

# Internal colonialism in Western Europe

## The case of Sardinia

Katjuscia Mattu

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

katjuscia.mattu@uab.cat

### *Abstract*

*Interregional socio-economic inequality is observable both at international level and within single countries. There are regions that, though belonging to rich countries, present structural deficiencies and low standards of living. Poverty is usually considered as an independent condition from wealth, but they are two sides of the same reality, as shown by dependency theory and, as far as sub-state level is concerned, by internal colonialism theory.*

*This paper focuses on the socio-economic conditions the Italian island of Sardinia, which exhibits the characteristics of an internal colony. After a conceptual definition of internal colony (section 1), I show how the socio-economic characteristics of Sardinia fit in that definition (section 2). Finally I argue why internal colonialism may be a valid theoretical instrument to explain poverty and interregional inequality also within rich countries.*

### **Short biography**

I studied Political Sciences at the University of Cagliari and at the University of Bucharest. I worked at NGO's, public offices, private enterprises and schools. I published an article on the Portuguese Revolution in the Romanian review *Sfera Politicii* (2005) and an intervention on Linguistic Diversity and Social Cohesion in the annual CiCe Conference proceedings (2010). Now I am doctoral student and research assistant at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, where I study interregional inequality in Italy.

### **Key words**

Interregional inequality, internal colonialism, regionalism, Italy, Sardinia.

## ***Introduction***

Thinking of socio-economic conditions of territories we are used to divide the world in “developed” and “underdeveloped” countries; this categorization is necessary for certain analysis at macro level, but it does not mean that countries are homogeneous units, indeed they are often characterized by an unbalanced distribution of wealth across regions. This happens even in the core of the world-system, where several territories exhibit low standards of living.

Which are the characteristics of these regions? In many cases, they present a number of features that contribute to reproduce their poverty: their structural problems are strictly connected to the fact that they are dominated and exploited by more powerful groups from other regions, of which they are internal colonies.

In this paper I use the internal colonialism paradigm to characterize the case of Sardinia, one of the poorest Italian regions. For the moment, the aim is mainly conceptual and descriptive: after building up an operative definition of internal colony I describe the Sardinian case comparing its features with the observable implications of that concept. However, my theoretical objective goes a little farther, and I explain several reasons that demonstrate the validity of the internal colonialism paradigm not only for a descriptive but also for an explanatory purpose, to account for in-country spatial socio-economic inequality in former colonies as well as in Western European countries.

The selection of the case is strictly connected to the research project on interregional socio-economic disparities of which this paper is a first step. Italy is the Western European country that exhibits the highest level of territorial socio-economic imbalance (Novotny, 2004; Rodríguez-Pose and Ezcurra, 2010); indeed Italian well-known dualism inspired the analysis of Antonio Gramsci on the exploitation of some regions (the South and the islands) by others (the North), that is a key argument of the internal colonialism approach.

Sardinia was the poorest region of Italy at the time of the unification, though it was not dominated by the absolutist government of the Bourbon monarchy, whose “backwardness” is often identified as the responsible of the “underdevelopment” of the South (see, for instance, Mack Smith, 1997; Cafagna, 1989);<sup>1</sup> conversely the island was part of the state whose government led the formation of the Kingdom of Italy, and whose ruling class's astuteness is considered an important factor for the

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1 For an opposite perspective, see for instance Capecelatro and Carlo, 1975; Zitara, 1974.

economic growth of the Northern regions (see, among others: Giardina, Sabbatucci and Vidotto, 2007).

While the Sardinian position at the bottom of the spatial social scale did not change until the second half of the XX century, since the constitution of the Italian Republic and the formation of regional governments, its socio-economic conditions have improved, and it turned into the richest region of (poor) Southern Italy. Thus, if Italy as a country is worth analyzing due to its deep spatial socio-economic inequality, the selection of the case of Sardinia relies on its historical pattern, its particular relations with the North and the political and socio-economic changes that characterize them.

From a scientific point of view the interest of this study lies in its contribution to break common wisdoms about the “First” and the “Third World”, by focusing on poverty and structural deficiencies in (parts of) rich countries rather than poor ones, and by using the categories of colonialism and dependence in a different context (Western Europe rather than Latin America, Asia or Africa) and a different level (in-country rather than international perspective) from those in which they are usually employed. This way I stress the similarity and mutual implication of social phenomena in societies that are usually thought to be extremely different and studied in opposition of each other, such as the “developed” and “underdeveloped”, contributing to the re-composition of the world-system (Wallerstein, 2004).

On the other hand, the practical interest of this research consists of its interpretation of the (partial) failure of “development” and modernization policies for poorest territories in Italy and other European countries, that have typically been based on the classical view of “underdevelopment” as a “pre-development” phase and of the need to stimulate industrialization and capital investments to get over it, without taking into account the dynamics in which these processes, and others more subtle, evolve.

## ***The internal colony***

Poverty and “underdevelopment” of world regions and countries have been studied especially through two main approaches.

The first develops around modernization theory, according to which poor countries lie in an early stage of the path towards modernity (Rostow, 1990): the persistence of traditional forms of production would prevent capitalism from expanding and this generates an economic dualism with “developed” enclaves that do not manage to integrate with the rest of the country. “Underdevelopment” would be the effect of internal factors, and it is to see if, how and when these “backward” countries are able to get out of the “vicious circle of poverty” (Nurkse, 1967). From this perspective, exchanges with “developed” countries can help the poor to modernize, through foreign investments as a substitute for lacking local capital and international trade to enlarge the demand and stimulate production.

This liberal approach is contrasted by Marxist theories of underdevelopment, such as the theory of dependence (Dos Santos, 1970; Frank, 1966) and neo-colonialist accounts (see, for instance: Nkrumah, 1980; Sartre, 2001; Chomsky, 2005). They consider poverty and underdevelopment not as a separate reality from economic growth and modernity, but precisely their “dark side”. Capitalist growth generates the division of labour also across countries, so that dividing the world along areas at a different stage of development does not make sense, for it is an integrate system (Wallerstein, 2004) where the core is characterized by a self-oriented economic growth, while peripheral economy follows a complementary and therefore dependent pattern of economic development. “Underdevelopment” is a function of “development” (Frank, 1966), being this dynamics the main cause of poverty and structural problems in the “South”, which tends to reproduce themselves in a process of cumulative causation (Myrdal, 1971).

These perspectives, used mostly to explain the phenomenon at international level, are suitable also for smaller contexts like the nation-state, where it connects to the internal colonialism paradigm. The most important exponent of this theory is Pablo González Casanova, who analyzed Mexican society by tracing the interdependence of power asymmetry, socio-economic inequality and human relations of exploitation between two main cultural groups, the dominant Ladinos and

the subordinate indigenous (González Casanova, 1991, 2006). In line with dependency and other underdevelopment theories, he unfolds the colonial structure, filters its definition from strictly formal attributes, and stresses its substantial elements, thus identifying colonial features even where colonialism was formally undertaken, with a rationale similar to present theories of neo-colonialism. Casanova explains that Ladino people have occupied the role previously played by Spanish colonizers and now perpetuate the same forms of socio-economic exploitation and political and cultural dominion upon the indigenous people, so reproducing the high level of intergroup inequality in Mexico and other Latin American societies.

Even if Casanova stated that internal colonialism is the inheritance of former colonialism in new states, Hechter (1999), Lafont (1971) and Beiras (1982) have shown that colonial relations also characterized the development of Western European countries, such as Great Britain, France and Spain. Here the ruling class of *core* regions obtained the power over the whole country and used it to foster a model of economic growth based on the industrialization of their territories, and the configuration of *peripheral* regions as sources of raw materials and labour forces and as markets to sell their manufactured products without competition. This way, central regions could undertake a robust economic growth and their ruling classes gained an ever larger power to influence political decisions at state level, while peripheral populations lost the control on their territories and resources, developing a highly dependent economy whose characteristics are determined by the demand of the centre; they became, in other words, *internal colonies*. These would be the case of the Celtic fringe in Great Britain (Hechter, 1999), Galicia in Spain (Beiras, 1982), Occitania and Bretagne in France (Lafont, 1971).

According to this approach, *internal colonialism* explains interregional inequalities, in terms of political power and socio-economic conditions, also in countries that are not former colonies but rather former colonizers, and actually both forms of colonialism, internal and external, meet the same needs, that is the economic expansion of central, metropolitan regions (Lafont, 1971).

What are the characteristics of an internal colony? First, it is a human group living in a territory that lies within the borders of a nation-state and nevertheless exhibits the substantive characteristics of a colony. Unlike the case of “classic” colonialism, people from internal colonies are integrated in the same polity and have the same formal rights of metropolitan people, that is, they are in principle equal citizens. Though, as our theoretical model suggests, formal status does not necessarily correspond to *de facto* conditions.

Based on United Nations' documents and discussions on the topic, Casanova (2006) identifies the following features of the colony (in the conventional meaning of colony of exploitation): it is a land whose population does not govern itself, being in an asymmetric position vis-à-vis the metropolis, which on the contrary does self-govern; its administration is left to the responsibility of the metropolis; its inhabitants do not choose their rulers, who are assigned from outside; its inhabitants' rights, economic situation and social privileges are determined by the metropolis; its people have not natural links with their governors, for they have been submitted through military conquest or as a consequence of an international agreement; finally they belong to a different cultural group from members of the metropolis.

