



INSTITUTE FOR RESEARCH IN ECONOMIC AND FISCAL ISSUES

IREF Working Paper Series

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IREF WORKING PAPER NO. 202205

JULY 2022

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The roots of wealth are in the psychology of the individuals

*Alessio Cotroneo, Edson Amaral*¹

Abstract: Italy is a country marked by strong social and economic inequality among its regions. This inequality not only has deep secular roots, but seems to insistently resist the decades of public policies of redistribution and stimulation carried out by the Italian state. Nevertheless, what we notice is that, at a certain moment, a cultural and psychological structure was created that decisively influenced the effective social and economic progress of the two different parts of Italy, so that, even with the Italian unification and the successive and intense redistribution policies, regional differences did not suffer any significant reduction. In this context, the present paper aims to analyse the contribution of the cultural factor, that is, the individual mentality in the achievement of wealth - and to demonstrate how, most of the time, there lie the true roots that lead to development. Using a questionnaire, we were able to measure these cultural factor values along three main axes: individualism-collectivism, Locus of Control and economic left-right; and we found different correlations with political self-identification and (macro)region of residence.

Keywords: Italy, federalism, inequality, wealth, psychology.

1. Introduction

What is the key ingredient that enables economic and social development? Max Weber tried to answer this question with his '*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*' (Weber 1905), using methodological individualism as a tool and considering culture as a product of the interaction between individuals as the true pillar on which economic development rests.

Following the path traced by him, there is scientific evidence that countries with an individualistic culture are the richest ones, that is, they enjoy more innovation, productivity and growth (Gorodnichenko and Roland 2011).

Secondly, the psychological measure that gauges the sense of control individuals have over their lives and, therefore, their sense of personal responsibility, usually known as Locus of

¹ The two authors contributed equally to this study.

Control, is also crucial to an individual's success and the creation of prosperity (Becker and Deckers 2012, 476).

Thirdly, the political translation of the previous two concepts corresponds to a greater propensity for ideologies based on individual responsibility and commercial openness.

Combining the three previous concepts, we constructed a questionnaire, submitted to a sample of residents in Italy, looking for differences between regions in order to construct an index indicating where to act at the policy level. This total score will be referred to as the 'Wealth Index' on the following pages.

What this study aims to emphasise is that it is not possible to solve the problems of certain economically depressed regions through incentive mechanisms via state institutions if the root of the problem is in the cultural framework: one must target the cause and not the symptoms. From this perspective, if it turns out to be true that macroscopic regularities are due to microscopic actions and interactions at the mesoscopic level, it is necessary to adopt a bottom-up methodology, which leads to the resolution of problems by acting on the micro-causes.

1.1 Historical Background

When a broad historical analysis begins, the first problem facing the researcher is the choice of the initial term from which to build, in general terms, the historical path that led to the current state of affairs.

There is always the risk of returning excessively to the past, which generates a clear loss of objectivity and an enormous increase in the natural unknowns linked to historical analysis, but there is also the risk of starting from a period excessively close to the present, which ends up not explaining many of the great and deep problems that afflict us today.

In the case of the present work, it seems reasonable to assume that many of the socio-economic, ethnic and cultural characteristics perceptible in the various regions of the modern Italian state have their origin in the fall of the Roman Empire.

The reason is relatively simple: before and during the many centuries of Roman rule, the Italian peninsula was substantially under the same legal-institutional order. Throughout the territory we now call the Italian Republic, the same laws and the same economic system were in force, by and large (Gibbon 1998).

It was in 476 AD, with the Fall of the Roman Empire of the West and the institutions of numerous sovereign Germanic kingdoms over a wide extension of the former imperial

territory, that the centuries of relative peninsular homogeneity came to an end, so that Italy found itself fragmented and occupied by a myriad of peoples of laws and cultures considerably diverse among themselves.

That said, the initial term of the historical analysis is justified, and we can move on to a brief analysis of what has occurred in the territory of present-day Italy since the Fall of Ancient Rome.

Much was said about the dark years that followed after the end of the Roman Empire, but in recent decades this historical consensus has been revised. Along these lines, there are authors who today openly assert that “the fall of Rome precipitated the kind of competition-driven innovation and small-government freedom that made modernity possible in the first place” and that “Rome’s greatest gift to posterity is not that it made the West, but that, in disappearing, it made room for the West to rise” (Morgan 2021).

It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the reasons and details that led to the fall of Rome, but only to underline that, after this historical fact, there was a fragmentation of the whole European territory, which was divided into kingdoms, principalities, duchies and counties.

By way of example, “roughly nine-hundred years ago, Europe comprised thousands of independent territorial units. During the second half of the 17th century, Germany consisted of some 234 countries, 51 free cities, and 1,500 independent knightly manors, while by 1871 its complete unification was ‘achieved’ (Reimers 2019).

This particular circumstance in Europe may seem of little value, but in fact it is of extraordinary importance. Not incidentally, there are many scholars of economic history who claim that “the fact that European civilization passed through a phase in which city-states were created is essential to understanding the divergence between European and Asian history” (Higgs 2021).

This is because the political fragmentation of the European peoples during the Late Middle Ages and early modern period - a political pluralism with hundreds of distinct jurisdictions - stimulated a process of institutional and technological experimentation through which entrepreneurs were able to discover how to make labour and capital more productive.

In relation to Italy specifically, it is necessary to highlight, in general terms, the territorial changes experienced by that territory in the centuries that followed the Fall of Rome.

Initially, Italy was conquered by Odoacer, who ruled Italy as *rex gentium*. And after his fall, a series of invasions followed (Amory 2009), which will not be detailed, precisely because it is beyond the scope of this paper.

The fact is that, between 568 and 774 AD, Italy was practically divided in two, between Lombards and Byzantines - with the latter ruling the main urban centres in the centre-south, such as Rome, Naples, Amalfi, Reggio Calabria, Palermo and Syracuse (Azzara and Gasparri 2005).

At the end of this period, specifically in 756 AD, the Papal States were born, with the donation of Ravenna and adjacent territories to the Pope. From then on, Italy was practically always divided between north and south, so that in the centuries that followed, the north was largely fragmented and the south almost enjoyed a relative and growing concentration of power (Spielvogel 2013).

During the Carolingian Empire (800-887 AD), the entire northern Italy was entirely under its control, but enjoying wide institutional, administrative and legislative autonomy. In the south, in the same period, followed the "*Catepanato d'Italia*", which was nothing more than a province of the Byzantine Empire, and, after its fall, came the Duchy of Puglia and Calabria (Kreutz 1991).

By the early 1000s, northern Italy was divided into the Kingdom of Lombardy, the Marquisate of Verona, the Marquisate of Tuscany, Romagna, the Papal States and the Duchy of Spoleto, all part of the Holy Roman Germanic Empire, and the Most Serene Republic of Venice. To the south, on the other hand, there was the Byzantine Empire, the Principalities of Benevento, Salerno and Capua, and the Duchy of Amalfi (Wilson 2016).

It was during this period that the so-called "*Italia dei Comuni*" flourished, characterised by the existence of various cities that were absolutely autonomous from the Emperor of the Holy Empire (Wilson 2016), and that for a golden period of three centuries displayed economic growth and a cultural evolution that had never been seen before in human history (Montanari 2002).

