have an average-size capital city and are traditionally characterised by social equality and economic well-being (see Serravalli 1999).

Examining the index of economic development, the homogenous internal results are more discernible than those of social cohesion⁹. You can see a pattern of territorial distribution that is more defined (see Figure 2). The North overall stands out against the rest of the country, showing once again high levels of development. However, even within the provinces there are certain areas that have a higher level of economic development due to their proximity to each other.

Table 3. Correlation between the intermediate indices of social cohesion.

	Index of EXCLUSION	Index of POLARISATION	Index of CIVICNESS
Index of EXCLUSION	–		
Index of POLARISATION	0.737 ¹	–	
Index of CIVICNESS	–0.773 ¹	–0.549 ¹	–
Index of PARTICIPATION	–0.818 ¹	–0.530 ¹	0.739 ¹

Note: $n = 103$

¹The correlation is significant at the level 0.00.

These areas cluster along the Emilian axis which – in turn – meets with an axis that runs down from the Trentino to the Po valley, passing through the west of the Veneto and eastern Lombardy. These are areas historically characterised by industrial districts and the widespread production of goods in small and medium businesses, creating a rich basin of economic development that is typically referred to as ‘the Third Italy’. To these areas we should also add the metropolitan area of Milan in the north-west and the provinces of Cuneo and Aosta.

Summarising on a national level, the data from the maps in Figures 1 and 2 confirm the divide between the strong Centre-North (especially the North-East and the Emilia-Tuscany zone)¹⁰ and a South that is consistently lagging behind, both in economic performance and in social fabric. This divide is also widely supported in both the literature and public discourse. We will try, however, to develop the picture, by looking beyond the stereotypes of the South and the narrow subject of the so-called North–South divide.

The data shown confirm that ‘the South remains the most underdeveloped area of the country’ (Triglia 2011, 41). This discrepancy can be only partially weakened if one takes into consideration the unofficial economy (Istat 2010; Ricolfi 2010).¹¹ From these data, it is evident that the South struggles to ‘spark growth capable of self-sufficiency’ (Triglia 2011, 42). However, it is striking that despite an abundance of data the issue of the South has been

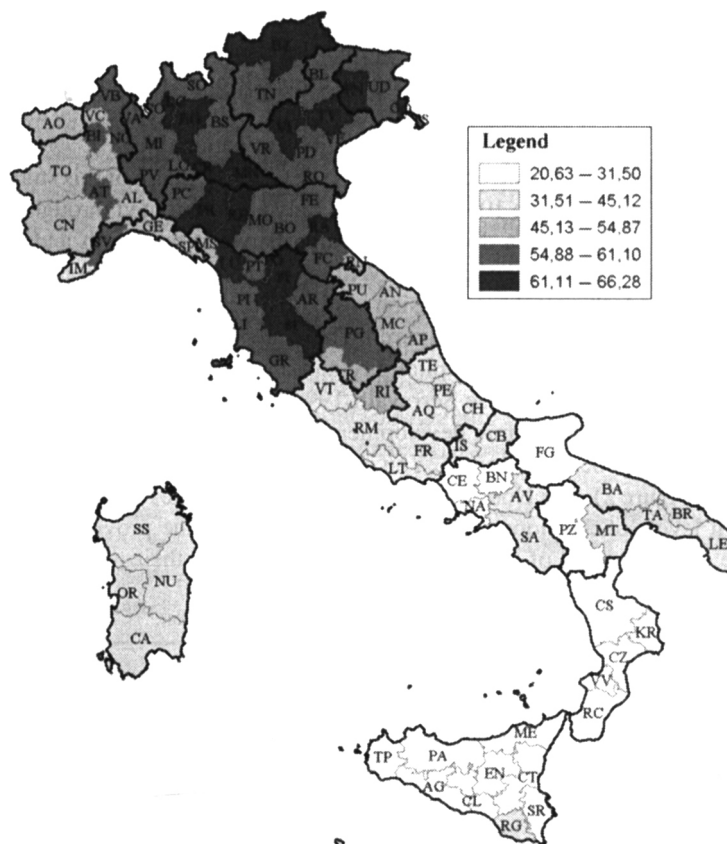


Figure 1. Index of social cohesion – geographical representations.