This is the classical interpretation, in full handbook style; but, as Casanova himself points out, it is a strictly formal definition, based on legal and political attributes that can be absent where colonial relations actually occur; indeed, it fails to identify the primary essence of colonialism, that is economic. Undoubtedly, during the colonialist era the metropolis exercised a political dominion upon the colonies, but this was not the basic function of their relation; it was the political-military instrument to pursue the very objective of colonization: the exploitation of natural and labour resources and the monopoly of trade.

If we focus on this substantial meaning of colonialism we can still use it to analyze “classical” colonies, but in addition we will be able to identify colonial features in not strictly colonial contexts. From this perspective, I re-define a colony relying on its socio-economic structure and relations with the core. In principle, the colony is poor: its population's incomes are lower than those of metropolitan people, both at the aggregate level, that is comparing the whole of the colonized people with the whole of the metropolis, and individually, because often the members of the peripheral group get lower salaries than the members of the centre even for the same job. In the colony there is a high level of unemployment that pushes young people to emigrate, often towards the core. Public services, such as health-care, education and transport systems are deficient, especially if compared with those of the metropolis. This also favors that those who need special medical attention are forced to transfer to achieve it, with all the economic efforts and human suffering that it implies. Students also encounter little opportunities in the periphery, so that if they want to cultivate their academic career they have to emigrate as well, and again, the destination is often the metropolis itself.

This situation, that could be called “underdevelopment”, is connected to the fact that the colony occupies a disadvantaged position in respect of the metropolis. The economies of the core and the periphery, though strictly interconnected, are very different. In the core, growth is led by endogenous forces, based on local capital investments and responding to a large extent to the demand of its own people; production is highly differentiated and the diverse sectors are bound in an aggregate system of production and consumption (Lafont, 1971).

Conversely, the colony follows a distorted path of development, for its economy is “out-centered”, complementary to that of the metropolis. On the one hand, what the core cannot or does not want to produce is left to the colony, that is a source of natural resources and cheap labour forces and a place for dirty factories. On the other hand, it is the ideal market for goods produced in the core, because the latter holds the monopoly of its trade (Hechter, 1999), and the power to establish the conditions for imports and exports. This unequal relation tends to induce an economy based on a dominant sector, usually agriculture and minerals, and a few dominant goods, and where external trade is very important. Besides, industrialization in the colony usually involves dangerous and highly polluting kinds of production, that are not welcome in the core (Lafont, 1971). In addition to cheap labour and the possibility to exploit the environment regardless of social and ecological criteria, foreign capitalists are often driven to the peripheries by further opportunities to reduce costs of production, that is, economic incentives and fiscal privileges conceded by central governments, in their attempts to industrialize and so modernize colonies (Lafont, 1971).

So, investments in the colony are made by importing capital from outside, be from private foreigners or the state; the exploitation of lands, waters, mines and other reserves of natural resources are likely to be assigned to metropolitan candidates (Casanova, 2006) in a way that the colony's industrial production, trade and credit come to be monopolized by the members of the core (Hechter, 1999). These foreign capitalists take direct responsibility for economic management, or delegate it to trusted charges, while employing natives as labour forces, so that in the colony entrepreneurs, managers and bankers tend to be recruited from the core (Casanova, 2006). These people are strongly linked to the metropolis, because of cultural belonging and for they usually have there a family, friends, colleagues and often more profitable businesses; conversely, they have no cultural nor human links with the colonial society, and no interest in improving natives' standards of living; not surprisingly, they are likely to pump resources out of the colony (Gramsci, 2007) without reinvesting in technological improvements, leaving lands and industries at a low level of productivity. A big share of the wealth produced in the periphery is taken out of it and contributes

instead to the economic growth of the metropolis (Gramsci, 1995), where entrepreneurs do reinvest in technology, spend their money for private consumption and pay taxes. Again, the poverty of the colony is a function of the metropolis' economic growth (Casanova, 2006).

Last but not least, the complementarity and dependency of peripheral economy have consequences for the territorial configuration. Given that production is, to a large extent, destined to export, economic activities in the colony tend to concentrate around the ways out, such as ports, crossings or roadways, industries agglomerate in enclaves and the transport network connects the inland parts to the ports and other nodes, so that natural resources and agricultural products can easily get to the points from where they are then exported. The result is a dualism contrasting industrial and “modernized” urban or semi-urban enclaves to the hinterlands, which in turn are relatively isolated not only from the outside but also among themselves (Beiras, 1982), and more and more depressed and depopulated, as job opportunities concentrate elsewhere. The inhabitants of the enclaves find themselves better connected to the metropolis than to the inland, and become consequently more familiar with the culture and way of life of the former, at the same time breaking away from the latter. Because of this alienation (Gramsci, 2006; Lafont, 1971) of “modern” enclaves from people of the hinterlands, geographic dualism translates also into cultural dualism, that is accentuated in the case of urban people occupying higher social positions, allied to the colonizers in the exploitation of the natives.

It is clear at this point that, though colonialism is primarily an economic phenomenon, it has strong consequences in social and cultural terms. In the colonial society, it produces a division of labour between members of the metropolis, which occupy the higher social positions, and the natives, who tend to be employed in subordinate jobs or anyway work in less profitable activities, as farmers and peasants. It does not mean that all natives are poor, nor that they are not able to reach a high social position, but that it is a matter of opportunities. However, considering the two populations at an aggregate level, we can define the metropolitan group as rich and the peripheral one as poor, nonetheless each of them maintains its internal inequalities along social classes, gender, rural-urban and so on. This applies to the whole system, composed by the metropolis and the colonies, but is especially evident within the peripheral regions, as I have already pointed out.

As long as colonial and metropolitan people belong to different cultural groups or “ethnicities”, we can speak of cultural division of labour, that is a basic element of internal as well as classic colonialism. It means that the range of opportunities of an individual is closely linked to

its cultural belonging, for members of peripheral groups are systematically disadvantaged relative to members of the metropolis, to the extent that actors identify themselves as belonging to a particular group also according to the social roles they have access to (Hechter, 1999). Cultural diversity assumes, in this sense, a high social relevance, as it traces the constraints for individual agency, and it is reinforced by attitudes of discrimination against distinctive peripheral cultural elements, such as languages, religions or clothing, and the diffusion of a number of clichés associated with people from the colony, described as backward, contentious, illiterate, lazy, lacking in entrepreneurial mindset, etc..

Concerning this point, I must clarify that by cultural group I mean a human group that share the same culture, that is a set of “distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features”, encompassing “art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs”. It is not always easy to distinguish cultural groups, however here I consider a cultural group one that identifies itself and is commonly identified through a distinctive culture. Particularly, as my unit of analysis is a cultural group whose members concentrate in a well-defined geographic area I may refer indistinctly to the territory and its native population.

By the way, it is worth noticing that what I call “cultural group” elsewhere goes under the name of “racial” or “ethnic” group, and what I define cultural division of labour is sometimes described by those alternative (but not totally interchangeable) adjectives. Otherwise, when the perspective focuses on territories rather than people, it is often called geographic or spatial division of labour, being the first particularly used in the international context and the second in reference to urban - rural disparities, residential segregation and housing discrimination (see, for instance, Blanco and Subirats, 2008). Finally, when emphasis is given to the contrast between different dimensions of the division of labour, the social one is called vertical while the one that concerns intergroup relations goes under the name of horizontal division of labour. The general understanding of all these definitions is the same: a division of labour based not on individual characteristics but on the belonging to different human groups, described either through their cultural or physical traits or the place they live in.

Cultural division of labour is a characterizing feature of colonial societies. As I mentioned above, it implies disparities in opportunities: members of the colony are very unlikely to access to high social positions because they start from a disadvantaged point in front of metropolitan people. An important exception to this social discrimination regards local authorities, who perform as

“brokers” between the colonized and the colonizers, as they are somehow members of both groups: they are identifiable with natives according to their origin, cultural and sometimes physical traits, but at the same time they are assimilated to metropolitan people (Lafont, 1971; Gramsci, 1995) as they are privileged, at least within the background of the colony. They are bound to the colonized by traditional links, and to the colonizers by political and economic ties.

Metropolitan rulers need the help of local authorities in order to maintain their power over the colony, so they build alliances in such a way that the latter perform as intermediary agents, making colonial domination easier for the former, and in return they obtain more power and privileges in relation to the natives (Gramsci, 1995, 2007). This way they progressively link their fortune to the colonial system, so much so that they come to depend on it, and have more and more interest in its perpetuation. Those who potentially represent the most dangerous threaten to colonialism (Hechter, 1999), for their authority and power of mobilization of local population, are not only neutralized but converted in a necessary component of the colonial structure itself. Social disparities among members of the colonial society are then a function of the system, and make it possible to perpetuate the domination; this is another reason for which colonial societies are dualist (Beiras, 1982).

To sum up, an internal colony is a peripheral sub-state region where a cultural minority exhibits lower degrees of economic “development” compared to the core (expressed in terms of low incomes, lower salaries, high level of unemployment, deficiency of services of general interest); a complementary and dependent economy, in which exports play an important role, being dominated by one or few sectors and goods; a cultural division of labour between members of the metropolis, that monopolize the higher social positions, and people from the colony, which lie in lower rungs of the social ladder.

Can these features be found even inside Western European countries? Let's verify it through the analysis of the Italian island of Sardinia.

