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## Geographies of production and the contexts of politics: dis-location and new ecologies of fear in the Veneto *città diffusa*

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**Abstract.** Scholars of regionalist mobilisation have focused their attentions largely on the ideal and idealised landscapes that are an integral part of regional mythmaking, noting the ways in which such ‘representative landscapes’ are deployed by regional ideologues to convey belonging and emplace identity. I argue that to understand regionalist mobilisation it is equally important to consider the lived, everyday spaces of the region, spaces within which such regionalist politics are born. In this paper, I focus on the Veneto region in the Italian North East: one of the wealthiest productive areas in Europe but also the site of some of the most reactionary regionalist and localist rhetorics. I explore the links between the transformations in the Veneto’s production landscapes over the past decades and the emergence of new political discourses, arguing that it is only through an understanding of the new geographies of production and consumption that structure the Veneto space—a space that is increasingly deterritorialised and decentred, suspended between its rural past and an unaccomplished urbanisation—that we can begin to understand fully the region’s increasingly exclusionary identity politics, and the ways in which the globalised Veneto *città diffusa* that has made its fortunes on the global market and on global migrants is increasingly reacting against both and finding refuge in hyperlocalised myths of belonging.

### Introduction

The Veneto, an administrative region of 4.5 million people, lies at the heart of the Italian *Nordest* (North East);<sup>(1)</sup> one of the most successful—and wealthy—productive areas in Europe. The Veneto is a region that exports over 80% of its production and where single industrial districts boast earnings that exceed the GDPs of many small nation-states. There exists a wide literature in economic geography on the ‘Veneto model’, along with numerous studies that have attempted to locate the region’s postwar economic success within a series of distinct territorial and social structures that have allowed for the development of industrial districts based on ‘local trust’ and informal networks of association, mediated in large part through the extended family and the institutions of the local Church. Although the Veneto was often linked in the past to the idea of a ‘Third Italy’ and its ‘embedded’ industrial districts (most famously by Bagnasco, 1977), since the 1980s the region began to affirm itself as a separate ‘system’, both in the rhetoric of its increasingly successful entrepreneurs, as well as within emerging regionalist narratives, keen to mark the Veneto’s difference from the other ‘engines’ of the Third Italy locomotive such as Emilia-Romagna and Toscana. I will not enter into dialogue with the wide-ranging literature (in economic geography and

<sup>(1)</sup> I will adopt this term in the Italian throughout the piece as it is not simply a locational descriptor referring to the northeastern Italian regions of Veneto and Friuli-Venezia Giulia but, rather, a metaphor that evokes a number of other geographies: political as well as economic. Economic geographers speak of the *Nordest* model when referring to the diffuse, family-based networks of firms that have characterised industrialisation in this region; similarly, political geographic analyses of Italian electoral behaviour have focused on the *Nordest* as a distinct context for the articulation of regionalist and autonomist aspirations. For political geographic readings see Agnew (1995; 2002) and Diamanti (1993; 1996; 1998); for an understanding of the *Nordest* as an economic actor see Anastasia and Coro (1993; 1996), Pittalis (2002; 2003), as well as the essays in Coppola (1997).

beyond) on the Third Italy model, for it holds only limited purchase in understanding the transformations in present-day Veneto that will be the focus of this paper.

Indeed, it is not my aim here to discuss the organisation of Veneto production networks. I would like to focus, rather, on the *geographies* of the ‘Veneto miracle’ and, especially, on their social and political implications. The Veneto has come to popular attention recently as the site of some of the most reactionary regionalist and localist rhetoric in present-day Italy. The region is currently governed by the Forza Italia – Lega Nord coalition and has been a key player in recent debates over regional devolution. It was the first to call for regional autonomy in policing and the regulation of immigration flows, as well as the first region in Italy to specify its own curriculum for primary and secondary education, overseen by a regional commission for ‘Regional Identity and Culture’. In this paper, I would like to explore the links between the transformations in the Veneto economy over the past decades and the emergence of increasingly reactionary regionalisms, particularly worrisome in the context of an Italian national politics that is, at present, strongly tinged with antidemocratic and xenophobic tendencies. I will argue that it is only through an understanding of the new geographies of production and consumption that structure the Veneto space—a space that is increasingly deterritorialised and decentred, suspended between its rural past and an unaccomplished urbanisation—that we can begin to understand fully the increasingly reactionary identity politics of actors such as Giancarlo Gentilini, the Lega Nord mayor and self-styled ‘Sheriff’ of Treviso, who in recent years has proposed, among other things, ‘organised hunts’ on African immigrants who do not make themselves ‘useful’ on the factory floor.

I will suggest that it is only by looking to the changing spaces of the region that we can begin to understand such reactionary attempts at fixing identity; it is only through an understanding of the changing lived contexts of its political texts that we can begin to understand the ways in which the globalised Veneto *città diffusa* (literally, diffuse city) that has made its fortunes on the global market—and on global migrants—is increasingly reacting against both. In doing so, I will attempt to challenge not only the myths that sustain the idea of the Veneto ‘miracle’, but also—and more importantly—the ‘local networks of trust and association’<sup>(2)</sup> that, purportedly, made the ‘miracle’ possible. Bringing together an examination of the region’s new geographies of production and consumption with a consideration of its changing *political* landscapes will allow me to highlight the ‘dark side’, if you will, of the Veneto model. It will also allow me to question the much more pervasive valorisation of ‘local networks of trust’ in geographical literature and beyond, taking to task the (often uncritical) adoption of such narratives in recent literature on regional devolution.

### **The history of the boom: from a ‘*piccolo mondo antico*’ to a ‘*Los Angeles che nasce*’<sup>(3)</sup>**

Since the years of the *Serenissima* (the Venetian Republic) (and particularly since the ‘refeudalisation’ of the republic’s dominions in the 17th century), the Veneto had been a rural hinterland, its ‘noble’ cities (Venezia itself,<sup>(4)</sup> Padova, Vicenza, Verona, Treviso,

<sup>(2)</sup> Most famously idealised in the work of Putnam (1993) and followers.

<sup>(3)</sup> “A dying rural world—or a Los Angeles being born?” (Paolini, 1999, page 30).

<sup>(4)</sup> Venezia stands, in many ways, worlds apart from its region: politically, economically, culturally. The transformations described in this paper have not touched it, although it has undergone its own set of transitions and changes (for an excellent description of the challenges facing the city today see De Rita and Galdo, 2001), and, although some of the regional(ist) ideologies may adopt myths of belonging that appeal to an idealised past under the *Serenissima* Venetian Republic, present-day regional ideologies are fundamentally antiurban and reject or resent the city and its ‘messy difference’ (Rumiz, 1997, pages 33–34).

and many other smaller centres) surrounded by a sea of semifeudal rural *podere* (small landholdings) (see Lanaro, 1984). Between 1876 and 1915 a full third of all Italian immigration to North America, Latin America, and Australia departed from this region. The land reform that followed the Second World War created a highly fragmented pattern of landownership and did little to alleviate the persistence of pockets of rural poverty that paralleled many in the Italian South. In the early postwar years the Veneto's inhabitants were, in the words of one of its preeminent popular historians, still either '*migranti*' or '*braccianti*' (Franzina, 1976): working the land as paid labourers, or leaving to seek fortune elsewhere. The last wave of significant out-migration came as late as the 1950s as a result of the disastrous floods in the Polesine, with *Veneti* scattering across the four continents (for a thorough account of Veneto emigration, see Bevilacqua et al, 2001; Lanaro, 1984). Between 1950 and 1970 the *Bassa* (the area around Rovigo, see figure 1) lost half of its population, with young men abandoning the land for the rapidly industrialising cities of the North West, or emigrating abroad (principally to Germany and Switzerland).

Today, the Veneto is Italy's economic powerhouse. In 2002, 450 000 firms were registered in the region, 98% of them with fewer than 15 workers. Regional per capita GDP was 23 000 Euro (over a third higher than the national average), and there were 3000 bank branches, with over €41 million in deposits. If the regional data are



**Figure 1.** The Veneto administrative region. Courtesy of the Design and Imaging Unit, Department of Geography, University of Durham.

impressive, the economic weight of individual provinces is even more astounding. Just the three provinces of Venezia, Padova, and Treviso (see figure 1) accounted for 23% of *all* national exports and for over 40% of Italian ‘luxury’ goods sold abroad (for a total exceeding €951 million) (all data from Centro Studi CGIA Mestre, 2002). The export earnings of the province of Vicenza alone were equal to those of Greece (Tomasoni, 2001).<sup>5</sup> Certainly, the Veneto is not the *only* Italian success story—other regions such as Emilia-Romagna or even the neighbouring Friuli-Venezia Giulia boast similar statistics. These figures matter, rather, because an exaggeration of the Veneto’s economic performance is very much part of the regional mythology—of the ‘rags to riches’ narrative promoted by regional ideologues and Veneto entrepreneurs alike (as we will see in the pages to come).