This happened essentially because, due to the absence of imperial power, as early as the mid-11th century the most powerful families in northern and central Italian cities ousted the counts and bishops from exercising power (La Rocca and La Rocca 2002). Contributing to this state of affairs were the weakness of the Empire, caused by the struggles for the imperial throne between the Welfen and Hohenstaufen dynasties (Wilson 2016).

In this same period, Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa (1155-1190) came to power and fought vigorously against the papacy, feudal lords and communes, to restore his authority over them. At that time, after opposing Pope Alessandro III (1159-1181), he decided to attack them all, to ensure the free exercise of his own power. In 1162, he succeeded in destroying the *Comune* of Milan (Dilcher and Quaglioni 2008).

In reaction to this attack, the cities of Northern Italy formed the Lega Lombarda and managed to defeat the Emperor at the Battle of Legnano (1176), imposing on him the Peace of

Costanza (1183), which eventually determined the definitive recognition of the autonomy of the Italian cities (Dilcher and Quaglioni 2008).

From this period on, the cities of northern Italy found themselves in a particularly favourable situation, with wide autonomy within the Holy Roman Empire, while southern Italy began to experience an increasing concentration of power, with the creation of the Kingdom of Sicily (1190), which is considered by many scholars as the prototype of the modern European state, and governed all the territories of the Italian *Mezzogiorno* (Burckhardt 2009).

It is noteworthy that, while in the centre-north the institution of the "*Comune*" developed early and asserted itself as an autonomous entity, generating a strong dispersion, fragmentation and competition between governments, in the south the situation was quite different.

With the coronation of Roger II of Sicily (1130) as King of Sicily, the entire southern Italian peninsula came under his rule. A state was formed in southern Italy that, until its annexation to the Kingdom of Italy (1861), would have remained virtually unchanged for almost seven centuries.

It is true that this Norman kingdom was at first one of the major powers of the Mediterranean, and that the city of Palermo was among the greatest cultural, artistic and economic centres in all of Europe, but at the same time a strong State was being built there, which ended up very strongly restricting the autonomist tendencies of the High Middle Ages (Jäckh and Kirsch 2017).

In the course of those long seven centuries of concentration of power, the Byzantine-like structure of the Sicilian kingdom limited the socio-economic progress of the southern cities, which were eventually prevented from autonomously developing prosperous institutions, like their victorious Cisalpine sisters at Legnano.

In 1843, on the eve of Italian unification, the northern part of the territory was divided into the Kingdom of Sardinia, the Kingdom of Lombardo-Veneto, Parma, Modena, Lucca, the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, and the Papal States. While its southern part was composed of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, which was the political continuity of the former Kingdom of Sicily, after the determination of the unification of the Neapolitan provinces to the Sicilian provinces, according to the agreements signed at the Congress of Vienna (1814) (Mack Smith 1997).

It is quite true that at this late stage of Italian history, the north was already concentrated in the hands of a few groups (*i.e.*, the Savoyards, the Austrians, and some small dukes and lower nobles), but the difference with the south was still noticeable, since this region not only remained unified under the Two Sicilies, but had been so for the last seven hundred years.

With the Risorgimento, and the wars that followed until 1870, there was the proclamation of the modern Kingdom of Italy (1861). Since then, the peninsular territory was fully unified under a single flag for the first time since the Fall of Rome.

1.2 Psychological Background

The research underlying this article attempts to discover a potential correlation between individual responsibility and other psychological concepts of personality and cultural environment, and to do so, a questionnaire was submitted to a wide range of Italian citizens from different regions. Our hypothesis is that individuals in different regions do not have random attitudes, but are also and not only the effect of complex social interactions, but are themselves the causers of these actions, so that the individual mentality creates, through these interactions, concrete results if analysed from a macro perspective. We expected to observe differences in line with the heterogeneity of the regional division of the Italian territory.

Correlations between some psychometric measures and individual success are already known, *e.g.* the Locus of Control and the individual success in the labour market (Cobb-Clark 2015), as well as the Big Five test - due to the sub-component of Conscientiousness - and individual income (Alderotti, Rapallini, and Traverso 2021, 27).

As much as indicators such as education and cognitive skills are good predictors of success in the labour market, it is necessary to go beyond 'what is seen' and explore what is not seen. People psychologically predisposed to personal success will tend to achieve it, and if this predisposition becomes widespread within a culture, the population as a whole can only benefit from this fortunate situation.

1.2.1 Locus of control as a measure of personal responsibility

Are we responsible for our actions and what happens to us?

In the psychology of the individual, the sense of control over one's own life plays a key role in recognising and solving individual problems.

The concept of locus of control comes to our aid in describing and measuring how people perceive their problems and how they think they should be solved.

Locus of control refers to a personal, psychological characteristic that describes an individual's sense of control over life, *i.e.* whether what happens in their life is determined by

their actions and decisions. Simply put, it is a one-dimensional axis, which has at its two extremes:

- internal locus of control, whether the individual feels that he is in control of his own life, *i.e.* whether he feels that the problems he experiences are primarily related to him and that the search for a solution concerns him alone;
- external locus of control, if the individual believes he is an actor in his own life, thus if he believes that the problems he experiences are external to his command and that the solutions must therefore be external to him.

The locus of control, being a personality characteristic, influences our approach to problems and their resolution, linking to the concepts of individual responsibility, self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Looking at the already known positive correlations of the locus of control, the following can be briefly mentioned: trust, life satisfaction and labour market success. Analysis of psychological measures reveal that the locus of control helps to explain heterogeneity in important life outcomes (Becker and Deckers 2012, 469-473).

There are environments that are conducive to seeing the link between effort and outcome, whereas individuals living in unfavourable environments are likely not to perceive this causality. Thus, for individuals living in societies where nepotism, corruption and other inequitable practices dominate, success can be understood as the result of sheer luck or chance, or even just the individual's connection to some person in a position of power. (Lefcourt 1991, 413-414)

The effect of reward or reinforcement on preceding behaviour partially depends on the individual perception of the reward as a consequence of his own behaviour (Rotter 1966, 24-25).

Extending this concept to encompass the reaction to institutional incentives, it suggests that incentives designed to favour instrumental acts that should increase well-being are not perceived as such, thereby implying the futility of these mechanisms. Consequently, incentive mechanisms are a necessary but not sufficient condition to ensure that society functions in the desired manner, whereas the precondition for these incentives is that individuals are predisposed to behave - and solve problems - in the expected manner.

In cases of extreme environments, social constraints can be observed with respect to personality measurement, and it can be assumed that individual behaviour can change with alterations of environmental conditions. Trying to change outcomes by setting different incentives may be ineffective since these are not seen as the effect of certain actions and behaviours.

An internal locus of control could also be seen on an economic level as a type of incentive-enhancing preference that leads internal workers to work harder (Bowles, Herbert, and Osborne 2001, 1161-1166). On the other hand, more fatalistic workers tend to believe that the consequences of their work or behaviour do not influence their career. This external locus of control reduces the subjective marginal benefit of effort and also diminishes the capacity for self-control in resisting immediate gratification instead of the pursuit of long-term goals.