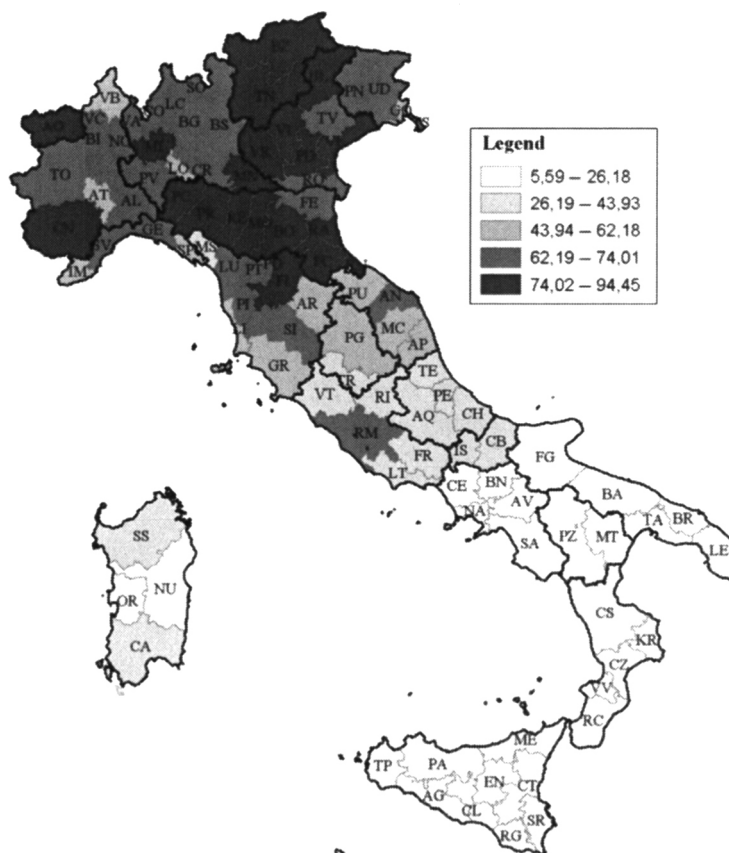


Figure 2. Index of economic development – geographical representations.

overlooked in recent years by scientific debate, is an object of only occasional interest, yet is exploited both in public and political discourse (Viesti 2011).

Nevertheless, the south of Italy is not completely homogeneous, nor is it distinguished only by relative underdevelopment and stagnation. The differences between the provinces are considerable and have grown in recent years (Busso and Storti 2011; Cannari and Franco 2011). Compared with other territorial macro-distributions, the South consists of a cluster of provinces that are less homogeneous.¹² For instance, the Adriatic ridge made up of Puglia, Molise and Abruzzo is considerably livelier and has a strong manufacturing industry (Viesti 2011), while the situation is more serious in the provinces of Campania, Calabria and Sicily. These are the three regions that struggle to find a road to economic development, even by the standards of the South. However, not even in these areas can backwardness be considered a generalised feature, since even here there are ‘businesses and territories’ that try to overcome the obstacles and difficulties presented by a somewhat inactive context (Asso and Trigilia 2010). For example, Siracusa and Ragusa in Sicily are known for the presence of a traditional industrial sector, which has benefited from a keen entrepreneurial input in recent years.

Overall, the empirical findings require a variety of analytical approaches. If we focus on the growth of the South, we find the existence of ‘more than one South’ (Trigilia 2008), even though

in many areas it lags persistently behind the Centre-North: this, however, is manifested in variable structures and gaps. If we examine further the heterogeneity within the South, we can see that some indicators (GDP and income) show the situation to be more complicated in an area which is clearly stagnant when compared with the rest of the country. In other respects (the level of employment and the rate of unemployment), the southern provinces that are more thriving appear to be nearer the national average, with an immense gap between them and areas of lower economic performance.

4. The relationship between social cohesion and economic development in Italy

The relationship between social cohesion and economic development can, in the first instance, be examined through an analysis of the correlation between the two composite indices. As the analysis of distribution detailed in previous paragraphs has suggested, these have a similar trend, confirmed on a statistical level by a correlation that seems to leave no room to doubt either the consistency (narrowness and intensity) or the direction (see Figure 3). However, a more careful analysis of the distribution in the Italian provinces with regard to both cohesion and development shows that their relationship does not have a linear trend. With the growth in the value of development the ‘cloud’ shape made by the points seems to expand and the correlation diminishes.