An exaggeration of the region’s stellar figures is also part and parcel of its idealisation as the archetype of post-Fordist flexible accumulation: a system of firms and associated subcontractors concentrated within highly specialised industrial districts (see, among others, Bagnasco, 1999; Becattini and Rullani, 1993; Conti and Sforzi, 1997; Scott, 1988; 1998; Storper, 1997; Storper and Scott, 1993). Over the years, the region has, indeed, attracted legions of scholars and analysts, all eager to understand the Veneto miracle. Along with its high degree of specialisation and aggressive export strategies, the success of the Veneto model has been traced, above all, to what many observers have termed ‘distinctive territorial and social structures’, based upon ‘local trust’ and informal networks of association, consolidated around the key nodes of Veneto society: the family, the Church (the *campanile*), and the spaces of local socialisation (the *osteria*). It is these informal networks that have allowed for the emergence of the ‘unstructured competition and cooperation’ (Becattini and Rullani, 1993) that so many economic geographers have identified as key to the Veneto boom, and to the flexibility and innovation that characterise its firms.

Already in the late 1970s economists studying the region had begun to speak of a localised ‘economic thickness’ (*ispessimento localizzato*), on observing the growing concentration of small industries in particular localities. This new ‘thickening’ of economic activity was not simply a new form of economic agglomeration, however. It was, rather, a new ‘*entità socio-territoriale*’, a new socioterritorial entity, “characterized by the active co-presence, in a territorially circumscribed area... of a community of people and industries... forming an interpenetrating whole” (Becattini, 1991, page 52), the one defining the other (see also Conti, 1996; Conti and Sforzi, 1997; Sforzi, 1991; 1995). The preminent scholars of the Veneto model over the years have insisted that the mere concentration of industries in a single locality did not suffice to constitute an industrial *district*, but simply constituted an industrial zone or area. Districts arose only “where the community of individuals and the community of firms create a single system and share a collective identity..., which becomes both means of communication and the basis for reciprocal trust” (Rullani, 1995, pages 29–33; see also Bagnasco, 1982; 1999; Becattini, 1991; 1997).

The existence of a common ‘communicative code’ as well as of the above-mentioned networks of ‘local trust’ has been key to the Veneto miracle (see, above all, the work of Rullani, 1995; Vagaggini, 1991). Such ‘networks of trust’ were fundamental to a rural social–territorial structure, centred upon the family and the parish, with local solidarity forming the backbone of all interaction with the ‘outside world’, and the parish priest entrusted as the mediator with external authority (see the descriptions in Galletto, 1982; Meneghello, 1986; Turri, 1995). The function of the ‘organising sites’ of

<sup>5</sup> The province’s most studied municipality, Rossano Veneto, has 6000 inhabitants and 2000 firms (practically a factory for every two families) and produces 60% of the world’s bicycle saddles.

the Veneto space—the family (and the family house), the local *campanile*, and the town osteria—was also economic, however. It was the family that constituted the primary economic unit and site of capital accumulation. Farm plots here had always been small—for most, not enough to sustain a family. From the 1950s on, many families decided to ‘do a little something on the side’, starting up businesses in the home, or at most in the shed (*capannone*) out back. In capillary fashion, little industries grew: all family based, with father and sons, brothers and cousins, in the ‘factory’ out back, the wife handling ‘home duties’ and, later, the firm’s accounts. The family-based organisation had a number of advantages: practically negligible overhead costs, no need to pay taxes or contributions on the work of family members to the state. The growth of such family firms was not entirely spontaneous or new, however. The emergence of particular industries in particular locations built upon long-standing traditions of local craftsmanship—whether in textiles, bootmaking, or metalwork. It is only with the progressive abandonment of the land in the 1950s and 1960s, however, that what previously were side occupations became the primary sources of income (for an account of this period of transformation in the Vicentino, see Turri, 1995).

The parishes were also important economic actors in the Veneto miracle. “Ever since before the war, the parish priest would collect one *soldo* a week from every family, held ‘*in caso de mal*’—for any misfortune that might befall any town inhabitant” (Fabio Lando, personal interview, 2001). These so-called ‘*Casse Peote*’ (small rural banking cooperatives, also called *Casse Rurali*) were to serve as an ‘insurance’ for town dwellers—as well as a source of money for those needing a short-term loan: a sort of early microcredit association. Over time, these parish ‘purses’ became a fundamental pivot in the start-up capital for new factories. These informal rural *Casse* still exist, but their economic weight has grown with the Veneto ‘boom’: in the 1980s in Feltre, the local *Cassa* was gathering 50 000 million lire (circa €25 million) a month in voluntary contributions. In the past two decades some of the *Casse Rurali* became institutionalised as banks and savings associations—many, nevertheless, still retain the informal status they had since their inception. They are, in many ways, symbolic of the networks of local trust and cooperation highlighted by scholars of the Veneto model, and are markers of the intricate interpenetration and ‘copresence’ of local community and industry (for a discussion, see Lando and Tallone, 2001).

The ‘unstructured competition and cooperation’ theorised by external observers of the region’s economic development was laughingly called the ‘*mi – ti*’ (me and you) strategy by Veneto entrepreneurs (as a tongue-in-cheek spoof of the powerful Japanese Ministry for Trade and Industry, MITI). The principle was simple: ‘*quel che te fa ti – fazo anca mi*,’<sup>(6)</sup> ‘what you do—I’ll do’, only better. Gian Antonio Stella (2000) recounts many stories of such start-ups in his *Schei* (money, cash in dialect)—with conversations overheard in the local osteria leading to innovations that would create new *global* market niches. “It was a very simple process”, explains Fabio Lando, Professor of Economic Geography at the University of Venice who has written extensively on the transformations in the region’s industrial structure. “Once a worker got good at doing what he was doing, he would leave the firm and, with the help of relatives, set up his own business making the very same product as his previous employer, just with a slight variation. And his original employer—who was quite often a relative—would usually guarantee him a share of the market.” As markets continued to grow, this was never a problem: “and anyway, it all stayed in the family” (personal interview, 2001).

<sup>(6)</sup> Most of the citations that appear in the text are in Veneto dialect, not in Italian. The use of dialect is pervasive in the region, not only amongst family and friends but also in business dealings: very much part of the local ‘communicative code’ described above.

As important as this unique socioterritorial fabric was, two other factors have been vital to the Veneto miracle: the local *political* and the global *economic* contexts. The social–territorial fabric that allowed for the development of these industries may have been premodern, based upon allegiances to family, Church, and the local community—but the fortunes could not have been made without the global market and its hypermodern thirst for innovation, a thirst that Veneto entrepreneurs have been masterful in exploiting.

The mythology of the Veneto miracle quite often tends to conceal the political economy of the ‘boom’, with leading regional entrepreneurs themselves (such as Renzo Rosso, founder of Diesel clothing) asserting that all there was to the Veneto model was “hard work and creativity”: the region was a “self-organising system”, its success a result of “spontaneous organisation”—see interviews in Stella (2000) and Tomasoni (2001), as well as Rosso’s (1999) self-published book *FoRty*. Such discourses of self-sufficiency and self-organisation mask, however, a distinctive regional (and *national*) political context in the 1970s and 1980s that although did not directly shape the Veneto boom certainly allowed it to occur. Prime here was the unquestioned local hegemony of the Democrazia Cristiana (Christian Democrats), which held power in Italy throughout the whole postwar period (for a thorough discussion, see Agnew, 2002; Ginsborg, 1990; 2002). The party and its territorial structures (mediated by the local parishes, acting as its *de facto* representatives) assured both political stability as well as sufficient opportunities for economic graft for regional entrepreneurs to go about their strategies largely uninterrupted. “The local DC shut both eyes—the tacit agreement was you don’t ask, we don’t look” (Rumiz, 1997, page 38; also Diamanti, 1996; Stella, 2000).<sup>(7)</sup>

It was international markets, however, that played a central role in assuring the region’s stellar economic fortunes. The devaluation of the lira in the 1980s allowed regional products to become highly competitive in export markets (see Lando and Tallone, 2001). Even more crucial, however, were shifts in post-Fordist consumption and, especially, the emergence of a global service class with a growing desire for Italian luxury goods. As Lash and Urry (1994), Urry (1990; 1995), and many others have argued, this new global elite calibrates its status—defines its very existence as a class—precisely by means of its consumption patterns and predilections. Consuming Italian goods, whether cappuccino and biscotti or clothing, kitchenware, and furniture, has become a marker of the service class’s *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1984), with consumption choices marking identity and conveying belonging—for a humorous look at the buying preferences of this new professional ‘caste’, including their Italophilia see Brooks (2000).