Those who believe that results are determined by external factors (*e.g.* mere luck or influence of powerful people) will also believe that the returns on effort are lower and will therefore be more difficult to motivate (Cobb-Clark 2015). Even the right incentives may not be grasped in the desired way.

The link between the individual's perception of control over their own life and institutional regulation appears to be in social ecology, since through individual behaviour and social interactions it is possible to observe organisational emergencies at the systemic level. If the conditions of a complex system like human society do not allow top-down approaches to social and economic change, it is therefore necessary to think of bottom-up solutions, emerging from the individual level. The micro-to-macro approach allows one to find the micro-motives driving the observable macro-regularities, through individual action, behaviour and interaction (Schelling 1978).

In conclusion, it seems reasonable to consider, for the reasons outlined above, that the concept of Locus of Control and the sense of individual responsibility are umbilically linked, and can be considered, for the purposes of this paper, synonymous.

1.2.2 Individualism/Collectivism axis

Of the many cultural dimensions through which a population can be studied, the most economically relevant is the individualism-collectivism axis (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov 2010, 132) (Hofstede 1984).

Individualism and collectivism reflect shared values, attitudes, beliefs organised around a central theme (Triandis 1995). Individualists have a preference for being independent, unique, focusing on their own goals; collectivists give value to group membership, social goals, family. Put simply - and without sacrificing the accuracy of the statement -, individualists think 'I' and collectivists think 'We'.

An individualist or collectivist culture is also reflected in the power of the State, *i.e.* the power of decisions taken and followed through the instruments at the disposal of the political and coercive power of the State to the detriment of decisions taken in a consensual manner

within civil society, and followed through the persuasion inherent in this decision-making model.

The weaker the individualism in the citizens' *forma mentis*, the greater the likelihood of a dominating role of the State both in the economic system as a whole, and in their private life. Individualist countries tend to be wealthier and to have smaller power distances than collectivist ones (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010, 125-126).

The cultural division between individualism and collectivism can also be seen as a political division, and has for years characterised the two groups divided by the Iron Curtain.

1.2.3 Relationship between psychology and politics

It is not wrong to assume that support for a political wing is also the result of a pre-existing psychology of the individual. In a meta-analysis of almost 80 studies, it was found that there are certain traits that characterise the conservative mindset, such as resistance to change and a preference for social hierarchies (Jost and Glaser 2003, 339-375).

Considering the 'Big Five' framework, in which five multifactorial axes of personality are measured, it can be seen that people tending to the left have a higher openness, so they are more open-minded, creative and curious; while people tending to the right have a higher conscientiousness and tend towards order and organisation (Carney et al. 2008, 836).

The role of the locus of control is closely linked to the belief system and not to mere preferences derived from specific forms of utility functions (Becker and Deckers 2012, 472). This suggests that economic actions do not depend solely on preferences, but also on personality. Thus, the mentality of the individual has a certain effect on economic development.

Looking at the differences between the psychological profiles for self-described Democrat or Republican in the United States, Democrats were driven by an external locus of control and Republicans by an internal locus (Sweetser 2014, 1191). The result should not surprise, as Republicans tend to prioritise economic arguments.

Right and left, Republicans and Democrats, have, therefore, different psychological profiles. But is it possible to trace a psychological measure back to the creation of wealth?

1.2.4 Praxeology: Why the psychology of the individuals creates (or not)

a wealthy society

According to analyses by the Maddison Project Database ("Maddison Project Database 2020") at the University of Groningen, humanity has gone from a worldwide per capita income of \$1,130 per year in 1820 to \$15,600 in 2015. This occurred at the same time as the global population increased from 1 billion people to 7 billion.

Likewise, in 1820, approximately 95% of the world's population lived in poverty, with an estimated 85% living in "abject" poverty. By 2015, less than 10% of humanity was still living in such circumstances. What we see, therefore, is that not only has the number of people in the world increased sevenfold, but each person has increased his or her income 11-fold.

This is an extraordinary feat and is due to the fact that the economy is not based on a zero-sum game, that is, the reality that relations between human beings can generate mutual benefits, which is why the amount of wealth is not fixed but can increase for both agents. Not by chance, Ludwig von Mises, in his *magnum opus* Human Action, asserted that "*the average american worker enjoys amenities for which Croesus, Crassus, the Medici, and Louis XIV would have envied him*" (Von Mises 1998, 265).

The reason for this is simple: if all the wealth in the world were static, it would be impossible for the per capita income and the world population to increase simultaneously. What would happen in such a case is that some people would increase their incomes at the expense of all the others, and the per capita income would fall, as a direct result of the increase in the total number of individuals.

Once these preliminary considerations are made to state that wealth is created through the interaction among economic agents, it is worth asking what would be the circumstances necessary for this virtuous mechanism to operate - and, furthermore, if the culture and psychology of individuals would have any relevance for this state of affairs.

Initially, it is necessary to define what is meant by wealth.

For Walter Williams, "*wealth is everything that allows us to earn a present and future source of income*" (Williams 2021). The cited author goes further, mentioning that it is not wealth that gives value to income, but it is income that gives value to wealth.

Along these lines, the value of a given piece of land does not depend exclusively on the geophysical characteristics of the land itself, but mostly on the value of all the services it allows to be exercised.

This is why, for example, a piece of land in Manhattan has more value than a piece of land of equivalent size in the middle of the Amazon Rainforest: the countless economic uses of this asset in New York are more profitable, for society as a whole, than those that can be conceived in the middle of an equatorial forest.

Given this, one might wonder why the statistics gathered by the University of Groningen would have shown such a high growth in the social and economic standard of humanity only in the last 200 years, not in the other thousands of years of human history.

And the answer is quite simple: it is the advent of the modern capitalist system - or, to use von Mises' precise terms, the *market economy system*.

This system of organising society depends to a great extent on how institutions are established, and also on how they are able to create virtuous incentives for individuals to feel confident in saving, that is, in making economic decisions based on the long term.

In this context, Cannan Edwin says that "it is necessary that Society should be well organised - that it should have suitable machinery for securing that the original powers of the people shall be great, that they and their surroundings shall be sufficiently improved, that co-operation shall be properly developed, that population shall approximate to the appropriate size, and that proper decisions shall be arrived at with regard to the amount and direction of the labour of the people" (Cannan 2008, 63)

It is for no other reason that there was an immense difference in socio-economic progress in the most famous example - and the one that comes closest to a controlled social experiment as one could probably hope to get - of the 20th Century: post-World War II Germany.

According to Hoppe, "a quite homogenous population, with very much the same history, culture, character structure, work ethics, divided after Hitler-Germany's defeat in World War II. In West Germany [...] a remarkably free market economy was adopted, the previous system of all-around price controls abolished in one stroke, and almost complete freedom of movement, trade and occupation introduced [...] In East Germany [...] socialisation of the means of production was implemented" (Hoppe 1989, 34).

In a brief period of time from a historical perspective, that is, after a couple of decades, what we saw was that, even though it was the same population involved, two different institutional frameworks and two different incentive structures caused an impressive difference in the results.

