

CULTURE

Geopolitica Del Paesaggio. Storie e Geografie dell'Identità Marchigiana

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In this collection of essays about the ways in which over the centuries a region and attached identity were imagined for the people and places now broadly labeled as the Marche ('Marches' in English) of Italy east of the Apennines from Umbria, Giorgio Mangani shows that this was often a self-conscious act of promotion and celebration by local and regional elites and local populations alike

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The common sense about regional geography in the English-speaking world is still that one tries to tell stories about regions by identifying collective traits and internal linkages that have characterized them for long time periods and imputing the meaningfulness of the 'region' as an entity from the longevity of these essential characteristics. In an era of place marketing and popular nostalgia for a presumably more localized past, the invention and embellishment of regions goes on apace. Italy is a country with a long history of regional differences that can lend themselves to the exploitation of nostalgia for a past we have lost, not least because tourism has become a major source of employment and economic growth. The fact is that types of agricultural system, industrial organization, urban forms, and socio-political institutions have long differed within Italy, albeit often in ways that defy simple regional aggregation. So, regionalizing is not so much bereft of material roots as requires acts of imagination and action to mobilize the local material into self-consciously regional forms.

In this collection of essays about the ways in which over the centuries a region and attached identity were imagined for the people and places now broadly labeled as the Marche ('Marches' in English) of Italy east of the Apennines from Umbria, Giorgio Mangani shows that this was often a self-conscious act of promotion and celebration by local and regional elites and local populations alike. This 'region' is an interesting one in several respects that support Mangani's thesis that the *idea* of the region has had to be imposed on a much more unruly geography. Firstly, its name betrays the fact that for many centuries it was a borderland at the edge of various polities, the last one being the Papal States ruled from the Vatican until 1870, and, as a result, a frequent zone of contention between various political, economic and political forces emanating from distant seats of power. The plural in English translation further draws attention to what Mangani persuasively calls the 'polycentrism' of a region divided historically among a variety of cities and hinterlands rather than unified around

a single center. Finally, as the home district of Giacomo Leopardi, possibly Italy's most important poet of the nineteenth century, its inherent diversity led the poet to emphasize the heterogeneity of Italy itself in both his poems and his other writings. His *Zibaldone*, an enormous collection of notes, thoughts and recollections, is a book known to most Italians from school. It represents one of the greatest reflections on the human condition, particularly in relation to emotions, ever written. But its title means a hotchpotch or mixture of heterogeneous elements, precisely what the Marche signifies to Mangani, absent its manipulation as a 'geopolitical' entity.

The essays have distinctive themes but follow a narrative 'flow' from broad considerations of how regional identities have been proposed for the region through the construction of a post-1870 racial-civilizational account of the Marche and more longstanding efforts at representing the area as a 'garden' (a Promised Land of sorts akin to a 'New Palestine') and as a coherent 'landscape' associated with a vision of political unity to somewhat more specific narratives about the Marche drawing on such diverse sources as 'Adriatic humanism', the classical Roman villas of the district written about by Pliny, Leopardi's Marche, the Third Italy industrial model of the contemporary Marche, and the 'senses of place' adopted by the anti-Fascist Resistance in the region at the close of the Second World War celebrating the sites of their major feats. These storylines thus go from the historic and long term to the more recent and contemporary. Each, through, illustrates the extent to the region is constructed and written about as a coherent entity even when it clearly resists incorporation into one singular regional narrative reflecting self-evident 'facts on the ground'. Most chapters are illustrated with historic maps and photographs of artifacts that provide some sense of the ways in which the stories of the region told to larger audiences have been created out of local lore.

The geographical hybridity and in-between character of the Marche as shown by many of the stories told about it as a region reveal for Mangani the extent to which the sweeping together of geographical particularities is invariably an act of geopolitical imagination directed towards creating a geopolitical identity for a region and its occupants, if usually as part of a larger Italian mosaic. The takeaway message for political-cultural geography, I suppose, is that 'regions' are never innocent empirical designations but rich with political implications about why different regional narratives rise and fall and about whose interests and identities they come to serve. In tracing a Foucauldian 'archaeology' of knowledge about the Marche, Giorgio Mangani has also shown then how much regional designations feed into political projects, from Italian unification to the model of diffuse industrial development and anti-Fascism, that are based in blending local particularities into regional narratives to serve specific ideological goals.