A great many of the icons of service-class consumption come from the Veneto’s ‘urbanised countryside’. From luxury eyewear made in the foothills of Agordo and Belluno by Safilo or Luxottica (which between them control almost 80% of the global eyeglass market—from sports brands, such as Ray-Ban, Revo, Persol, and Killer Loop, to eyewear produced for fashion houses, including Bulgari, Chanel, Moschino, Prada, and Versace), to the ‘boot district’ of Montebelluna, where 75% of all ski boots and 50% of all technical hiking and climbing apparel are made, to the ‘total look clothing’ of companies such as Benetton, Diesel, Replay, Sisley, Stefanel, or Gas, Veneto firms have come to dominate an infinite number of microniches in the global market for upscale, highly specialised consumption.

<sup>(7)</sup> This is not to say, however, that this political and political–economic context was ever uniform *throughout* the region: places such as Rovigo (see figure 1) and Venezia’s port of Marghera were always very different creatures, Fordist industrial centres (in decline), with a strong ‘red’ vote and trade union presence; in mountain towns such as Belluno, Veneto politics has also always been tinged with a particular local flavour (see the discussion in Diamanti, 1998).

### Narrating the new Veneto spaces

Describing the spaces of this boom is a challenging task. Morphological accounts of urban development cannot capture a growth that has not only been superimposed upon a still-existing rural territorial structure, but proceeded largely without any regulatory or planning controls. Here, one *comune* (municipality) seamlessly flows into another: a multiplicity of centres, yet without a centre.

Marco Paolini is a playwright and actor, and perhaps the best-known contemporary bard of the region. His 1998 theatrical piece *Bestiario Veneto* is an attempt to narrate the changing landscape of the region, to trace its geographies:

“Once, all you could spot along the Piave was an occasional  
*osteria*

Now, there are the strongest industrial districts in Europe

On a starry night, looking down from the Montello, you can see  
light up

the *Galassia Pedemontana*—the lowlands galaxy  
coagulating in diverse nebulosae, following  
mysterious pathways

There, under mount Pasubio, there are  
textiles, and  
machine tools

Under the Montello, between the Piave and Montebelluna  
the boot zone

Around Bassano  
del Grappa, ceramic workshops

Up there, under the Alps, the multimillion vineyards of Cartizze

Down by Treviso, the reign of Benetton and his ten thousand subcontractors

Over the bridge to Priula towards Conegliano  
the ‘Inox Valley’

of the global restaurant trade”

(Paolini, 1999, pages 25–26).

Both foreign as well as Italian observers have compared the Veneto space to the Los Angeles ‘exopolis’ (the term comes from Soja, 1996; 2000). Paolini’s (1999) own characterisation of the region as suspended between a dying rural world and a Los Angeles being born (“*Un piccolo mondo antico che muore—o una Los Angeles che nasce*”) has been picked up by numerous Italian commentators and journalists (see, for example, Rumiz, 1997) as the most apt description of this still indeterminate spatial ‘creature’. If exopolis has been the term coined to characterise “the new category of city being invented”, the “discontinuous constellation of spatial fragments, functional pieces, and social segments” that is today’s Los Angeleno ‘postmetropolis’ (Soja, 2000, page 237), the spatial metaphor par excellence for present-day Veneto is that coined already a decade ago by Francesco Indovina, an urbanist at the Institute of Architecture at the University of Venice: the *città diffusa*, “an amorphous mass of construction, filling all available space... like molten metal” (Indovina, 1990, page 19).

The metaphor is apt, for it is the metal of the industrial warehouses or *capannoni* that is perhaps the single most characteristic architectural form on the present-day Veneto landscape. Over the past decade, the Veneto has had the highest rate of building construction in Italy: construction that follows a set pattern—detached family house (or *villetta*) and small (though subsequently larger) *capannone*. According to Indovina (1990) and others, it is a paradoxical process of concurrent *hyperurbanisation* and *deurbanisation*, producing a ‘contiguous collage of fragments of urbanity’. The *città diffusa* has no centre, no piazza. It has developed along a series of straight lines: the *statali*, the state roads that provide the only visible skeleton giving form to this new

socioterritorial ‘organism’. The città diffusa fills the spaces between one town and another, with a ‘dis-continuous continuum’ (Indovina, 1990) of villette and capannoni. In the paragraphs that follow, I will attempt to capture the ‘discontinuous continuum’ that is present-day Veneto in a number of scenes, a number of fragments from this ‘diffuse’ landscape.

### Scene 1: the capannone

The capannone (literally: the shed, warehouse) is the icon of the Veneto model—and of its anthropology of production. Based upon family labour, built on family land, this ‘little place out back’ is, nonetheless, the key building block of production complexes that are planetary leaders in highly specialised goods.

The capannone is built where it is most convenient: on land already owned, and as close to the road as possible to minimise transport costs. Aesthetics are secondary: the ‘factory’ is often built of sheet metal, a square ‘box’ perched in the field behind the house, with a wide driveway to facilitate deliveries (see figure 2). If the Veneto can best be mapped as a ‘galaxy’ [to use Paolini’s (1999) metaphor yet again], its industrial districts are ‘solar systems’ of subcontracting planets, and the individual capannoni are the myriad of moons that rotate around them—the subcontractors of the subcontractors. Subcontractors that are, in many ways, invisible; in the Veneto città diffusa, the spaces of production are entirely anonymous, blending into the urbanised countryside.

This is true, however, not only for the small capannone attached to the individual villetta, but also for the ‘factories’ of global brands such as the Diesel ‘central’ in Molvena or the Replay factory in the foothills of Asolo. This ‘hidden’ nature of the Veneto production networks has been popularly interpreted as part of a ‘rural humility’ and the preoccupation ‘*di non apparire*’. The latter expression holds a duplicitous meaning in Italian: it is the preoccupation at once not to appear, to be visible, but also not to be conspicuous or ostentatious. Diverse readings of this phenomenon have been advanced: whether as the expression of traditional rural values (see Petrovich, 2000;



**Figure 2.** The ‘factory’ in the field: typical capannone on the outskirts of Vicenza.



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Tomasoni, 2001) or as the expression of an antiurban essentialism, the ideology of *'abitare per produrre'* (living to produce) (Turri, 1995; 2000). It is also the expression, however, of an iron-clad faith on the part of local entrepreneurs in 'spontaneous development' and what urban planner Franco Migliorini, head of Transport Planning at the Regione Veneto, characterises as a "pervasive allergy to any form of spatial planning or regulatory frameworks" (personal interview, 2001).

Apart from the extreme flexibility and high specialisation offered by this type of production model, however, such a decentred, only partially 'formal' mode of production has an additional advantage: "small firms prefer to keep production 'diffuse' because it is to their advantage to remain hidden", comments Indovina (in Erbani, 2002, page 36). As I suggested in the opening paragraphs, tax and regulatory evasion have facilitated the Veneto miracle since its early days: the factories were often 'family' factories where a bulk of the employees (as family members) were not covered by pension plans, and where decentred production also often meant decentred accounting (Stella, 2000). Indeed, the myth of the 'informality' of production also masks the absence of the state and its regulatory mechanisms; or, better yet, it is testimony to what was, for decades, a 'tacit agreement' between local entrepreneurs and the local (dominated by *Democrazia Cristiana*) state which, as Rumiz (1997, page 38) and other commentators have noted, "gave nothing but asked for nothing".

I stress the 'invisibility' and 'humility' of the *capannone* for it forms a fundamental support of the Veneto 'tale'. It is an integral part of the stories that Veneto entrepreneurs like to tell about themselves and of the 'rags to riches' miracle discovered by economists and journalists writing about the region over the past decades. The stories recounted are remarkably similar: 'a young man with an idea', begins making (insert: sweaters, jeans, motorcycles, eyeglasses) 'on the side' in his parents' home (after working an eight-hour day in someone else's 'factory'). A couple of years later he opens a makeshift workshop, and delivers his first samples (by bike) to local stores. Two decades later, the firm opens a flagship store in Manhattan. It may sound like an improbable Cinderella story, but it is that of the Benetton siblings, Renzo Rosso's Diesel, Ivano Beggio's Aprilia, and Leonardo del Vecchio's Luxottica. And countless others.