It is not even necessary to analyse the data regarding the two countries, since, as Hoppe precisely states, "the difference in living standard between the two Germanys proved to be so great and emigration from East to the West took on such proportions, that in 1961 the socialist

regime in East Germany [...] finally had to close its borders to the West completely" (Hoppe 1989, 50).

Hoppe himself, when detailing the set of conditions that generate the development of civilization, cited with special attention the temporal preference, which is influenced by biological, personal, social, and institutional factors.

However, for the German economist, institutional factors take precedence, because "no matter what a person's original time-preference rate or what the original distribution of such rates within a given population: once it is low enough to allow for any savings and capital or durable consumer-goods formation at all, a tendency toward a fall in the rate of time preference is set in motion, accompanied by a 'process of civilization'" (Hoppe 2001, 6).

This tendency to civilization could only be maintained under the aegis of non-predatory institutions, *i.e.* institutions that protect private property and guarantee a horizon of legal security and certainty, so that the individual can feel comfortable in saving today to reap greater rewards tomorrow.

These institutions, being products of human relations, depend greatly on the way a given society views labour, wealth, merit, individual freedom, and countless other factors. It is even possible that predatory institutions exist, which initiate a mechanism of "decivilization" - or which greatly reduce progress, placing an entire social body in a situation of socioeconomic stagnation for decades.

In fact, this would have been the rule throughout the course of human history, something that was only interrupted with the advent of the market economy and the ideals of economic freedom that accompanied Lockean liberalism.

In this regard, von Mises argues that: "the eminence of the Western nations consisted in the fact that they succeeded better in checking the spirit of predatory militarism than the rest of mankind and that they thus brought forth the social institutions required for saving and investment on a broader scale" (Von Mises 1998, 497).

The Italian case is particularly interesting from this point of view.

As briefly mentioned in the first part of this paper, it is a vast territory that, after relative homogeneity under the Empire of Rome, ended up spending seven centuries divided in a very marked manner: the northern half, subdivided into several state entities, with pulverised political power and relatively autonomous in relation to the Holy Roman-German Empire; and the southern half, substantially unified politically under the central power of the crown of the Kingdom of Sicily and the Kingdom of Naples, successively transformed into the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

In Italy, due to the wide competition among the northern micro-states, the conditions and incentives necessary for the flourishing of institutions and legal systems permeable to prosperity and progress were created very early on. The northern Italian citizen could vote "with his feet", that is, he could easily change his residence, opting for a city or state entity without major restrictions, in search of the best living conditions.

It is clear that this was not the norm, especially if we make an anachronistic comparison with the ease of movement that exists today in the globalised world, but for the time, northern Italy offered a possibility of mobility that was absolutely out of the ordinary - especially when talking about the elites, who could (and did) escape possible political persecution with relative ease.

In the south, the situation was relatively different, since the entire territory was under the strong control of a considerably organised State for the time, and that did not even suffer pressure from neighbouring entities to open up to trade or liberalise economic laws. In the south, mobility, even if it existed, would not have made a big difference, since within a radius of hundreds of kilometres all cities, towns and urban organisations were under the same crown.

It is true, as mentioned in the previous chapters, that since the Italian unification in 1861, Italy has contained a single legal and institutional framework. But it is also true that the great cultural differences that have been created in the course of the centuries, a product of this same enormous previous institutional differentiation, have become an almost insurmountable obstacle to the full acceptance of institutions permeable to the market economy.

Since wealth is a natural consequence of individuals' low time preference, and since this low time preference would be a consequence of the existence of institutions and a culture that protect and guarantee private property, free trade, legal security, and internal and external peace, a real change in the perspective of socioeconomic progress of a given territory would depend not only on an ascetic transplantation of successful institutions from one region to another, but above all on a major cultural change.

In other words, the imposition of beneficial institutions would not be enough for a substantial change in the status quo if it is not accompanied by a considerable change in the way individuals perceive - and respect - private property and trade. Once this perception is altered, in fact, real and positive change in institutions - what they are and how they actually function - would be anything but inevitable.

2. Methodology

The data set was obtained by means of an online questionnaire during the year 2021, promoted through various platforms. It was not possible to do otherwise due to lockdowns,

however, the age distribution of the sample was in line with the expected age distribution of the Italian population.

N = 2009 unique questionnaires were completed, the distribution of which by region is as follows:

Abruzzo	39
Basilicata	17
Calabria	33
Campania	120
Emilia Romagna	146
Friuli Venezia Giulia	58
Lazio	169
Liguria	83
Lombardia	345
Marche	42
Molise	22
Piemonte	203
Puglia	84
Sardegna	92
Sicilia	125
Toscana	160
Trentino Alto Adige	45
Umbria	22
Valle d'Aosta	11
Veneto	193

Sex distribution is as follows:

Males	1211
Females	798

While the age distribution of the sample is as follows:

18-24	219
25-34	230
35-44	228
45-54	286
55-64	513
65 +	533

The questionnaire consisted of twenty-four questions, plus personal data such as region of residence, age, gender, profession, educational qualification and political self-identification. The questionnaire can be found in Appendix A.

Within the questionnaire there are:

- 10 items for the Individualism-Collectivism axis, of which 3 with positive contribution and 7 with negative contribution;
- 7 items for the Locus of Control, of which 4 with positive contribution and 3 with negative contribution;
- 7 items for the economic vision, of which 2 with a positive contribution and 5 with a negative contribution.

Each item could be answered with a value from 1 to 5, meaning from slightly agree to totally agree.

The items for the Individualism-Collectivism axis were selected from the study by Singelis et al. (1995); the items for Locus of Control were selected from "LOC-L Locus of control lavorativo" by Vidotto and Argentero (1994) and "Economic Locus of Control" by Furnham (1986, 29-43).

The items on economic vision were designed by us on the basis of the left-right economic axis, which is not to be considered the same as the political axis - at least outside of Anglo-Saxon cultural countries. These items were chosen following the general questions of the well-known 'Political Compass' ("The Political Compass" 2022).

3. Results

The results are divided into four categories: Individualism-Collectivism, Locus of Control, Economic Axis and Total Score. The score of the three main categories is the sum of the contributions of its own items, except that for the Individualism-Collectivism axis and for the Economic Axis the values of 20 for the former and 15 for the latter were added, in order to counterbalance the number of items with a negative contribution and thus to have for all three categories a positive score. This somewhat arbitrary operation will not affect the results, but will only produce a shift in the score number.

The total score is the sum of the three above-mentioned categories. All values are rounded to the second decimal place.