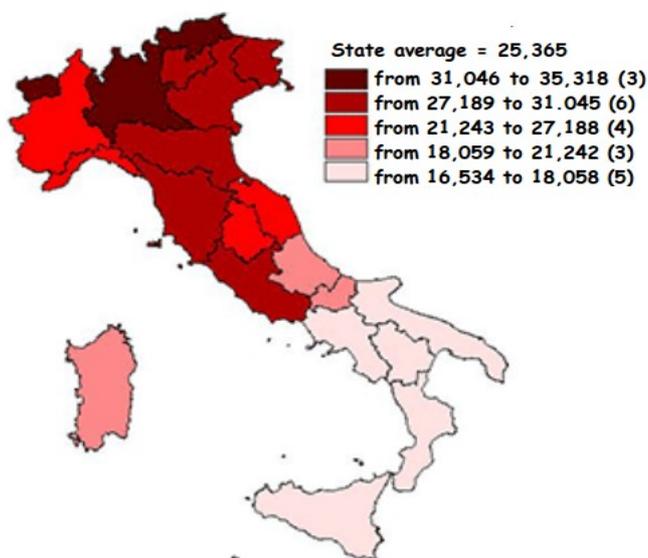
### ***Is Sardinia an internal colony?***

Italy is characterized by a strong dualism between the Centre-North (from now on just “North”) and the South of Italy, to which Sardinia, though being geographically closer to the centre, is assimilated just because of its socio-economic conditions. During recent decades Sardinian

economic growth has been higher than that of other Southern regions, but its socio-economic conditions are still more similar to the rest of the Mezzogiorno than to the Northern regions. I use most common official indicators of incomes, labour market, population movements, health-care, education and transport as proxies of the undoubtedly more complex concept of “socio-economic conditions”.

Recent statistics (Istat, 2012a, 2012b; Cuspi, 2011) show a difference of 7 to 15 thousand euros between Sardinia and Northern regions' GDP per capita (figure 1). The level of incomes follows a similar pattern; the (official) average incomes of Sardinian workers are around 22,000€ per year, a couple of thousand euros above the mean of Southern regions, but still less than two-thirds of the average incomes of Northern workers (Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2010). Comparing these numbers with those of other European areas, the average GDP per capita and incomes of some Northern Italian regions, like Piedmont or Lombardy, are very close to that of Scandinavia, while the values of Sardinia are more similar to those of Greece and Cyprus (Eurostat, 2012), considered “less-developed” countries, according to the quantitative criteria established by the European Institute of Statistics, Eurostat.

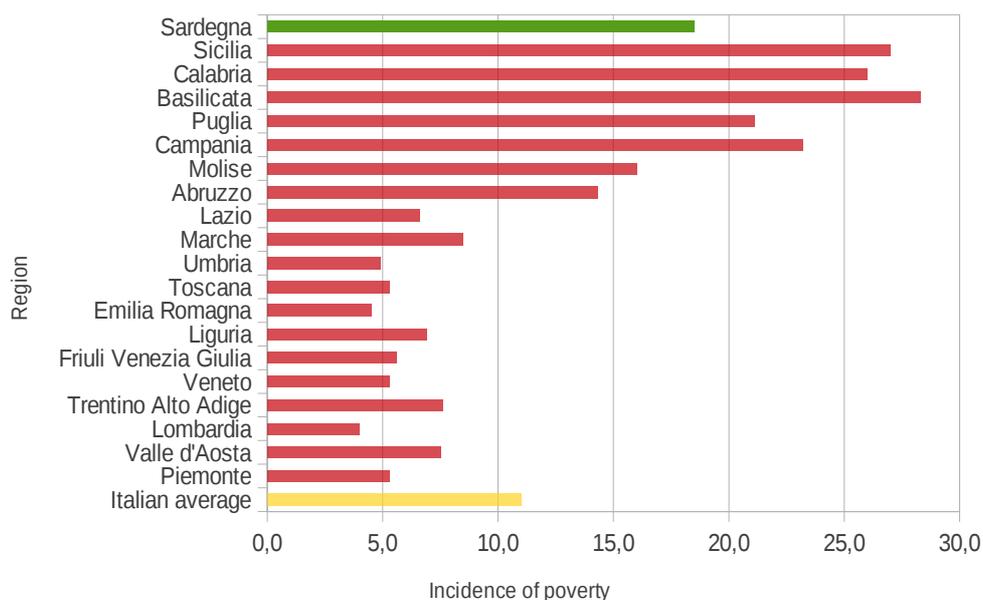
Figure 1. GDP per capita by region (at current prices in Euros), 2009.



Source: Istat, 2012.

The most forceful indicator with respect to this point is the poverty rate; almost one-fifth of Sardinians live below the poverty line (figure 2), and the proportion is even larger in other Southern regions while in the North poor people represent 5 to 8 per cent of the total population (Istat, 2012a).

Figure 2: Incidence of relative poverty by region.



Source: Istat, 2012.

The data about the labour market explain part of this reality; in Sardinia, 13 to 14 per cent of the population is unemployed, in line with the mean of other Southern regions; this rate represents almost the double of that of the North, whose mean is around 7. Similarly to other regions of the *Mezzogiorno*, almost half of the working age Sardinian population is out of work, while this proportion decreases to one-third in Northern Italy.<sup>2</sup>

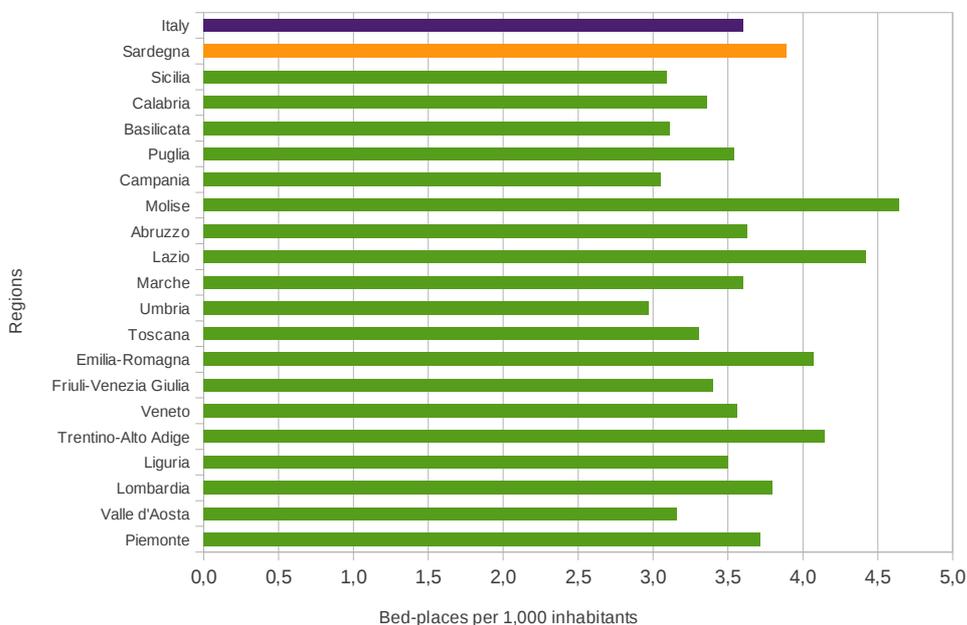
These data suggest that there are few opportunities for Sardinians to find jobs, and to get high incomes. This may well be connected with the fact that the internal migratory balance between Italian regions is negative in Sardinia and in the rest of the South, while it is positive in the North

<sup>2</sup> These are the current proportions; before the economic crises the discrepancy was higher, as the crises affects deeper the North than the South (see Istat, 2011)

(Istat, 2012a), for people leave the more depressed areas in search of better conditions of life in the rich regions. If the South is not depopulated it is because it is still attractive for people coming from poorer countries, especially Romania, Morocco, China and Senegal. These immigrants make the total migratory balance positive, but the population growth rate is still low (less than 2), and the gap with Northern regions is very high (almost 5 points, see Istat, 2012a).

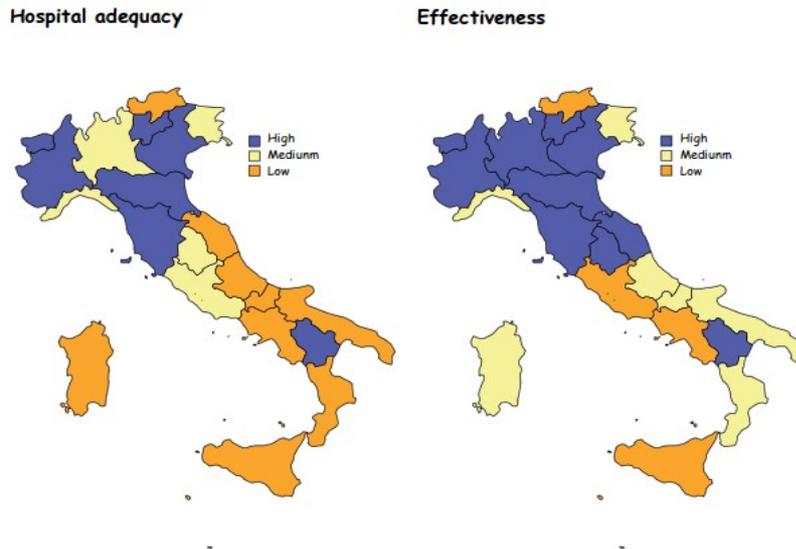
In the previous section I said that colonies are characterized by deficient public services; here, as in the case of macro-economic indicators, I speak about a relative deficiency for, in spite of everything, we are dealing with a country where the rights to health-care and educations are guaranteed to all citizens by the Constitution. Nevertheless, those who live in the South have limited opportunities to exercise these rights. As for health-care, Sardinia is among the regions with the highest number of hospital beds per inhabitants (figure 3) and its municipalities devote a big share of their budget to a limited number of social services (Istat, 2012a). But, when these indicators are integrated with others regarding quality, efficiency, efficacy (figure 4), the island's position decreases considerably; indeed it has among the highest level of inappropriate hospitalization, it lacks activities of prevention, efficacious and prompt treatments (Istat, 2012b).