From the *capannone* to global brand. The above four may be several of the best-known Veneto success stories, but there are countless others. Take the Montebelluna 'boot district' in the province of Treviso (see figure 1): 75% of all ski boots in the world are made here; 50% of all hiking boots; 65% of all *après-ski* footwear; 25% of all in-line skates; 60% of all cycling shoes; and 80% of all motorcycle boots (all figures from SportSystem Montebelluna, 2002, <http://www.museoscarpone.it>). In 2000 just 400 'factories', most with fewer than 15 workers, exported 30 million specialised sports shoes: specialised hiking boots and climbing shoes, ice-climbing crampons, motocross boots, hunting and fishing footwear, even professional ice-skates—in every style and material imaginable. Most of the brands dominating today's global hiking, climbing, and skiing market were born here: the Zanatta brothers' Tecnica, the Danieli brothers' Diadora, the Caberlotto brothers' Lotto and Caber, Franco Vaccari's Dolomite and Nordica. Every brand, a family name: a start-up story very similar to the one recounted above.

The district's dominance in the boot and sports shoe market is such that not only do local firms exert control over particular niches: when the big global brands hope to enter a highly specialised market, they too come to 'learn from Montebelluna'. The world's two biggest ski-equipment manufacturers, Rossignol and Salomon, have, in recent years, bought out two local competitors—Caber and San Giorgio, respectively—and moved half their production to the province of Treviso. What was the 'sell'? It was a

highly specialised labour force, along with an already-consolidated network of suppliers and subcontractors, all within the range of a few kilometres. Even Nike has come to learn from the locals: although the company may rely on low-skilled and underpaid labour in East Asia for its sports shoes, when it wanted to enter into the professional ice-skating market, it acquired the Treviso-based Cansar—and remained in the district. So too did the sports colossus Head Tyrolia Mares (SportSystem Montebelluna, 2002, <http://www.museoscarpone.it>).

Over the past two decades, the family-run ‘place out back’ has thus become the building block of a production system not only firmly emplaced within global markets but also often driving the trends that make those very markets. Companies such as Diesel, Replay, or Gas all pride themselves on selling a “total look for a global lifestyle” (as Diesel’s owner, Rosso, likes to boast) (see Polhemus, 1998; Rosso, 1999) and Diesel’s 1400 m<sup>2</sup> megastore on New York’s Lexington Avenue (purposefully located right across from the Levi’s flagship store) and its concept shop in London’s Covent Garden have become key nodes in the production of a global style.

## Scene 2: the villetta

If the capannone is the emblem of the ‘*Veneto che lavora*’ (the ‘working region’, literally, ‘the Veneto that produces’, a slogan favoured by regional industrialists and politicians alike), the detached family house or villetta is the other face of the region’s economic boom. Over the past two decades, it has undergone the evolution from poor country home to an iconic space of representation, a site for the manifestation of acquired wealth, and new ‘urban’ status.

Though the villette are, increasingly, the symbols of new wealth, here, too, practical considerations prevail over aesthetic ones. The villette are often built right alongside the main road. This is partly to facilitate ease of transport for the goods produced in the capannone out back, but also for reasons of representation, of social visibility. “What is the point of building a house that no one can admire?” jokes urban planner Franco Migliorini (personal interview, 2001). “And if you have an old house, an old country house, you’ll just build the new one right in front of it—to make it perfectly clear to everyone that you are no longer the old fashioned farmer” (personal interview, 2001).

Some observers have tried to trace a continuity between the contemporary villetta–capannone model and the Palladian villas, emblem of Venetian aristocratic power. The argument is, in part, functional to the rhetoric of regionalist ideologues who see the villas as architectural icons of the Veneto’s glorious past, and their present-day heirs as testimony to the continuity of the (regional) past in the present (see the essays in Bernardi, 1990; De Michelis, 1999; as well as Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche, 2001). The parallel is problematic, however, for although the Palladian estates were, similarly, both economic *and* representative spaces—sites of (at that time, agricultural) production *as well as* of symbolic capital—their idealised landscapes were the expression of a broader cosmology. As Cosgrove has argued, the Palladian landscapes embodied the way in which the propertied class of the day “signified themselves and their world through their imagined relationship with Nature and through which they underlined and communicated their own social role and that of others” (1984, page 15; 1993). As representative spaces, the Palladian cultural landscapes acted to support certain dominant sets of ideas and values, as well as certain unquestioned assumptions about the existing social order: that of the rural *poderi*, governed by a small landowning class.

The Palladian parallel is important not because it is necessarily accurate, but because it is pervasive in regional(ist) narratives that see the villette as the Veneto’s new iconic spaces of representation: testimony to the regional ‘miracle’. Geographers

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have long stressed the role of landscapes as central elements in the production of meaning (see Barnes and Duncan, 1992; Cosgrove, 1984, 1993; Cosgrove and Daniels, 1988; Daniels, 1993; Duncan 1990; Duncan and Duncan, 1988), noting the ways in which ‘representative landscapes’ in particular act to legitimate given sets of power relations and are intimately implicated with the articulation of hegemonic ‘spatial ideologies’ (Harvey, 1973; Lefebvre, 1990). This ‘regulatory’ function of landscapes and landscape ideals proceeds both through material interventions into the built environment (which concretise dominant ideas and values in places), and through associated processes of ‘spatial socialisation’ (Shields, 1991) through which individuals become members of distinct territorial entities and through which they (more or less actively) internalise collective spatial ideologies: through which they internalise ideas about what (and *who*) belongs where.

What is the spatial ideology of the present-day Veneto ‘*villetttopoli*’ [literally, a metropolis of villette, to use architect Pier Luigi Cervellati’s term (see Cervellati’s comments in Erbani, 2003)]? What sorts of assumptions about the existing social and economic order does it embody, and communicate? Despite attempts by regionalist ideologues to stress their role in ‘assuring historical continuity in the Veneto landscape’—see, for example, the arguments made in popular anthropologist Ulderico Bernardi’s (1990) book *Paese Veneto*—present-day villette lack the strong relationship to the land (in both material as well as symbolic terms) that characterised their Palladian predecessors. Their iconic referents are elsewhere: in globalised consumption models and styles. The progressive transformation of simple farmhouses (*case coloniche*) into the fortified luxurious villas of today mirrors the region’s momentous socioeconomic transformations of the past decades and, indeed, provides an interesting lens through which to examine the ways in which these shifts have been interpreted by the Veneti themselves and, literally, ‘built into space’.

The breaking point came with the first years of the Veneto miracle, the 1960s and early 1970s. As was noted previously, industrialisation in the region was, at the outset, a complement to farming employment: a ‘little something on the side’ to augment the family’s earnings. Production was integrated into what remained, fundamentally, a rural lifestyle. The family and the family house thus remained focal points of economic life. With new wealth, however, came a new preoccupation: that of ‘*apparire*’, and, especially, to appear like the ‘*siori*’ (Italian *signori*—gentlemen) of old (Turri, 1995), to ‘live well’, following the dictates of the models proposed by the mass media in the great Italian economic boom of the 1960s.

This conflictual relationship between a rural past and a rapidly changing present was materialised within the spaces of the home. As Giroto (2000, page 141) notes, “things that one would once do in the front yard—whether raising chickens or cultivating a small vegetable garden, were now things to keep hidden, out of sight: ‘dirty’ activities, ‘*non da siori*’ (not for gentlemen).” The chickens—but also the new workshops—were thus relegated to the back of the house, while the façade took on an entirely new function: that of representing the newly conquered economic well-being.