3.1 Whole population

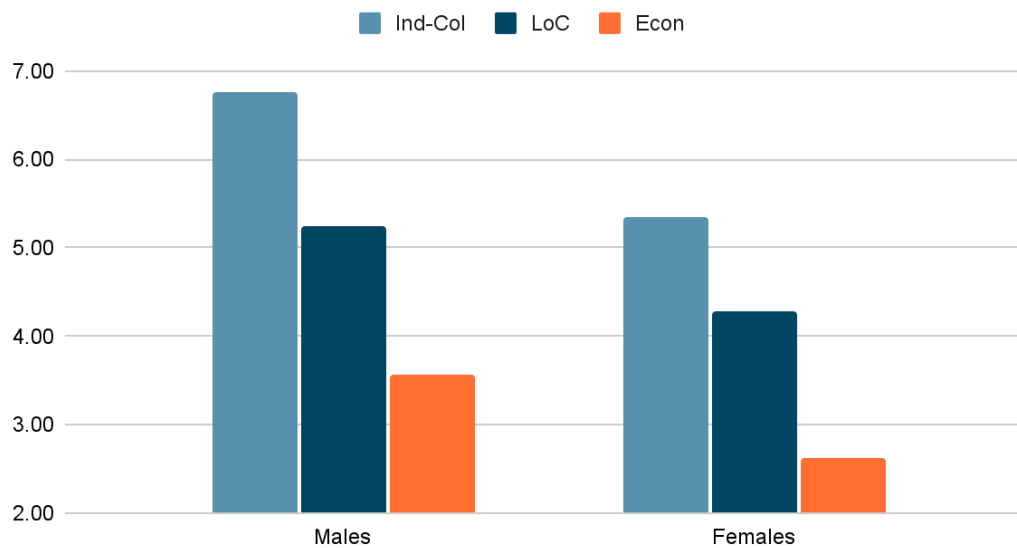
For the sampled population, the scores are as follows:

Individualism-Collectivism:	5.95
Locus of Control:	4.52
Economic Axis:	2.96
Total Score:	13.43

3.2 Sex differences

	Ind-Col	LoC	Econ	Total Score	N
Males	6.45	4.75	3.34	14.54	1211
Females	5.21	4.17	2.37	11.75	798

Sex classes



Although the distinction between genders was not one of the main objectives of this work, we took the opportunity provided by the extensive data collection to segment the groups into the traditional categories (*i.e.* age, sex, and political belonging) in order to produce a more qualified result.

It seems that normalising the data with respect to region of origin does not provide us, as a consequence, with a substantial difference in the figures shown above. However, when it comes to the normalisation for political affiliation, computed with data taken from a political poll conducted by Demos&Pi (2020), and age, the two genders become closer.

Sex classes



	Ind-Col	LoC	Econ	Total Score	N
Males	5.67	5.24	2.49	13.40	1211
Females	5.69	4.19	2.80	12.68	798

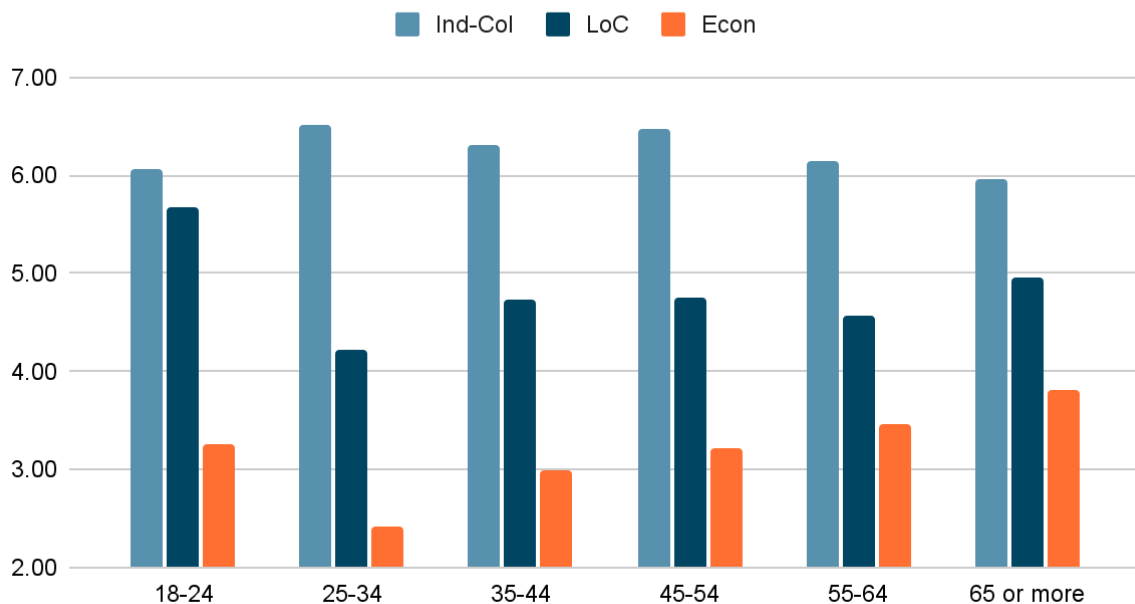
In this regard, it is interesting to note, preliminarily, that there was a significant difference between men and women before the normalisation. In fact, from the analysis of the figures, it can be concluded that the indicators showed a marked improvement, resulting in a smaller difference between the two sexes.

With more demographic information, it might be possible to improve the correlation analysis.

3.3 Age differences

	Ind-Col	LoC	Econ	Total Score	N
18-24	6.04	5.40	2.76	14.20	219
25-34	6.31	4.13	1.85	12.29	230
35-44	6.18	4.44	3.00	13.62	228
45-54	5.89	4.45	3.13	13.48	286
55-64	6.09	4.34	2.88	13.30	513
65 or more	5.58	4.57	3.49	13.63	533

Age classes



When it comes to the analysis by age, a less obvious differentiation is noted.

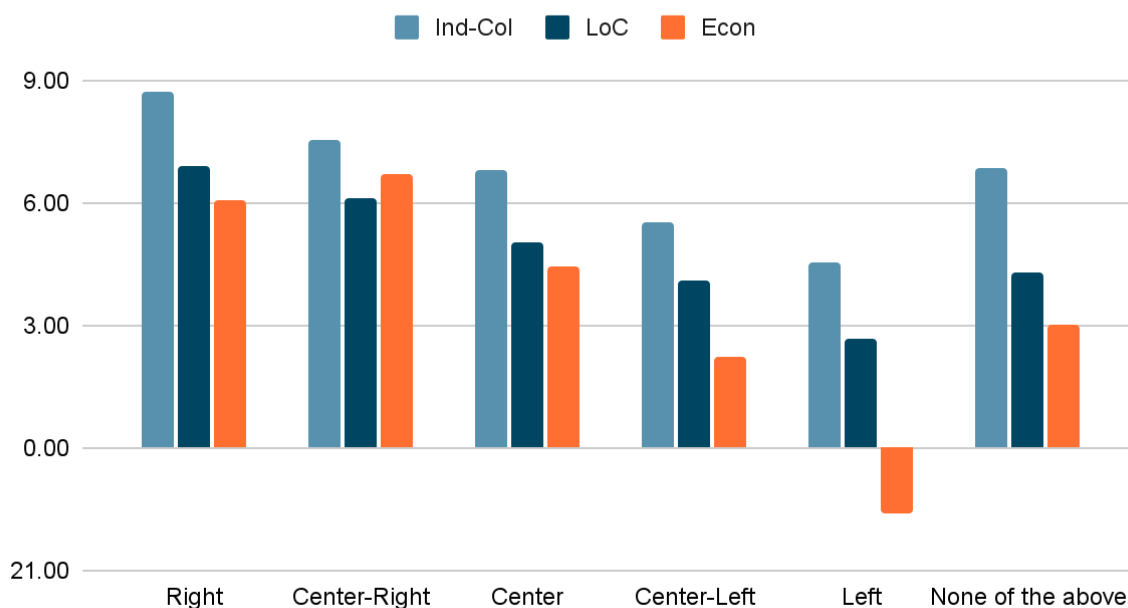
In fact, the Ind-Col remains practically stable in the six basic age groups. The same happens, in general terms, with the LoC sub-index, since after the clear drop from the 18-24 to the 25-34 range, the index starts to fluctuate basically in the same parameter.