Figure 3. Bed-places by regions, 2008.



Source: ISTAT processing on the Ministry of Health data, 2012.

Figure 4: Hospital adequacy and health-care effectiveness by region, 2009-2010.



Source: Istat, 2012b.

Among the basic services education has a growing importance, particularly in the so-called society of information and communication. In addition to the fact that Italy does not have an education system in accordance with its economic level, a cross-regional comparison shows that Southern indicators are the lowest, again.

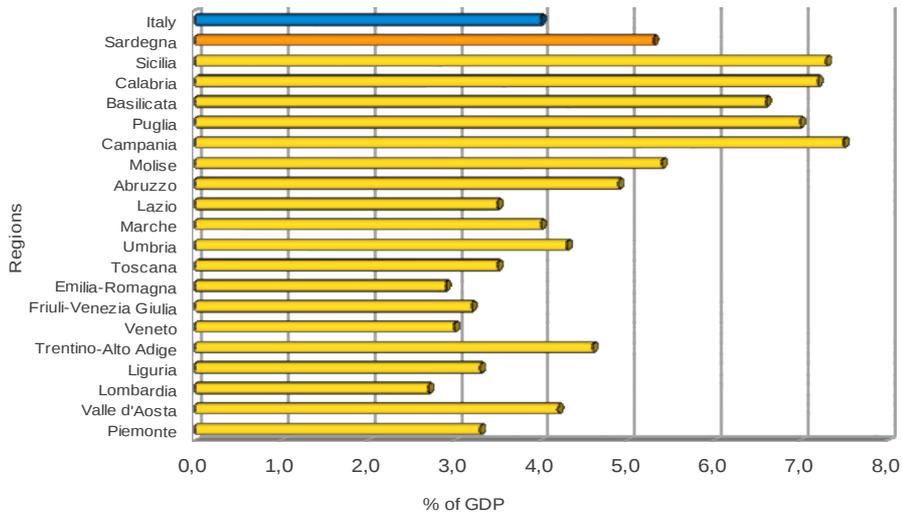
In this sector there is an odd discrepancy (compare figures 5 and 6) between public funding and the different education levels of Italian regions (Istat, 2012a). According to the 2009 PISA report Sardinian students' performance in education is considerably worse than that of Northern regions where the State and local governments devote to this service similar amounts.

Indeed, a considerable share of Sardinians are illiterates (RAS -Autonomous Region of Sardinia<sup>3</sup>- and Istat, 2011) and a very high percentage have completed just obligatory schooling. Even if most of Sardinians teenagers subscribe to secondary school (achieving the highest rate of all Italy), many of them give up after the first years (figure 6).

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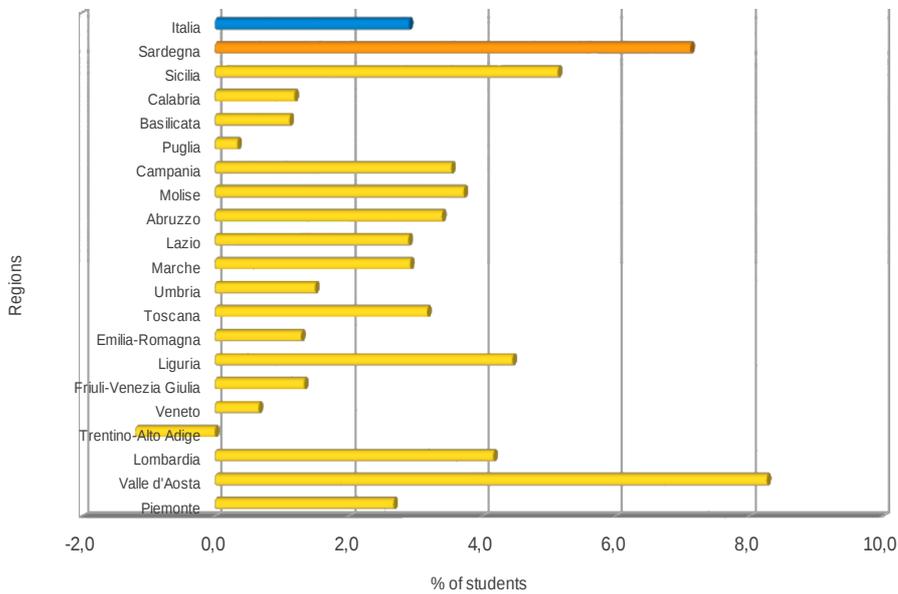
3 From now on just RAS.

Figure 5: Final consumption expenditure by general government on education and training by region, 2007.



Source: ISTAT, 2012.

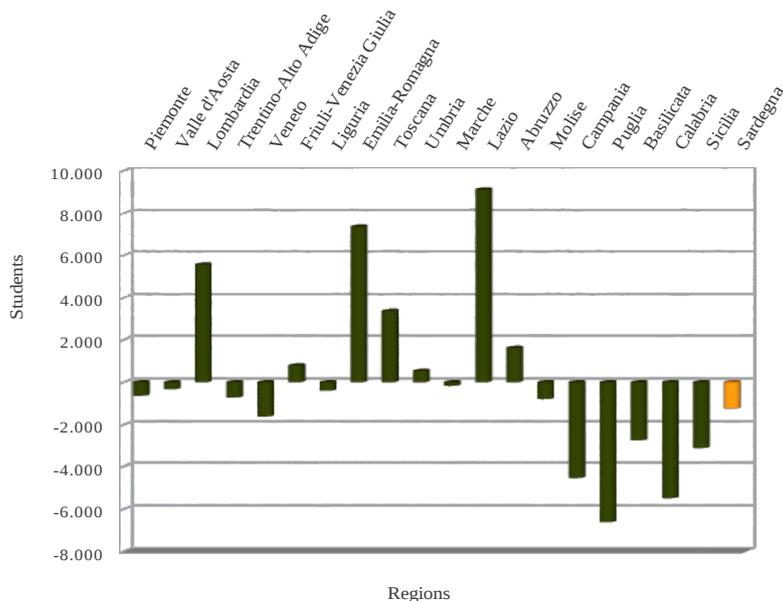
Figure 6: Students who give up after the second year of secondary education (obligatory school) by region, 2009.



Source: ISTAT and MPI (Italian Ministry of Education), 2012.

As for the university, only 8 per cent of Sardinian residents have a degree, that is 2 points less than the Italian average (Istat data, 2012). Many students emigrate to other universities, mostly to the North but also abroad while very few people from the rest of Italy choose the island's universities (see figure 7).

Figure 7: Net migratory gap of university students by region, 2008-2009.



Source: Own elaboration on Istat data, 2012.

(The net migratory gap is the difference between students registered in a university in the region and those who come from the same region; it does not consider students who study and come from abroad.)

The gap between the money invested in the education system and its quality may be explained through the socio-economic background of the school<sup>4</sup>, that is considered by the PISA report one of the most important factors for explaining the education level, and whose influence is stronger in Italy than in other OECD countries.

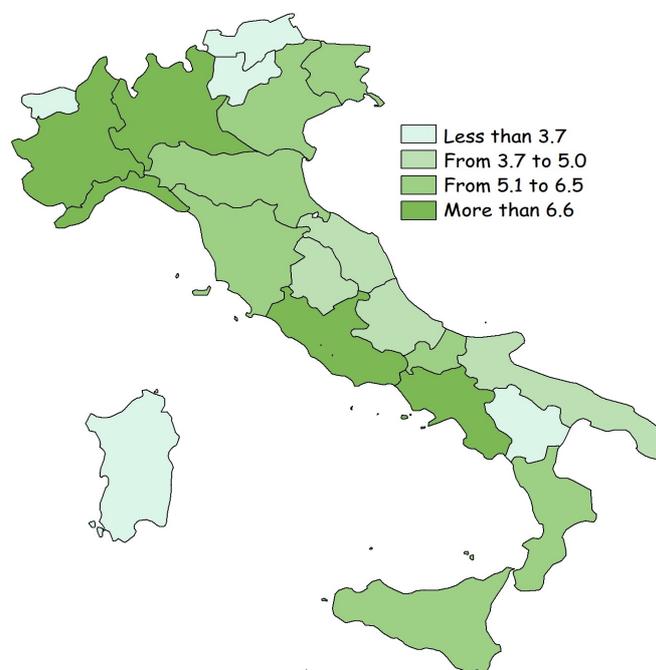
Access to education and jobs is made more difficult by the very poor transport system. Given the very low density of Sardinian population, most of people have to commute to work and school, travel to medical centres, hospitals, public offices. But the transports do not meet their needs at all. A typical indicator of modernity is the status of railway, with the island only having 1,8 km of network out of 100 sq. km., that is approximately one-third of the Italian average (Istat data,

<sup>4</sup> This is linked to such factors as the families' expenditure in cultural products, the attitude towards reading books and newspaper, the availability of them and other cultural goods, that in Sardinia are also deficient.

2012). Almost all railways in the island are diesel-powered single tracks, with a very small proportion of double track, which are very common in the North; electric trains, that are half of the total in the other Southern regions and much more than 70% in the rest of Italy, do not exist in Sardinia. Not surprisingly, the index of use of transport by rail is the lowest in Italy, around the half of the average (RAS data, 2008; Istat, 2012a).