In the new villette springing up in the 1970s the vegetable garden outside the front door was transformed into a landscaped garden: a site for the display of the new wealth. The newly rich attempted to mimic the gardens and parks of the villas of the landowning elites of the past—the *padroni*, the *siori*. “This was done with complete ingenuity, and the results are still visible today: neo-classical columns, elaborate fountains, perfectly manicured flowerbeds” (Giroto, 2000, page 142), along with a variety of mythological beasts populating the immaculate lawn, from the seven dwarves to statues of Venus in Ferrara marble. The late 1970s and 1980s witnessed a further modification: the new villette were built on artificial hills, made to dominate the

surrounding landscape, and even better visible from the road. The raised terrain also allowed for the construction of a key new space in the transforming social and economic order: the home *taverna*. At first no more than a glorified wine cellar, over the past two decades the taverna has become an important space of socialisation, a simulacrum of the town osteria. Increasingly, this is where evenings are spent, and where deals are made.<sup>(8)</sup>

The past decade and a half brought a further shift in building styles. Paradoxically enough, as rural spaces are transformed at breakneck speed into a contiguous ‘villettopoli’, there has been a growing concern for “recovering the rural past” (Indovina, in Erban, 2002, page 37). The new villette thus appeal to styles recalling the farmhouses of old: gone are the marble staircases and statues of Venus, replaced by ‘rustic’ building materials such as bare brick and wood. “The only problem is that the idealized rural heritage is from elsewhere”, comments Girotto (2000, page 145). The ‘country-house style’ adopted borrows heavily from a mediated geographical imaginary of *other* Italian regions: most notably, the *casale toscano*—the archetypal Tuscan farmhouse, surrounded by olive trees, and bordered by rock walls. “These are today’s markers of distinction, of a certain social status”, notes Girotto (2000, page 146), “and they are reproduced within the territory, acting also to create an ‘imitation effect’—this is the way a certain type of house *should* appear” (emphasis added).<sup>(9)</sup>

In a society that has undergone such rapid transformation over the past three decades as the Veneto one, distinctions matter. As the spaces of production that created the boom are, to a large extent, hidden (and certainly not the monumental spaces of Fordist capitalism), distinction and prestige are communicated within and through the private spaces of the home.

“With the loss of all social distinctions, the only mode of distinction became money: *i schei, la pila*<sup>(10)</sup>... the new legions of *miracolati*<sup>(11)</sup> could only distinguish themselves through visible consumption.... There was something feverish in the building boom, an attempt at all costs—and in the shortest time possible—to subvert the existing order to create a new landscape, a new world, a new way of life, refusing the past, submerging it in concrete” (Turri, 1995, pages 217–225).

### Scene 3: the historical centre

“... cities that are doubles of themselves, cities that only exist as nostalgic references to the idea of the city, and to the ideas of communication and social intercourse. These simulated cities are placed around the globe more or less exactly where the old cities were, but they no longer fulfil the function of the old cities. They are no longer centres; they only serve to simulate the phenomenon of the centre.”

Halley (1987) in Soja (1996, page 194)

<sup>(8)</sup> Alluding to the increasing enclosure and privatisation of the region’s social spaces, playwright Marco Paolini has characterised the latter-day Veneti as a ‘*popolo di tavernicoli*’—a wordplay on the taverna and the Italian word for ‘cavemen’, *cavernicoli*—literally, a population of ‘tavern dwellers’.

<sup>(9)</sup> The Tuscan inspiration is not accidental. Although Agnew (1998, page 217) and others (see, for example, Turri, 1998) have noted that as a “late-unifying state with much internal [physical geographical] heterogeneity”, Italy lacks a single ‘representative landscape’ that would encapsulate its national identity, nonetheless, if there has been one landscape ideal that *has* exerted an important influence on the articulation of Italian national identity, it has certainly been the Tuscan one. The Tuscan influence in present-day Veneto is, however, part of a ‘global Tuscan’ ideal more than a ‘national’ influence: it is part of a service-class imaginary that passes through Los Angeles and London before touching down (again) in the fields of the Veneto.

<sup>(10)</sup> Two popular terms for money in the regional dialect.

<sup>(11)</sup> Literally, ‘the blessed’, drawing on the idea of the Veneto (economic) ‘miracle’.

As the underground *taverne* of the *villette* increasingly replace the town *osterie* as the new spaces of socialisation—and economic deal-making—where does ‘public’ life go? As the ‘blessed’ Veneti rush to forget and ‘submerge’ the rural past, as Turri (1995) claims, what has happened to the historical city centres that once served as the organising nodes of the Venetian hinterland, Treviso, Asolo, Bassano del Grappa, to name but a few? No longer isolated medieval burghs, the historical city cores are, in fact, submerged within the ‘molten concrete of the urbanised countryside’, part and parcel of that ‘contiguous collage of fragments of urbanity’ that Indovina (1990) has termed the ‘*città diffusa*’.

“These cities may still imitate the traditional city, its morphologies and symbolic sites. But they have ceased to be cities”, comments Indovina (in Ermani, 2002, page 37), “over the past decades, the historical centres have become de-urbanized, while the surrounding countryside has become increasingly urbanized”. The centres, in other words, have been hollowed out. To cite Paolini (1999, page 76), they have become “zoo-cities”, where to “perform belonging on a Saturday afternoon”.

As all productive and, increasingly, service functions have been moved out to the surrounding ‘urbanised countryside’, the Veneto’s historical city centres have become simply spaces of representation. They have become iconic centres of identity: historical as well as economic. The luxurious storefronts (increasingly of international brands) testify to the growing wealth of the surrounding area but they are not the exhibition of the wealth of the urban merchant class of old (such as Benetton’s ‘mother store’ which dominates Treviso’s central Piazza dei Signori, see figure 3). The ‘revitalised’ and ‘redeveloped’ monumental spaces of the past have been transformed into sites of ‘heritage’: sites of spectacle, rather than the spaces of public interaction and dialogue that they once were. Treviso’s Piazza dei Signori and the centres of Asolo and Bassano del Grappa have become no more than ideal stage sets for consumption: both the visual consumption of an idealised urban past, as well as the consumption of other products and experiences (see Graham et al, 2000; Urry, 1995; Zukin, 1995).



**Figure 3.** United Colors of Benetton ‘mother-store’, Piazza dei Signori, Treviso.



**Figure 4.** Panificio Beltrame, Bassano del Grappa.

The *panetteria* (bakery) in the centre of Bassano del Grappa (in figure 4) no longer sells bread: it is a gentrified '*Bottega del Pane*' (family bread shop), performing the selling of bread to Sunday strollers who eagerly gaze in through its lit-up windows.

These spaces have become sites where the *distinction* that Turri (1995) notes is a guiding preoccupation of the Veneto entrepreneurs is communicated. Paolini's characterisation of the entrepreneur who comes to town with his family to "perform belonging on a Saturday afternoon" is apt: the city centres come alive on evenings and weekends, the streets and squares becoming products to be consumed. Presence in the spaces of the urban thus marks status, distinction (on this point see Urry, 1995): it affirms this new class as 'urbane', as the 'new siori' (Rumiz, 1997; Turri, 1995).

#### **Scene 4: on the road**

What joins these 'fragments of urbanity'? Verona geographer Eugenio Turri (1995; 2000) in his many writings on the Padanian 'megalopolis' has stressed the role of the roads as the only visible thread holding together this new spatial 'creature'.

The roads are not only the organising structure for the new decentred spaces of production, however. They are also important symbolic sites within the spatial order of contemporary Veneto. The roads are the object of complaints and the preeminent site for political action; they are the symbol of the insouciance of the central state and of the inability of the Veneti to 'take care of themselves'. Alongside complaints over unjust taxation—'*Roma ladrona*' (thieving Rome) siphoning-off the fruits of Veneto entrepreneurs' 'hard work' to the 'lazy' South—the other principal grievance of regional (and regionalist) politicians over the years has been the underfunding of regional transport infrastructure by the central government. Early Liga Veneta (the Veneto's ante-litteram regionalist party, prior to amalgamation into the current Lega Nord) posters, along with inducements to a tax revolt against the central state, featured the differential amounts allotted to regional transport infrastructure across Italy, highlighting the Northern regions' underfunding with respect to their Southern counterparts (Editoriale Nord, 1996)

The situation has been getting progressively worse from year to year. Everyday, along the *statali*, the small ‘state roads’ that crisscross the region, a solid block of cars and trucks grinds to a standstill: shining new SUVs and luxury sedans, interspersed by trucks big and small. “Go on the road if you want to see ‘*il Veneto che lavora*’ (the Veneto that ‘works’),” jokes Migliorini. “Pity only that a significant percentage of the just-in-time profit margin is lost as soon as the goods leave the warehouse and get stuck on the road” (personal interview, 2001).

Over the past decade, there have been numerous manifestations, led first by the Liga and later by the Lega, that have occupied minor roads as well as the motorways of the region, blocking tollbooths: all to no avail. Repeated proposals by industrialists’ associations and the chambers of commerce volunteering to take on the task of building additional transport networks or augmenting the carrying capacity of existing infrastructure have been rejected by the (national) state administration.