There is, however, a particular trajectory in the evolution of the Econ. In this specific case, as in the LoC, there is a drastic fall between the first and second age groups, but from then on there is a consistent growth - something not observed in the case of the LoC.

3.4 Political Self-Identification

	Ind-Col	LoC	Econ	Total Score	N
Right	8.42	6.55	5.65	20.62	279
Center-Right	7.33	6.06	6.41	19.79	375
Center	6.49	5.02	3.86	15.37	198
Center-Left	4.91	4.06	2.13	11.10	507
Left	3.92	2.40	-0.95	5.37	442
None of the above	6.52	4.17	2.60	13.30	208

Political affiliation



Moving on, when the analysis of the three different axes within political affiliation begins, we find not only expected results, but also unexpected results.

The most expected result was that political affiliation is correlated with the left-right economic axis. As one moves to the left, the economic axis score drops. However, those who identify as right-wing do not always identify with the economic right, given the strong presence of the *“Destra Sociale”* (social right) in Italy; it is therefore possible that the one-

dimensional political identification alone leads to misunderstandings when speaking of the right as a univocal category - at least when it comes specifically to the Italian case.

It was observed that the peak for the economic axis is to be found within the centre-right, which has most clearly endorsed instances to favour entrepreneurship and trade.

Those who did not express a political position are somewhere between the centre and the centre-left.

It can also be seen that there is a much clearer correlation between political identification and the two axes Individualism-Collectivism and Locus of Control.

Of course, the answers to the questionnaire do not imply party preference, but tend to show how people view and perceive the various branches of politics ideologically.

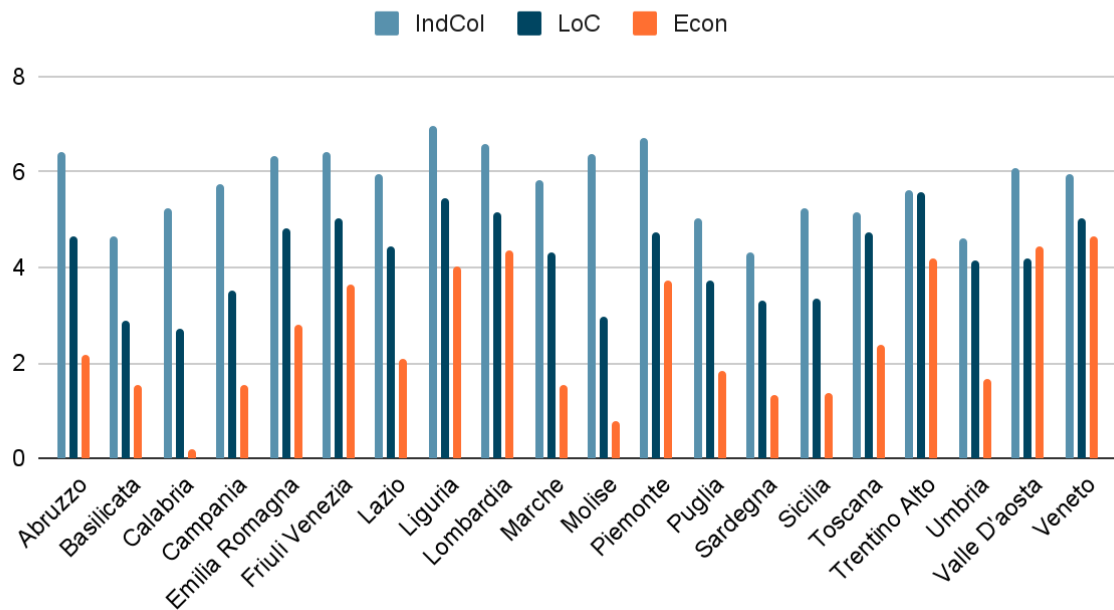
Along these lines, exemplifying with the figures collected among those who expressed their political preference for the centre-right and the centre-left, it can be seen that the former, even if they do not vote for Italian parties self-declared or recognized as centre-right, share a basic vision of public policy, and the same is true in the case of those who expressed political affiliation with centre-left thinking. These two very marked views show huge differences on the Econ sub-index, and considerable, though somewhat smaller, differences on the remaining two sub-indices.

3.5 Regional differences

	IndCol	LoC	Econ	Total Score	N
Abruzzo	6.44	4.64	2.18	13.26	39
Basilicata	4.65	2.88	1.53	9.06	17
Calabria	5.24	2.70	0.18	8.12	33
Campania	5.75	3.52	1.54	10.81	120
Emilia Romagna	6.32	4.82	2.80	13.94	146

Friuli Venezia Giulia	6.43	5.02	3.64	15.09	58
Lazio	5.93	4.43	2.08	12.45	169
Liguria	6.95	5.46	4.01	16.42	83
Lombardia	6.60	5.17	4.37	16.13	345
Marche	5.83	4.31	1.52	11.67	42
Molise	6.36	2.95	0.77	10.09	22
Piemonte	6.72	4.74	3.72	15.18	203
Puglia	5.03	3.74	1.82	10.59	84
Sardegna	4.30	3.33	1.32	8.95	92
Sicilia	5.26	3.32	1.36	9.94	125
Toscana	5.16	4.72	2.39	12.26	160
Trentino Alto Adige	5.60	5.56	4.20	15.36	45
Umbria	4.59	4.14	1.68	10.41	22
Valle D'aosta	6.09	4.18	4.45	14.72	11
Veneto	5.95	5.03	4.64	15.62	193

Regions



In the segmentation by region, it is possible to observe the application of the index to all twenty Italian regions.

Italy is usually divided into five groups: northwest, northeast, centre, south, and islands.

For the purposes of this work, the North was considered as the union of the northwestern, the northeastern and even the central groups - the latter is usually considered separately, since the centre of the peninsula expresses political, historical, and cultural characteristics that sometimes bring it closer to the classical north, sometimes to the classical south.

The South, on the other hand, is composed of the southern group and the islands.

Thus, for purposes of understanding, the North is composed of the four northwestern regions (Valle d'Aosta, Liguria, Lombardy, Piedmont), the four northeastern regions (Trentino-Alto Adige, Veneto, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Emilia-Romagna), and the four central regions (Tuscany, Umbria, Marche, Lazio).

The South, in turn, is composed of the six southern regions (Abruzzo, Molise, Campania, Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria) and the two islands (Sicily and Sardinia).