This deficiency is only partially compensated by bus circulation; the proportion between buses and inhabitants is similar to the national mean, that is still not very high (around 1,6 buses out of 100 people; see Istat, 2012a), being the need much higher. The road conditions do not facilitate things. Out of 6,500 km of highways of the whole Italy, Sardinia, with an area of 24,000 square kilometres, has none. The main extra-urban road, that goes through the island vertically, was built during the second decade of the XIX century; it crosses some villages and has grade-level intersections, a fact that justifies speed limits of 90 km/h, like in any other extra-urban road. Thus, going from Cagliari to Sassari, which are the two main Sardinian cities, would take around three hours (if one respects the limits), one more than covering the distance from Milan to Bologna, that are situated at the same distance. Generally speaking Sardinian roads are in bad conditions, not secure and lacking of road-signs, making it not only slow but also very dangerous to travel inside the island.

Figure 8 railway network in use by region (km per 100 sq.km), 2011.



Source:  
Istat (2012)  
processing on  
RFI (Rete  
Ferroviaria  
Italiana - Italian  
Railway Network) data, 2011.

The socio-economic indicators illustrated above clearly demonstrate that Sardinia is a relatively poor and “less-developed” region in spite of its belonging to a rich country. A low economic level and deficient public services are strictly interconnected; as about education, the socio-economic background of the school largely influences students' outcomes; bad public transport makes more difficult for ill people to get adequate treatment, because they cannot reach the medical centre every time they need to, thus indirectly worsening the health-care performance in aspects not regulated through public expenditure in that sector. This demonstrate that Sardinia has serious structural deficiencies that are typical of a colony.

A part from being poor and “underdeveloped”, the colony is economically dependent; its production is typically characterized by a dominant sector, concentrated around a small number of goods, and relies at a large extent on external trade. Is it the case of Sardinia?

If we divide the economy in the three main sectors of agriculture, industry and services, the latter is undoubtedly the most important in Sardinia, in line with the overall trend of Western countries but at a larger extent. Two-thirds of Sardinian workers are employed in services. Most of them work in commercial activities, followed by transport, information and communication. The second is industry, dominated by the branch of oil and metal processing, the production of foodstuffs and tobacco, the provision of electricity, water and gas, and the treatment of waste. The last is agriculture, that employs only one-tenth of Sardinians in work; half of the island is cultivated, and most of Sardinian enterprises are actually farms, mainly managed by a single individual or a family, whose average dimension is bigger then in the rest of Italy (Istat data, 2012).

Before the last decades of the XIX century these proportions where very different; the very dominant sectors were agriculture, farming and fishing, while there were few factories for the extraction of coal and other minerals and the processing of salt and tobacco, all managed by Northern or foreign entrepreneurs. This situation was drastically transformed by the policy of modernization that central and regional governments have developed since the constitution of Italian Republic and the Autonomous Region of Sardinia.

After the World War II Italy joined the block of Western powers and NATO military alliance, and received American funds of the Marshall Plan for post-war reconstruction and the “development” of poorest areas. Thus marsh fever was eradicated from Sardinian coasts, transformed in suitable places for tourist industry. Indeed, in the early Sixties, a team of wealthy

entrepreneurs led by the Aga Khan bought around two thousand hectares of land in the Northern seaside and built villages and facilities designed for luxury tourism. The Aga Khan also found the air company AliSarda (now Meridiana), one of the most important enterprises located in Sardinia. Today, the Emerald Coast<sup>5</sup> is an exclusive attraction for millionaire tourists, that generate hundreds of jobs for Sardinians; beyond this apparent contribution to the economic growth of the island, however, the Aga Khan' venture marked the pattern for the development of Sardinian coast tourist industry, as until now the owners and managers of Meridiana and the more profitable facilities are from all places but Sardinia,<sup>6</sup> while natives are employed in lower jobs; of course some have become managers as well, but the most are cooks and waiters hired just during the high season and often not legally hired (CGIL, 2011).

Being a NATO member implied for Italy other important consequences, such as offering its national territory for setting military bases. Since then, 66% of Italian military bases were built in Sardinia, whose areas is less than one-tenth of Italian territory, and whose population is little more than the 2,5%. Missile and firing ranges, military airports and fuel deposits, used by Western armies and air-forces, extend for 35 thousand hectares and, during experiments and exercise, that take from a few months to the whole year, over 20 thousand square kilometres of sea are closed to the access of fishers and other inhabitants (see figure 9).

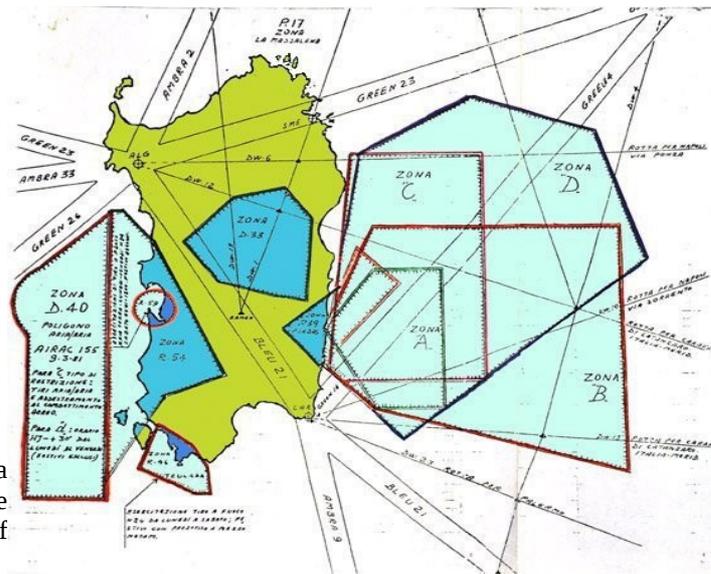
These bases have been presented to Sardinians as an important source of incomes, as soldiers from all over the world spend long periods in the island, consuming local goods and services; furthermore, many Sardinians have been employed not only as servicemen but also in charge of cleaning, maintenance and different kinds of provisions. But these advantages have also important economic, social and environmental side effects.

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5 The original name of the area is Monti di Mola, in the language of Gallura.

6 A few names are worth mentioning, that are the American businessman Tom Barrack, Emir Al Thani from Qatar (founder of Al Jazeera tv channel), the Roman banker Cesare Geronzi and the Milanese manager Flavio Briatore.

Figure 9: space occupied by military activities in Sardinia, 2011.



Source: Sa Difenza (Movement for the Liberation of Sardinia-2011) processing on RAS data, 2005.

First, from a strictly economic point of view, closing wide areas of land and sea impedes the regular work of native fishermen, farmers and tourist operators, counterbalancing the contributions just mentioned. But the most important negative consequences concern the natural environment and the health of local residents; the bases are used for routine training, for war simulations and experiments of new kinds of weapons, such as chemical and biological ones. Before leaving for the Balkans or the Middle East, Western armies have trained in Sardinia, and the Israeli air-force is a frequent customer of these bases. During these activities, the military use phosphorus and depleted uranium, that poison fishes and other edible animals. Furthermore, this causes a disproportionate incidence of grave disease such as leukaemia, lymphoma and others, known as Balkan Syndrome, and even the birth of animals with two heads or such deformations (Gettiamo le Basi, 2009; Rai-Report, 2004). Periodic clearances required by law are never executed, and a mysterious silence surrounds the issue, subject to military secret but also covered up by civilians involved, that often refuse to collaborate with journalist and even medical inquiries.

Why Italian governments maintain these bases in spite of these grave damages? Admittedly, they must be concerned with respecting international agreements and compromises, but this is not the only reason; renting the military bases is a very profitable activity that brings to the state coffers

hundreds of thousands euros per day. But, even if most of bases are in Sardinia, they are state-owned and therefore cannot be ascribed to regional budgets, nor considered as a contribution of the region to the state finance. Nevertheless, Sardinian land, air and sea are exploited to earn large amounts of money, with important consequences for the environment and the population's health, in addition to the indirect economic negative effects of obstructing the development of traditional activities such as farming and fishing, in typical colonial style.

The postwar period is a very key point in Sardinian history, for the pattern of Sardinian economic development was traced. Actually, according to many historical accounts (Accardo, 2007; Atzeni, 2000; Sotgiu, 1986; De Gioannis et al., 1988), there is a substantive continuity from the colonial handling of Piedmontes and Italian elites of the Kingdom of Italy and the treatment reserved to Sardinia by the ruling classes of the Republican era. The business in the Emerald Coast and the military bases are typical examples of private initiative and state policy made according to a colonial attitude, but they are not the only ones, nor the most important.

A larger effect to Sardinian socio-economic configuration was produced by the “development” policies and especially by the so-called Plan of Renaissance, an integrated plan designed to stimulate the “economic and social renaissance of the Island”, according to the Sardinian Statute.

After the second World War, the Italian Constitution set up a parliamentary republic with a strong central government and some degree of administrative decentralization, except for five regions that obtained a special autonomy, like Sardinia. Italy had to be rebuilt not only in terms of repairing the damages provoked by the bombs, nor just from a political perspective, but in its very socio-economic structure. After twenty years of autarky and centralized production that characterized the fascist period, the first republican governments undertook an economic policy based on the idea that supporting Northern industry and agriculture, that were already more “advanced” than the Southern, would favour the economic growth of the whole country, by way of a trickle-down effect. However, Southern politicians insisted on the necessity of strong interventions for the development of the South, even more so for this is what it had been written in the Constitution and in many regional statutes, like the Sardinian one.