The roads also reveal the geo-economic clues to the ongoing transformation of Veneto industry. The A4 motorway has by now become a continuous line of TIR trucks, from the Mestre–Venice interchange to the Slovenian and Austrian borders: anonymous trucks bearing the names of Hungarian, Romanian, Slovenian, and Croatian towns, but carrying inside the icons of global style—Benetton, Diesel, Gas, Geox, Replay, Stefanel, Sisley. Timisoara may not come to mind to most fashion junkies but this is where a great bulk of the assembly for such brands is now located, benefiting from generous trade and reexport agreements of recent years. In the area around Timisoara (rebaptised of late as ‘Trevisoara’), Veneto entrepreneurs have established, to date, over 4000 new firms, with over 200 000 jobs. The relocation of certain parts of the production process ‘East’ is the new vogue: so much so that the Treviso Industrialists Association held its 2000 annual meeting in Romania (Possamai, 2001; Tropea, 2001).

The roads are also, however, the new spaces of consumption. Outside of the deurbanised historical centres spring up countless multiplexes and hypermarkets. Italy may be seen as the place where artisanal production and the small shopkeeper still resist the vagaries of globalised production and consumption, but the Veneto has one of the highest concentrations of out-of-town commercial centres and malls in continental Europe, and the highest presence of such centres in Italy: the Auchan complex in Mestre, Cittamercato in Padova, the Piramidi complex outside of Vicenza, the Giardini del Sole in Treviso, and many others.

### Scene 5: the spaces ‘between’

The capannone, the villetta, and the historical centre are the fragments that make up the Veneto città diffusa—fragments that are increasingly privatised and segregated, increasingly urbanised but lacking the urbanity of a city. What lies in the spaces between the fragments, however? Or, better yet, *what and who* do the ‘invisible’ landscapes of production conceal?

The regional boom, built first on the exploitation of family labour, has increasingly grown dependent on the exploitation of immigrant labour. For example, the leather districts of Arzignano and Chiampo, in the valleys north of Vicenza (see figure 1), are staffed predominantly by Serbians and Moroccans. The Arzignano–Chiampo–Montebello ‘leather triangle’ is one of the most important tanning and leather processing zones in the world: some 600 companies, with over 6000 employees. Companies that, today, rely almost exclusively on an immigrant workforce. The growth of the local industries over the past two decades has thus been coupled with an astonishing demographic transformation. Up the Chiampo valley lies a little town called San Pietro Mussolino, which holds the distinction of having the highest percentage of extra-EU immigrant residents in Italy: 17% of the local population



**Figure 5.** Conceria Berica in the leather-tanning district of Arzignano.

(Tomasoni, 2001). For the most part they are Moroccans, Ghanaians, Serbians, and Macedonians, all employed by the tanning industry.

The economic figures, as elsewhere in the region, are flattering. Arzignano is one of the ten municipalities with the highest per capita GDP in Italy; the other towns in the area trail closely behind. But the acrid smell in the valleys is overwhelming. Most of the tanneries that generate such stellar earnings—and that furnish some of the best-known apparel and furniture brands in the world—are no larger than any of the other *capannoni* that dot the Veneto landscape: rusting, rundown warehouses belching smoke into the air (see figure 5, the ‘Conceria Berica’ in Arzignano, one of the countless small tanneries in the district). What also becomes immediately apparent is the absence of houses. My guide to the district, architect Lucio Coltri, who is Director of Urban Planning for the Vicenza Municipality, points up: “everyone lives on the hills—away from the toxic smells. Everyone who can, that is” (personal interview, 2001). The green hills are, indeed, scattered with *villette*. “You will find only the immigrants down here in the *concia* [tannery].” ‘Down here’ on the road, in fact, the only people visible within what appears to be an endless stretch of warehouses are young, dark-skinned men, walking, or hanging out in small groups in front of small apartment blocks that, as Coltri informs me, have been bought up by the tannery owners to rent to their foreign employees “since no one here wanted to rent to these people.”<sup>(12)</sup>

<sup>(12)</sup> Rather than ‘importing’ immigration and its associated problems, some clothing and footwear conglomerates such as Benetton, Sisley, and Diesel have chosen to export parts of the production process: first to Turkey and, in recent years, to the East (Romania above all). Smaller companies, eager to boost profits, find other spatial ‘fixes’. In the year 2001, police in the region raided three separate immigration rings that held illegal Chinese labourers—entire families, in fact—locked into sweatshop-farmhouses in the middle of the Padanian plain. In September 2001, thirty people were found locked in a windowless barn, sewing garments for the subcontractor of ‘a global brand’ (for an account of the diffusion of this phenomenon, see Stella, 2001).





“Ten kilometres, approaching Treviso: 19 sets of lights, average speed: 25 km/hour, over 100 Mercedes and various other mega-horse powered speed-machines, 180 trucks, 15 tractors, 15 foreign prostitutes, 160 *capannoni*, a few corn fields scattered here and there. .... In ten kilometres, there is nothing that tells me: this is the Veneto. Neither the architecture, nor the names on the signposts (that now mark plant names, not place names), nor the faces on the street.”

Rumiz (1997, page 43)

“an urban psychasthenia... defined as a disturbance between self and surrounding territory.”

Olalquiaga (1992, page 1)

What has rushed into this semantic and spatial confusion? In his theatrical pieces Paolini (1999; 2000) evokes not only the dis-location that characterises the Veneto città diffusa but also new landscapes of fear: the region as ‘carceral archipelago’, also in this mimicking the Los Angeles described by Soja (1996; 2000), Davis (1998), and Flusty (1994). The villette built today are heavily fortified: encircled by walls, and guarded by ready-response alarm systems and ‘120 decibel dogs’.<sup>(13)</sup> The increasing fortification of the houses is, in part, a response to a surge in burglaries over the past decade, many quite violent. The region’s diffuse industrialisation has created a diffuse wealth that has, indeed, attracted the attentions of petty and not-so-petty criminals. Over the past three years the situation reached crisis proportions: in 2001 there were 150 000 burglaries and 2000 holdups, an average of 630 crimes per day (Jori, 2001).

Fear of crime is now regularly cited in polls as the major problem facing the region: the frustration expressed by the Liga Veneta and Lega Nord in years past against ‘unjust taxation’ and an oppressive state bureaucracy<sup>(14)</sup> has given way to calls for security and safety (see the report published by the Istituto Poster, 2001).<sup>(15)</sup> In September 2001, after a week which witnessed seven violent burglaries in five days in villette in the provinces of Padova, Vicenza, and Treviso—the work of the same ‘*banda di slavi*’ (Slavic gang) as the local papers pronounced (Pennisi, 2001)—Renato Martin, the Lega Nord mayor of Jesolo,<sup>(16)</sup> decided that the only response to this latest crime wave was to arm himself and the entire city council, encouraging his townsfolk to do the same: “the State is not able to give us certainties. The citizens want facts, not talk. If not, they try to defend themselves in whatever way they can—and with weapons, they feel safer” (Martin, interviewed in Bianchin, 2001; see also Coen, 2001).<sup>(17)</sup>

But, as local commentators have noted, the Veneto’s ‘ecology of fear’ (Davis, 1998) is also the expression of “a deeper, almost primeval anxiety” (Rumiz, 2000; see also 2003b). It is a fear of returning to the origins: ‘*No gavevo, no gavevo, go paura de no gaver*’ (I didn’t have, I didn’t have, I am afraid of not having), an endless incantation

<sup>(13)</sup> “*Abitano in blisteri full-optional, con cani oltre i 120 decibels e nani manco fosse Disneyland*” (they live in all-option capsules, with 120 decibel dogs and garden gnomes as though they were in Disneyland) as evocatively described by Italian rapper Frankie Hi-n-r-g MC in his 1999 hit “*Quelli che Bepensano*” (literally, ‘those who think well’, an Italian expression that also signifies, however, a certain attitude of ‘those in the right’).

<sup>(14)</sup> For an overview of the Lega’s changing politics and its geographies of support see Agnew (1995; 2002) and Diamanti (1993; 1996).

<sup>(15)</sup> Riding the media frenzy over the ‘criminal emergency’, the Forza Italia coalition (of which the Lega is a part) organised a national ‘Security Day’ to “highlight the legitimate fears of citizens over the inability to feel safe in their homes and places of work” (see Silvio Berlusconi’s 2000 book *L’Italia che ho in mente*).