That said, the analysis starts initially with the IndCol sub-index. In this regard, it can be noted that among the seven last regions in the IndCol sub-index, 5 are from the South (Basilicata - 4.65, Calabria 5.24, Puglia 5.03, Sardinia - 4.30, Sicily - 5.26) and two are from the North (Umbria - 4.59 and Tuscany - 5.16), although they are from the central group.

Furthermore, among the top seven regions in the IndCol sub-index, only two are from the South (Abruzzo - 6.44 and Molise 6.36), both from the central group, while the others are from the North (Emilia Romagna - 6.32, Friuli Venezia Giulia - 6.43, Liguria - 6.95, Lombardy 6.60 and Piedmont 6.72).

Going forward, all seven of the lowest numbers in the LoC sub-index are from regions belonging to the South (Basilicata - 2.88, Calabria - 2.70, Campania - 3.52, Molise - 2.95, Puglia - 3.74, Sardegna - 3.33 and Sicily - 3.32).

Among the top seven figures in this sub-index, all are from the North (Emilia Romagna - 4.82, Friuli Venezia Giulia - 5.02, Liguria - 5.46, Lombardy - 5.17, Piedmont - 4.74, Trentino Alto Adige - 5.56 and Veneto 5.03).

Finally, it is noticeable that among the seven lowest numbers in the Econ sub-index, six are from regions belonging to the South (Basilicata - 1.53, Calabria - 0.18, Campania - 1.54, Molise - 0.77, Sardegna - 1.32 and Sicily - 1.36) and one from a region belonging to the North, again from the central group (Marche - 1.52)

Among the top seven figures in this sub-index, all are from the North (Friuli Venezia Giulia - 3.64, Liguria - 4.01, Lombardy - 4.37, Piedmont - 3.72, Trentino Alto Adige - 4.20, Valle D'Aosta - 4.45 and Veneto 4.64).

Analysing region by region, it is clear that with the specific exception of the Molise and Abruzzo regions - in the case of the IndCol sub-index -, there is a huge prevalence of positive results among the regions that make up the northern part of the Italian peninsula.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the exceptional cases of northern regions among the 7 worst in a sub-index - the cases of Umbria and Tuscany in the IndCol sub-index, and of Marche in the Econ sub-index - are from regions in the central group.

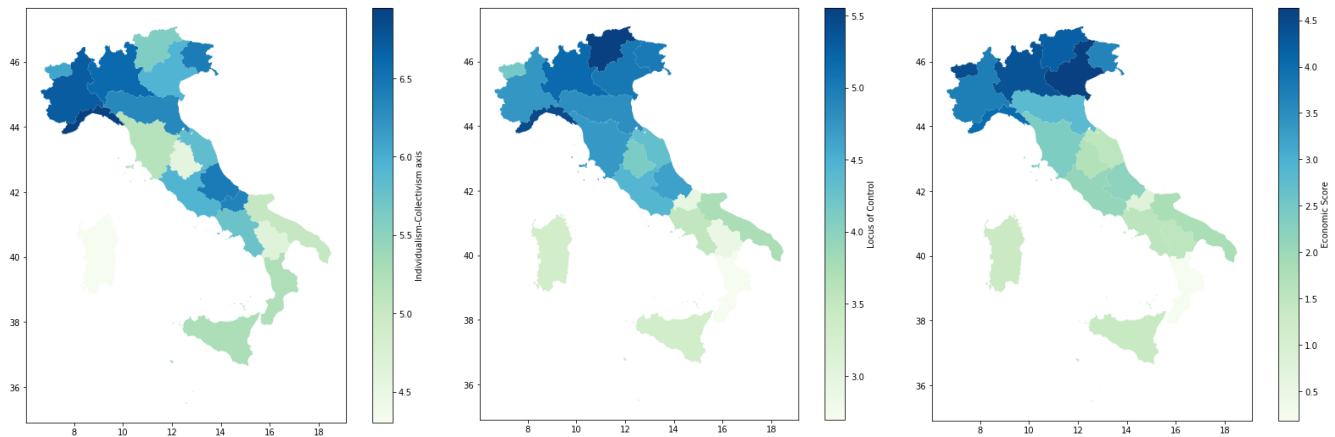
All this can be seen more clearly in the following map, which shows the Italian political territory colored in a regionalized way, in order to make it easier to see the three sub-indices and their prevalence among the twenty regions.

3.5.1 Regional data visualisation

IndCol

LoC

Econ



Overall the map shows most clearly the prevalence of higher values (in dark blue) in the central, northeastern and northwestern regions of Italy, *i.e.* the northern region for the purposes of this paper.

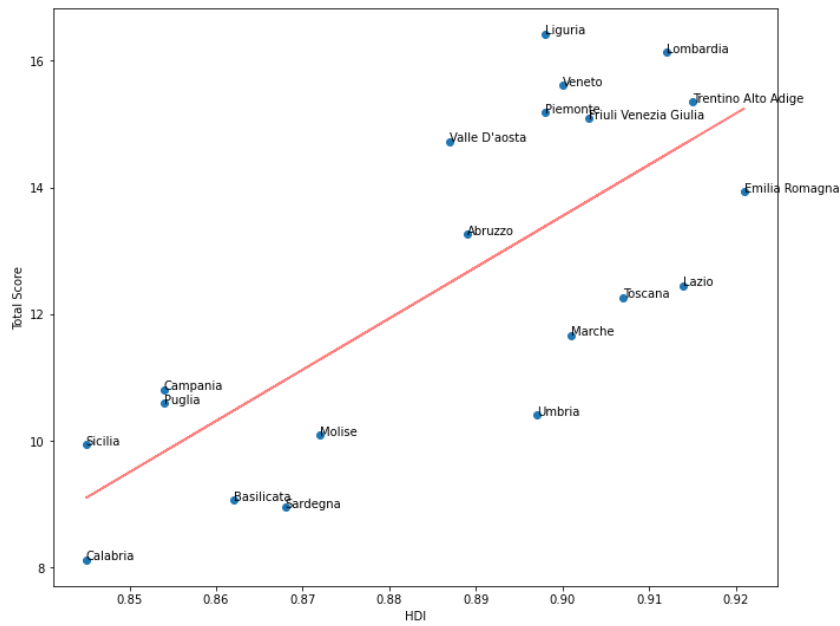
This arrangement is clearest in the case of the LoC sub-index, where it can be seen that even the central region comes substantially closer to the northern end of the Italian peninsula. In the case of the Econ sub-index, on the other hand, there is a greater concentration of high values in the northeast and northwest, with the centre group moving somewhat closer to the South.

The IndCol index was the least heterogeneous of the three, as could be seen from the previous analysis of the data. Even so, except for the specific positive cases of Molise and Abruzzo - and the negative ones of Umbria and Tuscany - what can be noted is, in general terms, a repetition of the trend observed previously.