So, a huge funding plan was elaborated and implemented for the South (the *Cassa per il Mezzogiorno*) and in Sardinia central and local governments launched the Plan of Renaissance. The vivacious cultural debate promoted by local newspapers and political groups about the priorities and the leadership of the Plan was summarized in a document that identified the necessary

conditions for the *renaissance* in the following terms: large public investments to stimulate the formation of a network of small enterprises, the modernization of agriculture and incentives to the small private possessions, the promotion of an industry based on decentralized processing of local natural resources and foodstuffs, the democratic participation of natives in the elaboration and execution of the Plan, and a regional management, in coordination with central authorities.

The way the Plan was put into practice was completely the opposite; its reins were taken over by the central government, leaving to the Autonomous Region a secondary role; the priority was given to an industrialization concentrated around a few areas, mainly on the coast, and public funds were assigned to a large extent to Northern big companies for the transformation of imported raw materials, especially oil and gas, to plastic goods and electricity, sold mainly outside. Small Sardinian hand-craft and agricultural activities, especially cooperatives, were also funded, but in a disproportionately lower measure. The outcomes of the Plan of Renaissance and a series of later policies that followed the same logic are still evident if we look at the current Sardinian economy, that presents many characteristics of complementarity and dependency.

The Italian Institute of Statistics (Istat) calculates the degree of economic dependency of Italian regions, that represents the percentage of net import out of total GDP;<sup>7</sup> Sardinia exhibits a high economic dependency, as it imports much more than it exports. The great majority of imported goods is represented by oil and gas, mostly coming from Libia, that are processed in the island and then exported again to the rest of Italy and abroad, especially to Spain and the United States. The enterprises which transform crude oil into basic goods and electricity are those with the highest revenues, namely Saras, Arcola and Sarlux, all belonging to the same group Saras; the sum of their revenues represents more than one-fifth of the total produced by the top 100 companies in the region (RAS, 2011), giving the group a dominant position in Sardinian economy. Here we have a first indicator of dependency<sup>8</sup>, for a big share of GDP is based on raw materials imported from abroad and their products are mainly sold outside. In addition, oil and gas are highly subjected to price fluctuation and the countries of origin are politically unstable, increasing the vulnerability of the sector to external factors. Oil and gas industries are not much integrated in Sardinian economy, as they do not transform local resources and do not produce goods for local consumption; furthermore its factories are concentrated in two big industrial hubs, that are also known as “the cathedrals in the desert”, exactly for this reason. To understand what makes such an industry work in Sardinia, and how it achieved its dominant position, we need some more information about its

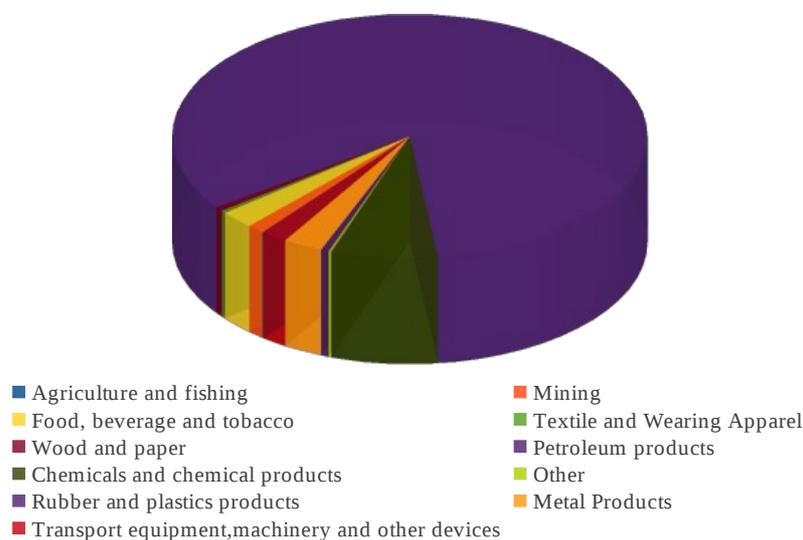
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7 Note that the meaning of the word “dependency” used by Istat is different from that of dependency theory, which I refer to in these page.

8 Here again in the sense of dependency theory.

foundation and development.

Figure 10: Sardinian exports by products



Source: Own elaboration based on Crenos (Centre for North-South Economic Research) data, 2012

The Saras company was installed in Sardinia in the early 1960's, facilitated by the Plan of Renaissance, a set of public policies designed to stimulate modernization through industrialization. The Milanese entrepreneur Angelo Moratti received then 40 billion lire, i.e. 10% of the total budget of the Plan, to build the oil refinery in a small village near Cagliari, the Sardinian capital and main port. Most of workers at Saras are Sardinian, as established by the Plan, but managers and department directors are mostly from Milan. Nowadays, the Saras group is still in the hands of the Moratti family, that is strongly linked to very important Italian enterprises and banks, the most famous being Pirelli, Telecom Italia and the football team Inter.

From the very first, the company and its spin-offs have got large amounts of public funds, both from the state and the autonomous regional government, in order to create jobs and stimulate research in technology; furthermore, since it started producing electricity from the waste materials of the oil refinery, it also got public subsidies for encouraging the use of renewable and “similar”<sup>9</sup> energy sources. But, according to a recent inquiry, the great majority of revenues produced by the

9 The assimilation of waste materials with renewable sources of energy has caused many suspects not only among ecologists but also in the European Union, that opened a sanctionatory procedure against Italian government for this measure.

group Saras is also exported, in part to be invested in the football team (Meletti, 2010).

If the colonial character of this business was not clear enough, I could bring other arguments accounting for it; for instance, one of the most socially relevant externalities produced by Saras factories is a high level of pollution; local residents suffer bad smell and smoke clouds, fishermen get black octopus and other “diesel fishes” and, if more strict scientific proofs are needed, a research team of the university of Florence is inquiring into the suspiciously high level of rare respiratory diseases among the inhabitants of Sarroch, the municipality that hosts the refinery and its spin-offs.<sup>10</sup> Finally, work conditions have been described as unhealthy, for workers are in contact with polluting materials, and dangerous, as it has been brought to the public attention by the recent death of three workers in probably avoidable accidents.<sup>11</sup>

The case of Saras factories is indicative of the pattern of Sardinian industry. Most of processing plants<sup>12</sup> were built in the 1960's thanks to generous funds established by the Renaissance Plan; among the companies with the highest revenues, the great majority is represented by highly polluting factories that process oil, gas and metals, mostly imported from outside, whose products are then exported to the continent and abroad. Except for the German E.On, also involved in the production and distribution of electricity, the rest are virtually owned and managed by people from Milan and a few other Northern cities, who live and make there other businesses.<sup>13</sup>

To sum up, an important part of Sardinian economy exhibit all the characteristics of colonial exploitation: it is based on the import and export of goods that have nothing to do with local natural resources or traditional activities; it is managed by wealthy people coming from the core, which reserve the highest position for members of their own region and leave the “dirty work” to the natives; it causes pollution and other environmental problems which fall on local residents, while economic benefits it produces are taken out of the land, contributing to the investments in other places.

Apart from the features of its industrial structure, Sardinia presents other factors of

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10 Progetto Sarroch “Ambiente e salute”, Unità Operativa di Biostatistica. Istituto per lo Studio e la Prevenzione Oncologica. Firenze; Cooperativa per l’Epidemiologia e la Prevenzione a r.l., Comune di Sarroch.

11 See for instance: <http://gruppodinterventogiuridico.blog.tiscali.it/tag/sarroch/>

12 The most important being the group Saras, Portovesme Srl (Sipsa group) and E.On, that is a new company coming from Düsseldorf .

13 Data about these companies and their managers come from their own webpages ([www.saras.it](http://www.saras.it), [www.alcoa.com](http://www.alcoa.com), [www.eon-italia.com](http://www.eon-italia.com), [ivipetroliфера.com](http://ivipetroliфера.com), [www.sipsa.it](http://www.sipsa.it), [www.energit.it](http://www.energit.it), [www.fluorsid.com](http://www.fluorsid.com)), and from news published in the Autonomous Region of Sardinia webpage ([www.regione.sardegna.it/notizie/](http://www.regione.sardegna.it/notizie/)) and other newspapers (*La Nuova Sardegna*, *L’Unione Sarda*).

coloniality, also related to the degree of dependency mentioned above. As for external trade, available data usually refer to the exchanges with foreign countries, but to get an idea of interregional import-export I compare them with the degree of economic dependency, that includes internal exchanges. Significantly the variation of this indicator across regions does not follow the same pattern of net exports toward foreign countries; for instance Lombardy has a negative balance of trade, for it imports more than it exports, but its degree of dependency is negative and high, meaning that it more than compensates international imports with internal ones. Sardinian purchasing from abroad are also higher than its sales, but the share of net imports out of its GDP is much higher when exchanges with other regions are included (Istat data, 2007).

The importance of external trade for Sardinian economy is confirmed also by data about its freight traffic; compared to the 2% of Italian total GDP produced in the region, the share of road freight transport is smaller (around 1%), while that of traffic by sea is considerably higher; indeed, around 9% of goods transported in containers by water get through to Cagliari alone, to which freights circulating through the other ports should be added (Istat data, 2007).