<sup>(16)</sup> Italy’s second-largest beach resort (see figure 1).

<sup>(17)</sup> Martin had already made the national news some months earlier after the city council decided to confer an honorary citizenship to the leader of the far-right Austrian FPOE party Jörg Haider, infamous across Europe for his incendiary anti-immigrant rhetoric.

on the part of region's 'blessed'—the *miracolati*—[to use Turri's (1995) expressive term]. The fear of not having, of returning to the misery of the fathers. A fear that, as many observers have noted, had been the motivation, the 'push', behind the iron-clad work ethic that fueled the Veneto machine (see Stella, 2000; Turri, 1995), but that now has become "the crucible of all postmodern anxieties: fear of the market, of Europe, of immigrants, globalisation" (Rumiz, 2003b, page 180).

The figure of the stranger is increasingly becoming the target of all these anxieties. Although the Veneto production machine would grind to a halt without immigrant labour, this 'urbanised countryside' still has not reconciled itself with the presence of difference. "We may have the export figures of California—but we still don't realize that we have *become* California", comments Diamanti, one of the preeminent scholars of the Italian *Nordest* (in his introduction to Tomasoni, 2001, page 6). The growing immigrant presence has been blamed for everything from increasing crime to urban decay to a 'loss of family values' (building on the stereotypes of immigrant men as drug pushers and immigrant women as prostitutes): fears masterfully exploited by local—as well as national—political leaders.

But, whereas the immigration issue has become the winning rhetorical tool in political contests, the 'Veneto che lavora', the 'working region', has altogether different concerns. The Federation of Veneto Manufacturers, the regional branch of the national industrial conglomerate Unindustria, as well as countless provincial and municipal chambers of commerce and industrial associations have been raising an alarm call for the past five years that, without further immigration, the Veneto miracle may well soon be over. The most often cited estimate is that, by 2020, the region will have to rely on immigrants for 40% of its labour force (Favaro, 2001, page 2; see also Fondazione Nordest, 2000; *Il Gazzettino* 2000).

The 2002 Bossi–Fini law regimenting immigration flows<sup>(18)</sup> (pushed through the national parliament by the Berlusconi coalition) has found strong opposition from Veneto entrepreneurs—often the very same people who voted the Lega and the Forza Italia coalition into office. "With a stop to new immigration, our firms will be forced to close" (Gavaz, 2001, page 4) pronounced Veneto manufacturers' associations in chorus. The 2001 figures published by Unioncamere (the association of regional chambers of commerce) are revealing: only 149 000 foreign workers were granted visas, a small percentage of the 714 000 requests forwarded to national immigration authorities by Veneto firms (Jori, 2002).

The figure of the foreigner lays bare the contradictions between political convenience and economic necessity. It reveals the semantic and spatial confusion over what the Veneto città diffusa has become. Immigrants are necessary to make the 'miracle' continue. But '*guai se si li vede fuori*' (God forbid you see them outside). 'Outside what?', one might ask. This (by now rhetorical) phrase, reevoked by regional politicians and journalists alike, says it all. The notion of an outside alludes to a hidden space of production (where the immigrant, as a factor of production, is necessary) and a world outside, a world of charming villette and gentrified historical centres: spaces of representation of the region's wealth, testimony to the miracle, where the presence of the immigrant is dissonant with the image that the new siori—the new lords of the urbanised countryside—try to project.

<sup>(18)</sup> This is named after Lega Nord leader Umberto Bossi, and the leader of the post-Fascist *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN—National Alliance), Gianfranco Fini, the coauthors of the law. The Lega and AN have been very strange bedfellows in Silvio Berlusconi's *Casa delle Libertà* coalition, with the Lega's platform of regional devolution standing in clear opposition to the ideals of national unity (and homogeneity) held dear by the far-right AN. The two parties have found common ground, however, on the issue of immigration control, both expressing concerns about the growing foreign presence in the country.

“For a world that moved in one generation from the plough to trading on global markets, from the pre-modern to the post-modern”, writes Rumiz, “the only way to survive is to keep the local and the global rigorously apart” (2003b, page 158). The necessity to keep ‘the right people in the right places’ thus becomes paramount.

Someone who knows quite a bit about keeping ‘the right people in the right places’ (the phrasing is his) is Giancarlo Gentilini, who in June 2003 concluded his second mandate as the Lega Nord mayor of Treviso.<sup>(19)</sup> Known affectionately as ‘the Sheriff’ (a self-ascribed moniker), Gentilini walks around the city every morning, “checking up on work in progress”, and stopping to drink coffee with the Trevigiani. “The people love me”, he says, “because I roll up my sleeves and do the work—rather than jabbering all day in political-speak (*politichese*)” (personal interview, 2001). The Trevigiani seem to agree: in national polls, Gentilini regularly appears as one of the top three ‘best-loved’ local politicians.

The Sheriff is also known nationally, however, for his incendiary pronouncements against immigrant workers. During his two terms in office, Gentilini has come up with a variety of strategies to “assure order and discipline within the city... and to put everyone in their proper place” (personal interview, 2001). One of these was the removal, in 1997, of all benches from city parks in order to “dissuade those good-for-nothing drug-peddlers and prostitutes from laying about in public spaces that are for the people” (personal interview, 2001; on similar tactics implemented in North American cities see Davis, 1998; also Katz, 2001; Smith, 1996). In March 2003 the sheriff ordered that a number of alleys leading to the central piazza Duomo and piazza Pola be put ‘under lock and key’ for the night. The initiative was purportedly adopted to answer “citizens’ requests for silence and tranquillity” during the evening hours. As the mayor’s office communicated, shutting the alleyways would “contribute to bringing back a more orderly and clean city: the alleys had become a receptacle for drug-pushers and *malviventi* [illicit] *extracomunitari*;<sup>(20)</sup> in some cases practically open-air latrines. This initiative will return the centre to its owners: the local citizens” (*La Tribuna di Treviso* 2003). Indeed, it is the local inhabitants who will be entrusted with the keys to the alleys; the *vicolo del Duomo* will be shut every night by one of the Basilica’s priests. The project will be paired, in the mid-term, with a network of video cameras that will oversee ‘*le zone a rischio*’ (at-risk areas).

Some local businesspeople, inspired by the mayor’s suggestions, have put into place their own strategies for controlling access to the spaces of the city centre. Just recently, one bar owner decided to double the price of coffee for *extracomunitari*, to prevent them “from hanging out in the garden in front of his bar” (Genga, 2003). The initiative brought a storm of protests from local Catholic and immigrants’ rights associations and, again, Treviso made the national news.

Beyond regimenting the proper use of public spaces, the mayor also has strong ideas about what immigrants’ ‘purpose’ in Treviso society should be: “I want people that can stand on an assembly line, not those who are used to running away from lions.<sup>(21)</sup> These people that come here to sell counterfeit goods in the street or to wash

<sup>(19)</sup> In the June 2003 elections, Gentilini’s deputy mayor, Lega activist Giancarlo Gobbo, was elected to replace him. The Sheriff has stayed on in the municipal administration, however, as ‘deputy and counselor’ to the newly instated Gobbo. In August 2003 the Lega Nord announced that Gentilini will stand as the Lega’s *Nordest* candidate for the 2004 elections to the European Parliament (representing the regions of Trentino Alto Adige, Veneto, Friuli Venezia Giulia, and Emilia Romagna), hoping that the inflammatory pronouncements of ‘lo sceriffo’ would find a wider audience (Comelli, 2003).

<sup>(20)</sup> This is the commonly used term for extra-EU immigrants.

<sup>(21)</sup> This is a veiled allusion to the predominantly Senegalese street vendors who are, by now, a common sight in all major Italian cities.