This hypothesis is confirmed by looking at the same correlation distinguishing the cases on the basis of the level of economic development (see again Figure 3). For the 42 provinces that are

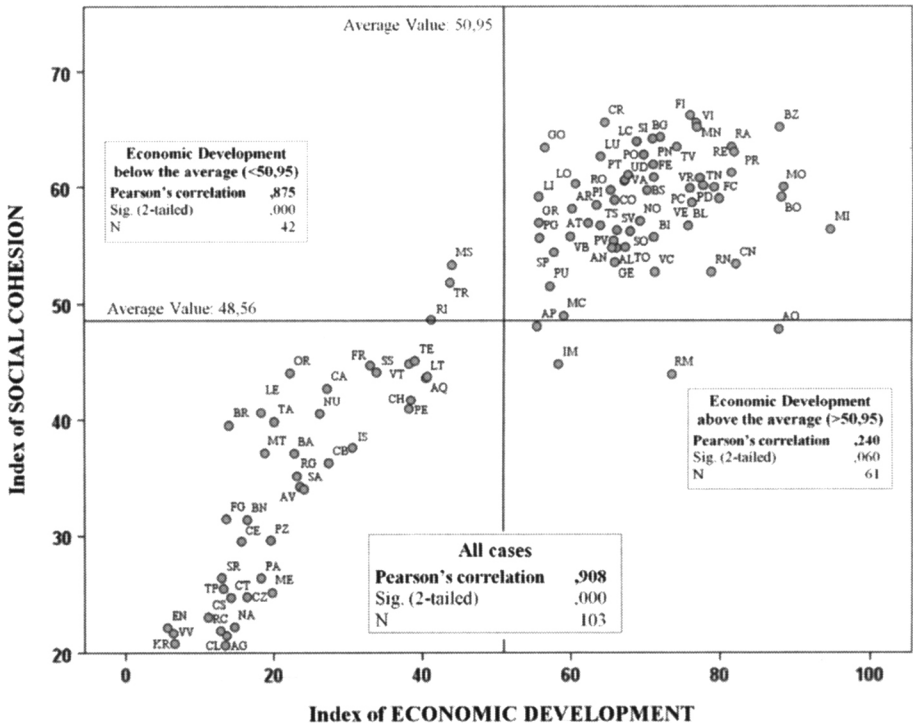


Figure 3. Relation between the index of economic development and the index of social cohesion.

below the national average the relationship remains strong and significant, while the 61 provinces above the national average show wider dispersion, and a correlation that diminishes and loses significance. The analysis suggests the presence of a 'threshold effect' in the relationship between social cohesion and economic development. This seems to matter decisively only for the lower levels of development; for the higher levels of development (see the section at the top right of Figure 3) the connection between the two dimensions is not discounted.

Is it possible by analysing our data to identify the factor that decreases the strength of the correlation?

To better understand the aggregated effect it can be useful to consider the correlation between economic development and the specific dimensions that make up the index of cohesion (operationalised through the intermediate indices, see Section 2), proceeding also both to examine the overall picture and to differentiate both groups in respect of the average value of economic development (Table 4). The idea behind this process is to try to identify the 'irregular trend' – at various levels of development – of one or more of the ingredients that make up the concept of social cohesion.

The dimensions of participation, of civicness and of exclusion show substantially similar trends to those from the combined index: strong correlation of all the provinces. The correlation remains significant and positive, though diminishing, even if we study the cases separately – those from the lowest level of economic development, on the one hand, and those from the higher level of development, on the other (see Table 4).

The most interesting feature is definitely the relationship between polarisation and economic development, which shows a clear U trend (see Figure 4), with equally strong and significant correlation, but with the two groups of provinces at high and low development on opposite sides. However, the other constituents of social cohesion – participation, civicness and exclusion – are correlated with economic development on all levels, in a strong and coherent manner as expected. Therefore the diminished relationship between the combined indices and the growth of development is primarily traceable to the trend of polarisation of distribution of resources.

This statistical relation between the indices has a clear substantive meaning. The U trend implies that where there is a lower level of economic development the distribution of resources is for the most part polarised: the disparity in inequality of educational qualifications, of quality of housing and, above all, of levels of income are the most pronounced indicators. The distribution of these resources becomes more homogeneous in the presence of an intermediate level of development, then unequal again where economic development is higher.

Another significant and interesting finding is the level of polarisation in the provinces that have the biggest metropolitan areas with a population exceeding 600,000: Rome, Milan, Naples, Turin, Palermo and Genoa. These provinces have higher values in the index of polarisation compared with the national average, as well as lower values in the indices of social cohesion compared with the provinces of the macro-areas to which they belong. By analysing the distribution of income in the capital cities of these provinces, the hypothesis that the big cities are characterised by greater polarisation of resources appears to be confirmed.¹³ Furthermore, in these capitals the number of people who claim to earn an annual income of above 100,000 euros is 5.64 times higher than those who earn less than 10,000 euros. Capital cities from the other provinces have a value of 1.52. It can be argued that the dimensions of urban centres have an important interpretive role, especially regarding the polarisation of resources. The economic fabric, in particular the finance industry and the so-called knowledge economy, is centred in the urban areas: however, these are the areas that seem to generate inequality, especially with regard

Table 4. Correlation between economic development and the dimensions of social cohesion.

	Index of ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT		
	All cases (<i>n</i> = 103)	Economic development below the average (<50.95) (<i>n</i> = 42)	Economic Development above the average (>50.95) (<i>n</i> = 61)
Index of SOCIAL COHESION	Correl. Sig.	0.908 0.000	0.875 0.000
Index of EXCLUSION	Correl. Sig.	-0.887 0.000	-0.869 0.000
Index of POLARISATION	Correl. Sig.	-0.622 0.000	-0.647 0.000
Index of CIVICNESS	Correl. Sig.	0.835 0.000	0.554 0.000
Index of PARTICIPATION	Correl. Sig.	0.828 0.000	0.846 0.000
			0.240 0.060 -0.274 0.033 0.409 0.001 0.332 0.009 0.350 0.006

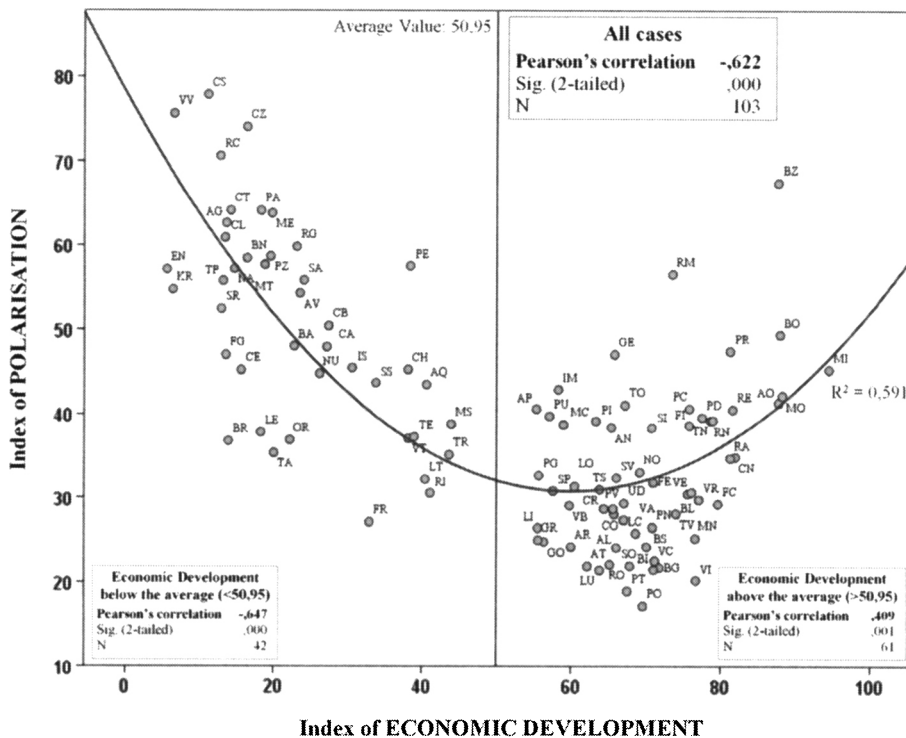


Figure 4. Relation between the index of economic development and the index of polarisation.

to the increase in income disparities. Though faced with inevitable differences and continual evolution, the observation that ‘the overall dynamic of polarisation in profit levels in the urban economy remains in place, as do the distortions in many markets’ (Sassen 2002, 37)¹⁴ seems also to be significant in the Italian case. The importance of the metropolitan context, signifying a scenario where the relationship between dynamic economy and capacity for social cohesion decreases, confirms that we are faced with a multidimensional relationship.