In conclusion, the structure of Sardinian industry and the role of external trade for its economy account for its complementarity and high dependency on other regions and countries (we should not forget that present world economy is considerably internationalized); besides, as we saw speaking about industrial and tourist sectors, there is a cultural division of labour as Northern and foreign people reserve for themselves the high positions, while employing natives in less profitable, harder, dangerous and unhealthy jobs. Besides, a good part of the wealthy produced in the island is redirected outside, and used for the benefits of other economic contexts. Finally, though paying the consequences of the presence of military bases in its territory, the Autonomous Region receives nothing of the big amount of money that the Italian central government is paid for its use from foreign countries, nor is it recognized as being produced in Sardinia.

The features and dynamics of Sardinian economic development illustrated in these pages demonstrate that the characterization of the colony provided by the internal colonialism theory fits with the Sardinian case, enough to justify further research to determine other aspects in which coloniality may manifest itself, to explain how colonial relations occur in a rich democratic country such as Italy and to verify to what extent they are responsible for interregional disparities in Italy and other Western countries.

## ***Internal colonialism as a theoretical framework***

In the previous section I briefly introduced the internal colonialism theory and extrapolated from it the main features that allow to recognize a colonial structure even where there is not formal colonialism. Thus, the model has served to characterize Sardinia as an instance of internal colony, proving its descriptive utility. Nonetheless, the very theoretical potential of the model lies in its explanation of the causal chain that links colonial relations and interregional inequality.

Socio-economic disparities between sub-state regions have been analyzed much less than those between countries or world regions; the country level has been taken into consideration especially in research concerning the “Third World” while research on spacial inequality in Western Europe is not abundant, and is less suitable to explain socio-economic disparities than to verify how they vary across countries and through the intervention of political or economic factors.

One element that has been commonly associated with interregional imbalance is the level of economic “development” of the country at issue (Williamson, 1965): inequality is deeper in poorer countries (Novotky, 2004), feeding the common wisdom that economic development leads to a better distribution of resources; but the New Economic Geography have shown that growth is correlated with a concentration of wealth and so with the increase of interregional inequality (Krugman, 1998).

Another element that has been identified is trade, but here also different studies reach diverse conclusions: while some authors highlight that opening to trade mobilizes centrifugal forces that favour the dispersion of wealth across regions (Krugman and Elizondo, 1996), others claim that trade favours the agglomeration and thus the concentration of wealth (Paluzie, 2001); finally, recent studies show that it depends on what kind of trade is undertaken: one based mostly in manufacturing would stimulate concentration while trading products of agriculture would favour the dispersion of wealth (Rodríguez-Pose and Gill, 2006).

From a more political perspective, interregional socio-economic inequality has been linked to the state capacity of redistribution and the level of decentralization. While the first explains variation of the level of disparities across countries (Gil et al., 2004), the latter opens an interesting debate about the potential of fiscal federalism in terms of resource management within a country. While some scholars have shown that decentralization helps to reduce interregional disparities

(Calamai, 2009; Gil et al., 2004), the majority conversely highlights a number of factors that link devolution to higher benefits for the richest regions and thus an increase in spatial inequality (Cheshire and Gordon, 1998; Rodríguez-Pose and Gill, 2004; Prud'homme, 1995).

This kind of studies illustrate how interregional inequalities vary across countries and historical periods and suggest important elements to take into consideration; but they also present some problems that make them insufficient to explain interregional inequality *per se*.

Firstly, they assume spatial disparities as an objective fact, observing how they differ from a country to another and how they are affected by the factors mentioned above, but don't put them into question and don't investigate their causes.

Second, they consider the different factors individually and separate economic from political ones. While considering the effect of trade, for instance, it is presented as an autonomous element and its dependence on political decision is forgotten; even when the variation in interregional disparities is correlated to the type of trade that a country performs, there is no reflection on the reasons behind the political decisions on the country's internal trade and its involvement in international exchanges.

Conversely, when dealing with political factors, some reference may be found to the connection between wealth and political influence, for instance when decentralization is thought to increase inequality by favouring richest regions not only because they have more resources but also for they have a stronger influence on the central government about the distribution of central resources (Rodríguez-Pose and Ezcurra, 2010). Nonetheless this kind of statement is presented but not argued, it is merely used in complementary way and by no means considered as central for the aim of these researches. The interdependence between economic and political power needs to be better explored, and this is what the internal colonialism paradigm tries to do.

Finally, some of the above mentioned studies identify a constraint that limits and conditions the effect of the factors at issue on spatial inequality, but do not go on to explore it. When studying how political decentralization affects interregional disparities, Beramendi (2007) concludes that what actually matters is not decentralization itself, but the previous level of inequality; similarly, Rodríguez-Pose and Ezcurra (2010) describes how the same factor may delete or emphasize the effect of decentralization on interregional inequality. This gives an idea of path-dependence that is not analyzed by these authors, but is very important to understand while spatial disparities persist across time, and is the central argument of the internal colonialism.

The approaches presented so far offer a big contribution for the understanding of certain aspects of the socio-economic disparities among regions belonging to the same country, but fail to offer an overall perspective. This is just the aim of the internal colonialism theory, that at this point needs to be better explored.

The internal colonialism paradigm revolves around the three concepts of inequality, asymmetry and exploitation, which are strongly interconnected. The first refers to an unbalanced distribution of resources that produces unequal opportunities among different groups, often associated with other forms of discriminations based on cultural belonging, physical traits, place of residence and so on. The second has to do with power: an asymmetric relation between two or more subjects is that in which one dominates the others, determining the constraints within which they are able to act. Finally, speaking about exploitation involves human relations where the ones take advantage of the others' resources and work.

All these categories imply the comparison and interaction between subjects, indeed they are used to explain relations among human groups (or regions) having dissimilar characteristics in terms of socio-economic conditions, power and social roles, being this divergence a product of the relation itself. This means that the one's poverty, subordination and exploitation are functions of the other's wealth, power and benefits, so that the former is not completely understandable without considering the latter and viceversa. Through these categories it is possible to explain the disparity between social classes as well as between different territories or cultural groups.

Unlike the liberal perspective according to which history evolves in a linear direction toward higher levels of modernity, and some individuals, groups, regions and countries advance faster than others, the internal colonialism theory reassembles “development” and “underdevelopment” in a single time system where they are strongly interconnected through a mechanism of reciprocal causation. Poverty and “underdevelopment”, far from being a symptom of backwardness, are products of modernity as well as wealth and “development”; the difference between the poor and the rich, then, is not the speed at which they move toward modernity, but the access to economic and power resources.

Wealth and poverty are linked in a circular causality that involves the three categories mentioned above; if a human group at large occupies a lower social position – poverty – it will have more difficulties in the access to power– asymmetry - and little possibilities to modify the system to improve its own conditions. Conversely, the group that exhibits higher standards of living has an easier approach to power and may use it to perpetuate the mechanism and crystallize the imbalance. This is done through exploitation: by appropriating itself of the other's resources, the

more powerful group obtains more benefits and at the same time prevents the economic growth of the other. Socio-economic inequality implies asymmetry in the access to power, that gives the chance for exploitation, which in turn produces more inequality, in a process of circular causation (Myrdal, 1971) that is the essence of colonialism.

From a theoretical point of view, interpreting colonialism as a mechanism makes it recognizable not only when it is formally defined, but also when in principle it does not exist (anymore), as in independent countries. If former colonies are poor, it is because political independence did not change the mechanism set up by the colonial system; and if inside them some groups are disadvantaged and discriminated by others, though holding the same formal rights, it is because colonial dynamics are still active, and native colonizers have taken the place of former European rulers.

If it is suitable for former colonies, what happens in the so-called “First World”? The internal colonialism theory focuses on substantive factors, showing that colonial relations may occur aside legal and juridical configurations (political independent or equal formal rights). As a matter of fact, this happens also in Western European nation-states, as argued mainly by Michael Hechter, Robert Lafont and Xosé Beiras.

Studying national development of Great Britain, Hechter points out its similarity with formal colonialism. A state that managed to develop a strong central government, an efficient administrative bureaucracy and a powerful army annexed other territories, either through military invasions, international treaties or political agreements with local authorities. It followed a process of political integration, when newly incorporated people were submitted to the political authorities of the conquerors (see Rokkan, 1999), often through physical violence and attempts to suppress social and cultural diversity. After the “unification” the conquerors do not share political and military power but make conquered people depend on their decisions; this generates asymmetric relations between a centre, where decision-making takes place, and one or more peripheries, politically and economically dependent on the core, supported by social and cultural assimilation (Hechter, 1999).

Tracing this strong tie between political and economic power this theoretical perspective controverts the basic assumptions of modern nation-states. First, the liberal concept of democracy assumes that equalizing political rights make all citizens able to influence political decisions in the same way and, if some of them obtain more power, it is due to the party they belong to, the campaign they run and this kind of reasons. Furthermore, elected representatives are supposed to

pursue a common national interest, defined through the contributions of the diverse perspectives expressed in the elective bodies, while defending collective or corporative interests is not admitted, in theory. As for the economy, it is thought to develop parallel to political mechanisms, rather than according to them; here liberal theories generate somehow contrasting expectations: on the one hand, it is acknowledged that capitalism tends to produce territorial inequalities, in the sense that richer regions grow faster than poor ones and leave them behind, because of a number of factors such as the availability of capital and the consequent ease to invest and generate more wealth; on the other hand, intensifying the contact and exchange between rich and poor regions is expected to make the latter share the benefits produced in the former, favouring the improvement of their populations' standards of living.

These perspectives do not seem to take sufficiently into account the practical mechanisms at work, that constitute the background and the horizon of social changes. Among unequal groups or territories, the one that is technologically stronger and richer is less willing to share its wealth than it is to take advantage of its material superiority by imposing its conditions to the weak, increasing its benefits at the expense of the latter. Though democratic rules extend political rights to each members of the society, the central group – in fact its elites - influence political decisions in order to maintain a dominant position, which, in turn, is the instrument by which it conserves and even increases its privileges and makes it possible the exploitation of the internal colony. Colonial relations constrain the development of democracy and reproduce themselves even in a context of formal equality.

From this point of view, if capitalist development works in favour of socio-economic disparities among regions, it is not for a sort of natural tendency provoked by the invisible hand of market. Capitalist development requires the availability of massive amounts of capital, that is, a big quantity of economic resources that must be concentrated in order to be invested; capitalist economic activities aim to produce benefits, thus gathering more capital and generating more concentration of resources. The division of labour that follows can be analyzed in terms of social classes, as usually the case, but also from a spatial perspective; though focusing on the first perspective, Marx himself used to speak of capitalist and proletarian nations, referring to this phenomenon. Translating this definition to the sub-state level, we could speak of capitalist centre and proletarian peripheries. Thus, the tendency of capitalism to an unequal development could be explained by the fact that it favours colonial relations among territories and cultural groups; if this is true, we cannot expect contacts between metropolis and colonies to bring benefits to the latter, rather, as a big portion of wealth produced here is drained toward the centre, there is no way for colonies to accumulate capital and lead a self-centered economic growth.

Finally, though undoubtedly adopting a Marxist perspective, the internal colonialism theoretical model also contradicts a common wisdom of many Marxists that claim political and administrative centralization to guarantee equality among citizens. The central state would manage economic resources in order to distribute them equally across all over the country, while decentralization would favour localisms and permit private interests of some local group to influence political decisions. Conversely, if we take into account colonial relations, where political power is monopolized by members of a cultural group or a geographic area and is used to crystallize their privileges, we may expect political centralization not to prevent but to favour a situation in which local interests – those of the metropolis – dominates political decisions of central governments (Lafont, 1971). Nonetheless, the opposite is not necessarily true, in the sense that political decentralization does not automatically imply a more autonomous management of local resources. Indeed colonial mechanisms generate a structure whereby local elites are often linked to colonizers, and their authority is highly dependent on the colonial structure itself. Thus, while political decentralization may represent an opportunity for local governments to contrast the monopoly of political power exercised by the metropolitan elites at state level, on the other hand it may contribute to perpetuate internal colonialism and even make it more acceptable for colonized people by disguising it as political autonomy, similarly to what happens at international level to “underdeveloped” countries, that are formally independent but actually dependent on the decisions taken by Western governments.

The internal colonialism model offers a number of theoretical contributions that make it possible to shed light on social phenomena that are commonly underestimated as well as to explain them through unfolding complex causal mechanisms.

First, it deals with a situation that is often overlooked, that is sub-state interregional disparity, thus underlying the fact that socio-economic inequality occur not only in the world context but at all levels, depending on the spatial perspective we adopt. In addition, applying the model to Western countries has the further merit of questioning the general wisdom that certain problems, such as poverty and “underdevelopment”, are an exclusive feature of the “Third World”, or if anything they exist in the First in association with immigration and other causes of social exclusion. Conversely, even in the core of the world system, there are cases of “underdevelopment” and strong socio-economic disparities between regions belonging to the same country. Once recognized the proper relevance to the problem, that is what I did in this paper, the internal colonialism model does not simply observe it as a fact, but it treats it as a dynamic historical product (Lafont, 1971) of political as well as economic (and cultural) mechanisms. Unlike

mainstream explanations of underdevelopment and socio-economic inequality, that rely primarily on economic factors, our perspective implicates politics and underlies its role in the management of a country's resources.

Internal colonialism is an overall theory that recomposes the system in many senses: it links fields of society that are often analyzed apart, that is economy, politics and culture (that is a very important element though I could not deepen it in these pages); it traces the interconnection between wealth and poverty, power and weaknesses, considering them all aspects of the same phenomenon that is colonialism; finally it puts the emphasis on an usually overlooked dimension of inequality, that is spatial and intergroup, not as an alternative but as a further dimension of interclass relations, for speaking of interregional disparities implies illustrating how class imbalances develop along space.

So far I have discussed the theoretical potential of the internal colonialism theory; now I need to consider a number of problems that are left unsolved by the model, in addition to those concerning its application to the context of Western European countries.

Firstly, we have seen that stressing the substance of colonial mechanisms rather than their formal aspects presents many advantages, still formal structures are worth more attention. Claiming that colonial relations occur among politically independent countries or among groups of citizens that hold the same rights and have in principle the same opportunities may be interpreted in the sense that actual mechanisms make formal structures and rules vain and useless. This must be qualified; liberal democracy and the rule of law have permitted the inclusion of larger and larger portions of the population into the political decision-making and many material obstacles to the exercises of formal rights have been overcome thanks to the spread of education and the welfare state. What is to define, then, is to what extent substantive mechanisms constrain formal rules and limit their efficacy. This aspect has been described largely relying on general explanations and common knowledge, that are probably sufficient to support the internal coherence of the theory but do not offer a deep understanding of the issue.

Similarly, the relations between economic and political power, that is plain from a Marxist perspective, requires further arguments to dialogue with other interpretations that stress the social relevance of other elements such as culture and psychology in configuring human and territorial relations. In addition, as far as it concerns the spatial distribution of power, an analysis in terms of internal colonialism must specify how the spatial location of the centre of power is determined: are

political and economic power necessarily concentrated in the same place? What happens when one of both centres change position over the years? Clarifying this points is also necessary to determine the scope of applicability of the internal colonialism model, and especially important in the case of countries such as Italy, where Northern regions hold the economic power but the capital city, where political decisions are taken, is in the centre of the peninsula; or Spain, where the original core of the nation-state has turned into a peripheral region and where the economic power is concentrated not in one but in three regions, two of which are characterized by a distinctive culture from the majority.

The last observation introduces another aspect that is still ambiguous, i.e. the cultural belonging of peripheral groups. González Casanova clearly states that colonial relations take place between different cultural groups, and this is confirmed by other authors who have dealt with internal colonialism and the cultural division of labour. Hechter gives to this criterion even more importance than the condition of poverty or “underdevelopment” in identifying Scotland as an internal colony though the high standards of living of its population. Actually the stress on the cultural diversity of internal colonies has contributed to a shift in the explanatory function of the theory: elaborated to understand the socio-economic inequality and the disadvantaged conditions of indigenous people in Latin America, in the West it is widely used to account for the formation of group solidarity and the rise or revival of (sub-state) nationalism. This aspect opens a debate around fundamental questions, beginning with which are the necessary conditions that make it possible to define a sub-state territory as an internal colony. Is poverty a basic assumption or there are other features, like cultural diversity, that are more relevant? Then, if internal colonies have a distinctive culture by definition, what accounts for interregional inequality in culturally homogeneous contexts? If these cases have to be explained through other theories, they may represent alternative explanations to the internal colonialism model; but then what prevents us to use them also in instances characterized by cultural diversity?

Finally, considering cultural distinctiveness an essential feature for our theory implies entering the debate around what characterizes a distinctive culture; if Mexican indigenous may be easily recognized through the language they speak, their physical traits and also, to a large extent, the municipality where they live, identifying who's English or Irish is not that plain, as in this kind of instances a subjective sentiment of belonging plays an important role. Furthermore, given that the nation-building of most European countries have been characterized by the institution of a national language and literature and a consequent process of homogenization, may we exclude that colonial

relations occur within them just because distinctive cultural features are no longer noticeable?

To sum up, on the one hand, the internal colonialism model offers valid theoretical instruments to identify and explain a phenomenon usually underestimated, that is interregional inequality at sub-state level, and has got the great merit to stress such elements as the multidimensionality of socio-economic disparities and the constraints that de facto mechanisms represent for formal configurations. On the other hand, just because it introduces new perspectives, it opens a wide debate around its own internal logic, for many aspects need a deeper definition, and its applicability to contexts different from that in which it has been elaborated. After all, this is how scientific knowledge develops.

## ***Conclusions***

In the previous sections I have traced an operative definition of a colony that is based on substantive characteristics, and, for this reason, may be used for cases both of classical and internal colonialism; then I have described an empirical case that fits with that definition, that is Sardinia: this is a relatively poor region, though belonging to a country that is generally considered rich and “advanced”; it suffers structural deficiencies that make it difficult to improve its residents' standard of living; its economic dependence is not only due to the fact of being integrated in a globalized system of interdependent economic agents, like virtually any other territory in the world, but it is also the result of modernization and industrialization conducted, to a large extent, by exogenous forces; there is a cultural division of labour where economic power is held by entrepreneurs and managers mainly from outside, while natives are left lower social positions.

If the internal colonialism model serves us to characterize Sardinian socio-economic structure, it may be helpful also to explain the causes that lie behind Sardinian coloniality, and to contribute to understand interregional inequalities in Italy and other Western European country. Compared to alternative explanations, whose contribution is relevant but always partial, this model presents the merit to offer an overall perspective, that recomposes the system by analyzing its parts not individually but together, in the sense that it highlights the relations not only between regions and human groups but between different aspects of their social life, the economic, the political and the cultural one.

Thus, not only is the internal colonialism theoretical model suitable to characterize Sardinia,

and other Western regions, as internal colonies, but it is necessary to understand their socio-economic conditions as the result of colonial relations among territories of the same state, that will be the aim of a further research of which this paper is just a first step.

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