# CLANDESTINI



Stampato in proprio Novembre 2000 - Via Bellero, 41 - 20161 Milano

## IDENTIFICARLI ed ESPELLERLI



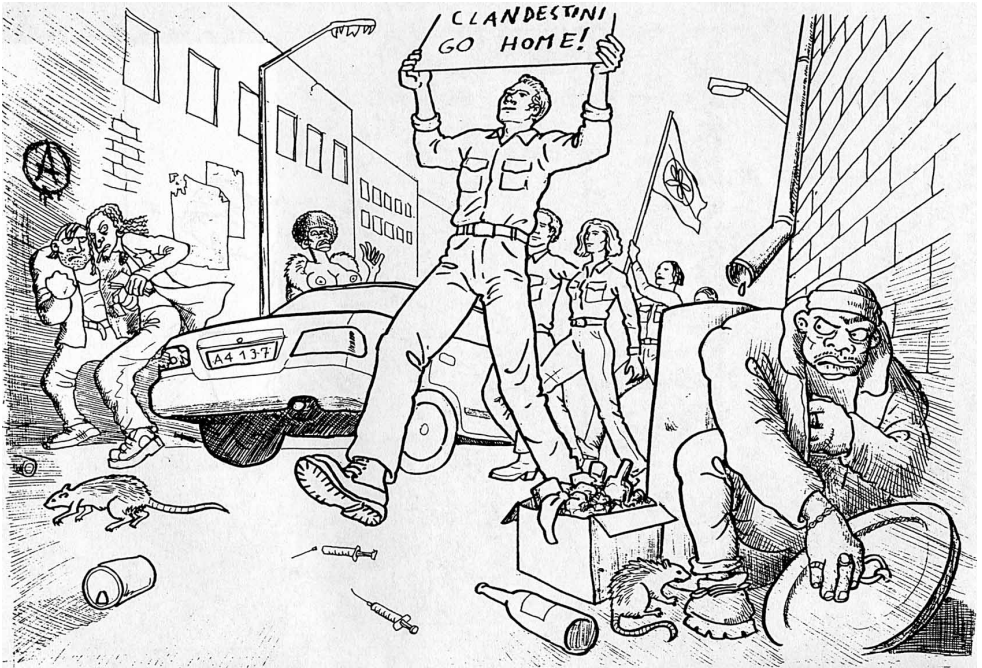
**Volontari VERDI 338.27.03.012**

**Figure 6.** Lega Nord flyer calling for the fingerprinting and expulsion of immigrants.

windshields at traffic lights—I don't need these people" (Gentilini, personal interview, 2001).<sup>(22)</sup> The right place of the immigrant is, therefore, on the factory floor. The urban centre—now the space of representation, not production—is not the place for them. They have no citizenship here. They are, in Gentilini's own words, 'out of place', 'not needed'.

Gentilini may be the loudest voice of the Lega Nord in the Veneto, but he reflects a much-broader discourse within regional politics that counterposes the displaced or out-of-place immigrant against the strongly 'placed' family values of the Veneto. Indeed, the variety of proposals that have come up for a vote in the regional assembly over the past two years reflect a strong preoccupation with 'grounding' immigrant workers. Lega politicians have repeatedly called for all foreign workers (whether legal or illegal) to be fingerprinted (see the flyer in figure 6), and a series of new laws will now regiment work permits to be granted only to single men for a prescribed period of time, with no possibility of renewal or migration of family members (much like the German and Swiss *Gastarbeiter* systems of the 1960s and 1970s), and monitor closely

<sup>(22)</sup> In 2000 the mayor famously suggested that unemployed immigrants could be "made useful—we could dress them up like rabbits and let the hunters have some target practice: bam, bam" (quoted in Adamoli, 2001).



**Figure 7.** The Padanian ‘vanguard’ reclaiming city spaces (source: cartoon reproduced from the pamphlet “Etnonazionalismo: L’Unica Speranza per l’Europa”, distributed at the Lega Nord’s annual ‘Padania Day’, Venice, September 2001).

immigrants’ residence. The 2002 Bossi–Fini law on immigration has, indeed, put many of these requirements into practice, creating (in Bossi’s own words) “finally a logical link between immigrants and work” (Bossi in Colaprico, 2001), and the newly introduced requirement of taking digital fingerprints from all extra-EU immigrants “will make sure that the foreigners who come here pursue legitimate work rather than turning to crime” (Canetti, 2002; Casadio, 2002a; 2002b).<sup>(23)</sup>

In the dis-placed, diffuse landscape of the Veneto miracle, the preoccupation of ‘putting everyone in their place’ is becoming increasingly violent, as the popular imaginaries of the figure of the immigrant become increasingly racialised and criminalised. The figure of the ‘black man’—or ‘black woman’—on the corner (whether he, or she, is dark-skinned or not is a small matter) has become a popular trope, a symptom of—but also an explanation for—all the ills that assail the region. ‘Drug peddlers, robbers, and prostitutes’, that is, all those who inhabit the ‘spaces between’ of the *città diffusa*: the roads, the abandoned city centres, the stretches of countryside between the fortified *villette*. During the 2001 ‘Padania Day’ (celebrated by the Lega Nord in Venezia each September since 1996), a variety of pamphlets incited the ‘*Popolo Padano*’ (the Padanian people) gathered around the Laguna to “push back the immigrant threat” (Edizioni Ghenos, 2001). Figures 7 and 8 offer disturbing caricatures of immigrants, and implicitly deny these individuals citizenship within the spaces of the *città diffusa*: in both posters the immigrant ‘Other’ is confronted by the Padanian vanguard, affirming family values and ownership of the local.

<sup>(23)</sup> This new provision of the Italian immigration law caused an uproar not only in Italy but also abroad: a long list of foreign artists and intellectuals signed a declaration penned by Steven Spielberg condemning the practice as xenophobic and as branding immigrants as criminals (Spielberg, 2002, page 2).



**Figure 8.** Protecting ‘family values’ against the criminal (immigrant) hordes (source: cartoon reproduced from the pamphlet “Etnonazionalismo: L’Unica Speranza per l’Europa”, distributed at the Lega Nord’s annual ‘Padania Day’, Venice, September 2001).

### Conclusions

Scholars of regionalist mobilisation, both in Northern Italy as well as elsewhere, have focused their attentions largely on the ideal and idealised landscapes that are an integral part of regional mythmaking, noting the ways in which such ‘representative landscapes’ (Duncan, 1990) are deployed by regional ideologues to convey belonging and emplace identity. I would like to argue, however, that, to understand the politics of regional identity in present-day Europe, it is equally important to consider the *places* that make up the region—the places within which such regional(ist) politics are born. An examination of the geographies of production and consumption of the Veneto città diffusa can thus be an important aid in better understanding the region’s increasingly reactionary politics for it is here, in the capannoni, in the villette, and on the roads ‘between’, that such politics of exclusion emerge.

In his collection of essays on contemporary identity politics in Europe, Žižek (1998) argues that to understand the new ‘regional fundamentalisms’ we cannot separate politics from political economy. Žižek’s call to ‘bring back political economy’ echoes, in many ways, critiques voiced within recent assessments of the state of regional geography (in particular, Agnew, 2000; 2001). For, although studies dedicated to the role of regions as settings for economic development are many, few of these look to the ways in which changing regional economies *also transform the contexts—and texts—of regional (and regionalist) politics.*

There is another reason why it is important to pay attention to the spaces of the città diffusa. Italian sociologists (especially Bagnasco, 1977; 1982; 1999; Trigilia, 1981; 1986; see also Bagnasco and Trigilia, 1984) as well as numerous foreign commentators have long argued for the role of local political subcultures in creating the conditions necessary for successful ‘diffuse industrialisation’ and, in particular, for the emergence

of the dynamic industrial districts that characterise the Italian *Nordest*. As Agnew (2002) has recently suggested, however, as valuable as such territorial subculture models may be in describing the diverse paths of industrialisation and their ‘bases’ in localised forms of knowledge and social organisation, they risk essentialising (and even reifying) ‘local specificity’. They forget, indeed, the dynamic nature of places: the shifting ways in which places are articulated within wider spatial divisions of labour and global flows of goods, people, and information—and how such shifts necessarily act to transform the local contexts of political behaviour. It might be intriguing, then, to reverse Bagnasco and Trigilia’s argument and ask: *what sort of politics* is emerging today in the Veneto’s ‘dis-located’ spaces of diffuse industrialisation?

What does an examination of the geographies of the Veneto città diffusa tell us, then, about the politics of the Veneto model, and about the much-lauded ‘local networks of trust’ that make it work? As I have tried to argue within this paper, in the “discontinuous continuum of fragments of urbanity” (Indovina, 1990) that is present-day Veneto, those who lie *outside* of the local networks of association and trust—the foreigners, the strangers—become a ‘disturbance in the landscape’, forced into the spaces between the fragments and thus immediately visible, immediately Other.

And yet the Veneto ‘miracle’ would not be possible without these ‘invisible strangers’. The rhetoric of the boom exercises its power precisely through this play of absence and presence: deciding who to make (in)visible, when, and where. Perhaps this should make us think much more critically about mythologising local ‘connectivity’: a myth that can prove just as exclusionary as appeals to blood and belonging.

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