The analysis of the relationship between economic and social cohesion requires yet further study. It is well known that in the Italian case almost all the variables are correlated with the North–South territorial variable, ‘which acts as a third variable that influences all social phenomena, which therefore appear to correlate between themselves unless the territorial variable is kept under control’ (Corbetta 1999, 618). It is, however, appropriate to examine in ‘net’ terms the relationship of ‘belonging’ to a particular territory. To do this we have put together two indices that measure social cohesion and economic development based on the variance between the provincial value and the average value both in the macro-area of belonging and in the region.¹⁵ The correlation between the relative indices of the macro-area and the region allows us to identify the effect of belonging. The correlation actually falls as the level of territorial detail of the indices increases (see Table 5), but, taken as a whole, remains significant, and seems to show a similar trend: stronger at lower levels of development, and of little significance at higher levels. This leads us to two conclusions: (i) the variable territorial collocation exercises an influence on the relationship and (ii) the relationship nevertheless has a ‘net’ influence on territorial variables.

Table 5. Correlation between the absolute and relative indices of social cohesion and economic development.

Correlation between index of SOCIAL COHESION and index of ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT (absolute indices)	Pearson correlation Sig. (2-code)	0.908 ¹ 0.000
Correlation of index of SOCIAL COHESION and index of ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT (indices relative to the average per macro-area)	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-code)	0.539 ¹ 0.000
Correlation between index of SOCIAL COHESION and index of ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT (indices relative to the regional average)	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-code)	0.266 ¹ 0.007

Note: $n = 103$

¹The correlation is significant at 0.01.

Conclusions: development and cohesion – a complex relationship

Moving from the main empirical findings, the conclusions offer an opportunity to focus on the key analytical issues presented at the beginning of the paper.

A preliminary challenge was that of operationalising the concept of social cohesion. It has already been said that this concept has a high level of abstraction and a complex connection with empirical reality. Therefore, it is inevitable that the elaboration of the concept for empirical ends requires the definition of ‘boundaries’ that determine the choice of single indicators. Even though this process is arguably arbitrary, it can be considered a necessary evil for any empirical research dealing with social cohesion. The study presented in this paper is no exception: we tried to reach a balance between theoretical definitions and data availability for our case study.

At a descriptive level the constructed indices, though suffering from the above mentioned trade-offs, have allowed us to reiterate the endurance of some of the historical divides that define the country and that in recent years have continued to grow rather than diminish. However, some findings could challenge arguments that are persistent in public debate: compared with the Centre-North it is actually the South that has the higher level of domestic variance. This evidence conflicts with representations of the South as a homogeneous area, which still circulate in public opinion and frequently arise in political debate.

Beyond this descriptive level, the study allows some broad considerations on the connection between social cohesion and economic development. First of all the research confirms the relevance of this nexus with regard to the Italian case, since the correlation is significant not only at national level, but also – though to a lesser degree – net of the territorial effect. We are not, therefore, faced with a spurious relationship, exclusively determined by a third variable. Furthermore, the ‘threshold effect’ pointed out in this study is not determined by the territorial dimension. On the contrary, we can conclude that the relationship between cohesion and development is influenced by the levels of the two variables: with the growth of the two indices the correlation diminishes, due to an increase in the polarisation of resources. This most commonly occurs in the big urban centres of the country.

In more general terms the presence of a threshold effect provides some critical evidence with regard to the ideal-typical conceptualisation of both developmental and culturalist paradigms.

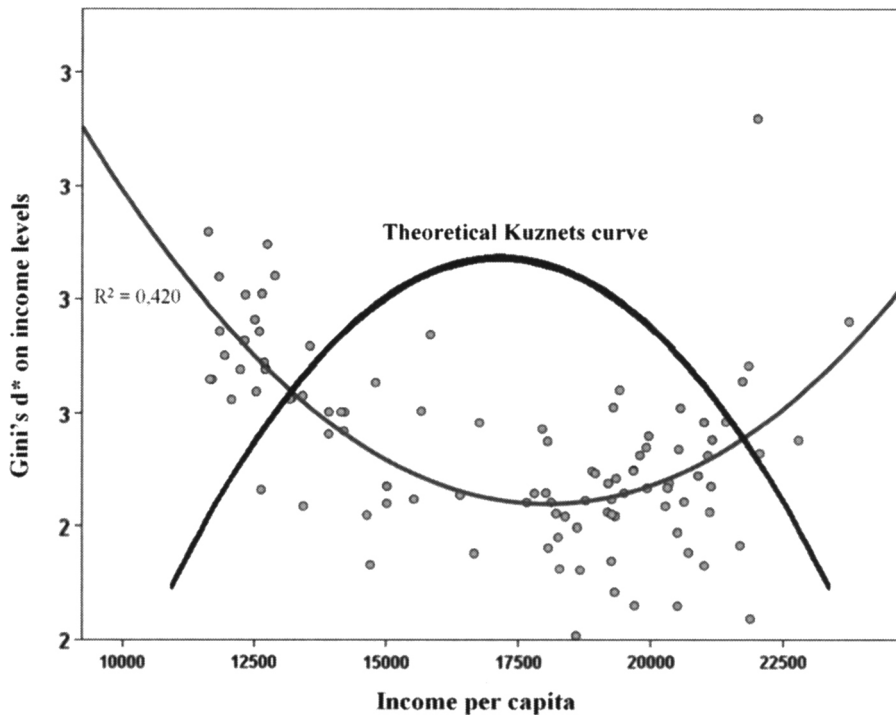


Figure 5. Relationship between income per capita and polarisation.

Indeed, as has been previously argued, the two paradigms differ in their identification of the independent variable, but are similar in their attempt to define the link between economic development and social cohesion as linear.

Moreover, within the developmental paradigm, even those contributions representing the relation as a curved line do not fit well with the data found in our study. For example, the idea that in advanced societies economic growth – measured by the increase in income per capita – leads first to an increase and later to a reduction of inequality is not corroborated. This emerges in the form of a graph in which we place the income per capita on the X-axis and on the Y-axis the data from the index of polarisation measured with the Gini index. In this space we position two curves: the first theoretical, mostly found in the works of the economist Kuznets (1955), the second obtained by the elaboration of our data (see Figure 5).

As can be seen by examining the two distributions for the high levels of income, the theoretical trend of the curve of Kuznets predicts a declining line, in other words a smaller disparity in the distribution of resources, while the empirical findings give us a different picture: as has already been underlined, with high levels of development the polarisation increases again.¹⁶

These considerations, however, do not imply that we are drawn to the opposing theory, or the 'culturalist' paradigm. The scope of the research, and in particular the non-linear trend of the relationship, suggests that it is difficult to substantiate empirically both the cultural and developmental arguments.

For this same reason it is likewise problematic to expect to theorise the existence of the casual connections, in the strictest sense, between the two dimensions examined.¹⁷ Furthermore, as the literature has argued, 'the identification of causality in social development is clearly a complex matter' (O'Connell 2003, 245).

A more convincing perspective would be to integrate the contributions of the two approaches and to provide a more sophisticated literature that illustrates the complicated crossovers between social cohesion and economic development. In other words, to open the 'black box' in order to try to articulate the relationship, through the development of a cross-section of mechanisms, between two variables that 'play' with each other.¹⁸ Spatial and temporal examples operate within variable combinations of mechanisms, the aggregated effect of which impacts on development and social cohesion in unexpected and unpredictable terms when viewed in the light of extensive ecological data.¹⁹ We suggest, as illustrated, a possible combination of mechanisms which, in the presence of social cohesion, cause a decline in development. Solid social links could favour a certain economic conformity, which finds it difficult to pick up new market signals and tends to stick to the old economic routines, possibly causing a decline in performance. Furthermore, more cohesive social networks can embrace an unconditional altruism that identifies the interests of the individual with those of the collective, offering limited incentives to develop the economy (Steiner 2001).

The study of a relationship this complex, however, requires the elaboration of two types of distinct, though complementary, analysis: the identification of the connections between the dimensions and the reconstruction of how these connections are configured.

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Notes

1. These discussions do not just relate to large-scale national and international contexts, but also to more geographically restricted areas. A case in point is the study of what is termed 'urban political economy' which analyses – in small city districts – the links between economic processes and social segregation (Ranci and Torri 2006).
2. Areas that correspond to the 'Third Italy' model are, as is well known, mainly located in the central and north-eastern regions of the country.
3. Although the provinces are subject to economic processes that extend beyond their boundaries, they are usually used in Italy as units of analysis in the context of this 'ecological' type of research, which focuses on issues relating to socio-economic development (i.e. Ballarino and Schadee 2005). Furthermore, territorial units based on economic rather than administrative boundaries, such as local labour systems (Sistemi Locali del Lavoro), while presenting some potential advantages as compared with provinces, do not offer a sufficient number of indicators for the type of analysis we are carrying out. For these reasons – even though there are some limitations – we believe that the choice of provinces offers the best balance between the available data and the issues we wish to explore.
4. As we will show, our aim is not so much to identify causal links between economic development and social cohesion, a problematic operation from both analytical and empirical perspectives. Rather we wish to look at how the relationship holds together, and how the individual elements that make up the relationship are themselves maintained and develop.
5. There is an extensive amount of literature on this issue. Among the most recent we have chosen to highlight the study conducted by the economists Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi, which aimed to define the unit of measure capable of evaluating both economic performance and social progress (Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi 2010).

6. It is useful to add that even by concentrating only on economic development, GDP creates controversies: for example, it does not take into consideration productive activities that are informal and sometimes illegal, and which do not pass through the market. Similar controversies decrease with indicators at the provincial level, in that they provide estimates and not direct statistical findings. However, in spite of these criticisms, the substitution of GDP with an alternative measurement framework has rarely been tried, at least in studies that compare territorial units on a sub-national scale (Ricolfi 2010). Hence the choice of this indicator is dictated not only by the lack of an alternative but also to conform with the literature on the subject.
7. In this sense, it is important to avoid falling into the 'ecological fallacy': in our study the correlations actually follow the territorial aggregates, without being used as surrogates for correlation at the individual level.
8. As social cohesion is defined as the absence, or reduction, of disparity and of levels of exclusion.
9. The correlations between the three variables used never fall below 0.95.
10. Other than being the section of the country averagely more successful, the Centre-North-East is the area denoted by the lowest internal variance – measured by the coefficient variation – in relation to both economic development and social cohesion.
11. The estimates relative to the extent of the hidden economy cannot be used in our elaborations as they are not disaggregated beyond the regional threshold. These, however, confirm the extent of the unofficial economy in the South compared with the Centre-North (Istat 2010).
12. The great internal variability, in terms of development and cohesion, of the southern provinces clearly emerges if one compares the coefficient of the variation percentage of the macro-areas (obtained by dividing the standard deviation by the average and multiplying it by 100). The South: 45.69 for economic development; 25.5 for social cohesion (North-West: 12.7; 8.9, North-East: 10.5; 4.8, Centre: 21.9; 13.1). There is an obvious internal differentiation directed towards the low end: the provinces of the South that reach a higher score in the index of economic development are actually positioned substantially below the average of the north of Italy.
13. For this purpose a supplementary study is conducted to calculate, using the same method adopted for the measurement at provincial level, the distribution of income for groups in the capital cities of the provinces (source: elaborations on Finance Ministry data).
14. Here there are echoes of the debate that has been going on since the immediate post-war years (Mills and Ulmer 1946) according to which 'average cities' guaranteed a greater equilibrium between economic development and social cohesion (see Bagnasco and Storti 2008; Lyson 2006).
15. The indices are calculated by subtracting from the provincial value the average for the macro-area. They will have an average of zero and both negative and positive values.
16. The comparison between the two curves is intended in essentially suggestive terms. Kuznets actually takes on a longitudinal perspective: 'his' curve is intended to show that inequality in the distribution of wealth reaches a maximum in agricultural society, then decreases in successive phases of development. Beyond the reference to Kuznets, what also needs to be underlined is the difficulty of sustaining in a systematic and consistent way the concept that development has a positive effect on the decrease in inequality (see Franzini 2010).
17. Furthermore, from a technical point of view a process of this type, which presents the analytic vulnerabilities we have referred to, would require a longitudinal and diachronic analysis, often impossible to conduct due to the lack of indicators used throughout history.
18. The output of the relation is, however, the aggregated effect of the combination of the different mix of these mechanisms acting on a micro-scale.
19. This makes the elaboration of a 'general rule', such as 'developmentalist' or 'culturalist', misleading.

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