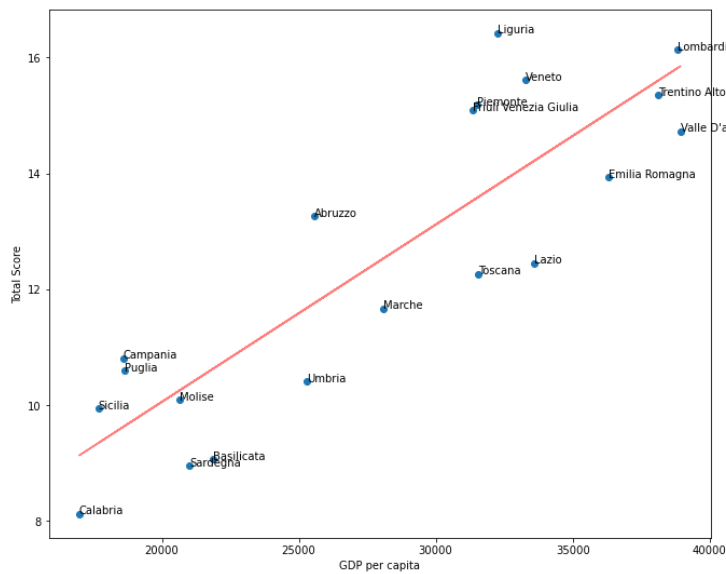
3.5.2 Correlations with Total score

Correlations were sought between the total score and:

- Human Development Index, 2019 data (“Sub-national HDI - Area Database”);
- Regional GDP per capita, 2019 data (“Database - National accounts - Eurostat”).



The Pearson correlation coefficient, chosen because it is a linear relationship between the total score and the HDI: $r = 0.75$



The Pearson correlation coefficient, chosen because it is a linear relationship between the total score and GDP per capita: $r = 0.86$

Conclusions

The creation of this index was intended both to start a new strand of quantitative analysis of 'what is unseen' in the economy, and to provide policy makers with the suggestion not to devise over-ambitious mechanisms.

It is not our intention to convey the message that policy makers should shape the culture; rather, it would be more correct to say that institutions should be as close to the population as possible. A top-down approach risks worsening the situation if the problem lies at the roots of society; it is necessary to work to enable it to free itself from constraints.

Thus, what is proposed is that the repetition, for another decade, of the same pattern of public policies that has been implemented for the last several decades cannot lead to satisfactory results, but only to the repetition of the same unsatisfactory consequences that have been seen, that is, the maintenance - and in many cases the aggravation - of the wide regional inequality in Italy.

It is very true, as said, that the attempt to change the culture, besides being counterproductive, would be absolutely inadvisable, but it was observed that, before trying to impose institutions that, in the abstract, seem perfect for achieving progress, it would be necessary to develop policies, institutions, and methods for the realisation of positive incentives that are really permeable to - and understood by - the population involved.

In simple words, a way must be found to dehydrate the perverse mechanisms that lead to a widespread disbelief among certain groups of people in the value of work, of merit, of long-term projects, in short, in the value of individual effort and in the ability to honestly, and without any undue favouritism, achieve a worthy goal.

The road this work has begun to travel only points that the best way to do this is not found through the imposition of potentially virtuous institutions or through the uncontrolled redistribution of subsidies and aid, because if this is the only way, the former will be perceived with cynicism and distrust, and the latter will be seen as a mere occasion for an opportunistic momentary gain.

In light of the modest results obtained, we believe that a strategy of localised responses on the basis of territorial division, carried out by a substantially decentralised government that is close and more permeable to its citizens, is the best way to tackle Italy's structural economic division.

Future Developments

Based on the interesting results gathered from this first questionnaire, it might be useful to reapply the questionnaire to:

- display the results on the basis of political party voting, rather than on the basis of political affiliation;
- increase the number of items and improve the precision and accuracy of psychometric measures and personal views;
- rewrite the least significant questions as they may have introduced a bias in the wording.

Furthermore, to achieve a more comprehensive and global analysis, the same questionnaire could be carried out in countries that, analogously to Italy, are also marked by large regional differences and by the persistent implementation of the same kind of public policies aimed at mitigating these inequalities (*e.g.*, United Kingdom, United States of America, Brazil and Spain).

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Carlo Balestriere for his contribution to the elaboration and research of the questionnaire items; he has been crucial due to his vast knowledge of the psychological field, of which he is a well-known disseminator. We are also grateful to IREF for the support given to us and to the Atlas Network for the funds that enabled us to carry out the questionnaire.

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Appendix

The questionnaire items are listed below.

Individualism

It is important that I do my job better than others.

Competition is good and makes people better.

I depend more on myself than on others.

Original Italian version:

(È importante che io faccia il mio lavoro meglio degli altri).

(Competere fa bene e migliora le persone).

(Dipendo più da me stesso che dagli altri).

Collectivism

I like to collaborate with other people.

The welfare of my colleagues is important to me.

I hate to disagree with others in my group.

I usually sacrifice my self-interest for the benefit of my group.

My happiness depends a lot on the happiness of those around me.

Before making an important decision, I always consult with someone else.

I prefer to work in groups than to work alone.

Original Italian version:

(Mi piace collaborare con altre persone).

(Il benessere dei miei colleghi è importante per me).

(Odio essere in disaccordo con gli altri nel mio gruppo).

(Di solito sacrifico il mio interesse personale a beneficio del mio gruppo).

(La mia felicità dipende molto dalla felicità di coloro che mi circondano).

(Prima di prendere una decisione importante, mi consulto sempre con qualcun altro).

(Preferisco i lavori di gruppo a lavorare da solo).

Locus of Control

My life is mainly determined by my choices.

If I get busy and satisfy many customers well, I will definitely become richer.

Generally, a person's merit determines how much he or she earns.

I can fulfil my desires without having to face an excessive amount of obstacles.

Those who are rich have probably done something dishonest.

Becoming rich is essentially a matter of luck.

Success depends mainly on knowing the right people.

Original Italian version:

(La mia vita è determinata soprattutto dalle mie scelte).

(Se mi darò da fare e soddisferò bene molti clienti, diventerò sicuramente più ricco).

(Generalmente il merito di una persona stabilisce quanto guadagna).

(Posso realizzare i miei desideri senza incontrare troppi ostacoli).

(Chi è ricco probabilmente ha fatto qualcosa di disonesto).

(Diventare ricchi è essenzialmente una questione di fortuna).

(Il successo dipende soprattutto dal conoscere le persone giuste).

Economic Axis

More freedom should be given to private individuals and the State should be put aside, in many areas.

Entrepreneurs are key figures.

When there is group work to be done, the total work should be divided equally among the participants.

Wealth inequality is a serious problem.

The State should raise taxes on the rich to increase the help given to the poor.

If someone can't find a job, the State should provide it.

The majority of companies do not care about the welfare of employees.

Original Italian version:

(Bisognerebbe dare più libertà ai privati e mettere lo Stato da parte, in molti settori).

(Gli imprenditori sono figure fondamentali).

(Quando c'è un lavoro di gruppo da fare, bisogna dividere il lavoro totale in parti uguali fra i partecipanti).

(La disuguaglianza di ricchezza è un grave problema).

(Lo Stato dovrebbe aumentare le tasse ai ricchi per aiutare di più i poveri).

(Se qualcuno non trova lavoro, dovrebbe pensarci lo Stato a fornirglielo).

(La maggioranza delle aziende non ha a cuore il benessere dei dipendenti).

In the following histograms, the absolute frequency of responses to the items can be found:

