Foreword: ‘Italy’ and ‘made-in research’: a marriage made in heaven?

‘You’ve got pretty good taste’, she said.  
‘I like Italian suits,’ he replied.  
‘I’ve had a couple of British suits, and they were okay, but they felt . . . constructed. Like I was wearing a building. But the Italians – they know how to make a suit.’  
(Sandford 1999, p. 222)

We can leave it to the character in Sandford’s novel to explain how a British suit can feel like ‘wearing a building’ – but much of the world is certainly aware that the Italians ‘know how to make a suit’, and that is why gentlemen like Armani, Brioni, Zegna, Canali, and many others have become symbols of Italian excellence in design and fine workmanship. The brief passage above, and countless others like it in literature, movies, music, advertising, or virtually any other human expression one may think of, is just one indication of how deeply embedded in our culture is the notion that some peoples can do some things better than others can. This ‘ability differential’ is, of course, the marketing manifestation of what our economist friends know of as Ricardo’s comparative advantage – the underlying theory that explains trade and many other kinds of human activity.

Ricardo, of course, did not invent comparative advantage. In putting forth his theory he was articulating a concept that has been with us since time immemorial – the notion of ‘place’, including the people associated with it and the kinds of things they produce or invent, which has always been central to human life. ‘All the best things come from Syracuse!’, exclaims a merchant in a novel about ancient Rome (Saylor 2007, p. 185); in more contemporary times, ‘all the best things are made in Japan!’ according to a character in the movie Back to the Future; and, in a more realistic spirit that acknowledges that a place cannot be ‘best’ at everything (and so, unwittingly, echoes Ricardo), Steve Tyrell sings, in his song New York is Where I Live: ‘L.A. where I see the stars / Germany where I buy my cars . . . Italy where I buy my shoes / New Orleans where I sing the blues . . . Alaska where I skate on ice / Vegas where I roll the dice . . .’.

In this context, there are three main reasons that make this book so
important and unique. First, it deals with an issue that is itself important; the idea of ‘place’ is ubiquitous in our culture, and the book deals with the nature and role of the images of places as product origins. Second, by virtue of its focus and contributing authors the book is firmly embedded in the Italian experience – and what could be better as a base for discussing made-in than a country which is famous for making some of the finest things in life, from fashion to wines and from cheese to cars? And third, it features the work of outstanding scholars who are known to do good research that leads to insightful and useful conclusions.

To briefly speak, first, about ‘place’, one must note that, considering its centrality, it is not surprising that it has been studied in many disciplines ranging from geography to environmental psychology and from anthropology to international marketing. The traditional and narrow view of place as simply a ‘location’ has given way in our times to considering it as a socially constructed experience. Kearney and Bradley (2009, p. 79) rightly stress that ‘place . . . cannot be separated from people’. That is to say, a place is not just a spot on a map – it is a complex construct that, among many other characteristics, can evoke strong ‘us versus them’ feelings ranging from attachment to what we call ‘home’ to admiration, animosity, or indifference toward the places of others.

Attachment to ‘home’ is as strong an emotion as can be, and the mere thought of it brings forth a flood of images: ‘Africa . . . wisdom, understanding, good things to eat . . . the smell of sweet cattle breath . . . the white sky across the endless, endless bush . . .; O Botswana, my country, my place’ (McCall Smith 2002, p. 234). Horace was among the first to encapsulate such emotions eloquently into the notion of patriotism, in his ‘Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori’ (‘It is sweet and fitting to die for your country’; Odes III.2.13), and he has been followed by many. ‘I love my country because it is mine,’ the 14th century Armenian poet Stephan Orbelian wrote, for example, summarizing in a simple phrase the powerful notion of ‘home’ (Gelven 1994, p. 163). Needless to say, such strong feelings find their way to the marketplace – in, among others, the construct of consumer ethnocentrism, which is studied in this book.

While most people love ‘home’, views about other places and what they stand for often diverge. For example, many admire German engineering, French fashion, or Japanese electronics, while others can be quite vitriolic in discussing various places. A character in one novel notes that ‘Vienna was not a big city and never has been: it is a little provincial town where narrow-minded peasants go to the opera, instead of the pig market, to exchange spiteful gossip’ (Deighton 1989, p. 92). In another example, a comparison between Sweden and Tuscany does not speak well of the former and pays a compliment to the latter: ‘The Swedish are
a humourless, sterile race . . . For them, there are no lazy hours in the bar, no strolling down the street with an easy gait and a Mediterranean nonchalance’ (Booth 2004, p. 205). Do such views matter? Of course they do – they contextualize human experience, give it depth, and help to explain why some things are the way they are. Why, in a nutshell, Brioni makes good suits. Let us borrow one last reference from popular culture to emphasize this point, because it is important – this one from the movie The Third Man, with words spoken by Orson Welles: ‘In Italy, for thirty years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed, but they produced Michaelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love, they had five hundred years of democracy and peace – and what did they produce? The cuckoo clock.’

So, ‘place’ is everywhere. The term can be used in reference to anything from a glade in the forest to a room, a building, a neighbourhood or a city, a country, a region within a country or one that encompasses many countries (e.g., the EU), or the world at large. As a result, we experience place in a multitude of ways, from living in it to buying products from it, hearing about it on the news, reading about it in a novel, going to it for a holiday, and so on. Cognitive psychology tells us that the information we collect over time about a place is stored in the brain in the form of mental schemata. These are complex networks of associations that include generalizations, objects, events, or feelings, which are hierarchically structured and linked in ways that help us understand our environment.

Mental schemata can be activated by either intrinsic or extrinsic information, such as, respectively, a detailed examination of a car’s engine versus the same car’s brand name. Since ‘objective’ technical information is often hard to get, time consuming, and many times beyond the average consumer’s level of understanding, and since our lives are rather busy these days and many of us suffer to one degree or other from cognitive overload, we often rely on extrinsic cues (in this example, the brand name) that conveniently ‘bundle’ many technical characteristics into one easy-to-get piece of external information (‘I know a Ferrari is better than a Mazda Miata, I don’t need to research it’). It is these types of extrinsic cues, which activate strong mental associative networks that we often call ‘stereotypes’ (much like those in the popular culture examples cited above) that guide much of our marketplace behaviour. And country of origin, or a place’s made-in image, is one of the most powerful extrinsic cues in existence.

The relative importance of the images of places in international marketing is reflected in the attention paid to the subject in both research and practice. On the academic side, a number of scholars have called country of origin ‘the most researched’ field in international marketing – and a comprehensive database I maintain shows that research in this area is
indeed voluminous: as of the end of 2011 the database includes more than 1600 works, of which well over 800 are refereed journal articles (the remainder are books, book chapters and conference papers). This database includes works on nation branding but not those on TDI, or tourism destination image, which comprise at least another 200 journal articles. With regards to practice, in a recent study we used the ‘content analysis’ technique to identify and catalogue in detail the place cues appearing in over 6000 business and consumer magazine advertisements from five countries – and what we found exceeded even our highest predictions. In summary, more than 80 per cent of all the ads contained at least one place cue; the average number of place cues per ad was about 6.5; and place-based approaches were the seventh most-used out of 27 types of advertising executions found in these ads, outscoing such common approaches as testimonials and problem-solution ads. The evidence, in other words, shows that both academics and marketing managers agree on the importance of place in buyer behaviour.

Turning to the second main strength of this book, the fact that it carries an Italian pedigree, one does not need to say much – the importance of made-in to Italy, and of Italy to made-in, is self-evident and reasonably well understood both in Italy itself and elsewhere. Three examples can help to make the point. The first concerns the Chinese workers who started coming to Prato province some 20 years ago and have since set up over 3000 companies specializing in low-end fashions (Donadio 2010), or pronto moda, as they prefer to call it. Concerns in the region were not just limited to immigration, or the potential cultural effects of some 10000 expatriates plonked in the middle of Tuscany – they also extended to a thorny issue that lies at the heart of made-in: to what extent might ‘cheap fashions made in Italy by Chinese companies and workers’ undermine the prestige of ‘Made in Italy’ in traditional high-end markets?

The second example refers to two cases (Owen 2008) that help to portray not only some contemporary Italian problems related to made-in but also the broader complexity of the issue. One arose when Paris Hilton promoted a drink called Rich Prosecco, which comes in a can and includes wine with fruit juice. Italian concern in this case was not just over the copyright of the name ‘prosecco’; it also expressed the fear that, as a local representative of Italian prosecco producers in Treviso emphasized, Ms Hilton is helping to shape consumer opinion in the wrong direction that prosecco is ‘an alcoholic fruit drink’. The other case arose from the 2007 European Court of Justice decision which assigned the term ‘Tocai’ exclusively to the ‘Tokaji’ wine-producing region in Hungary. Producers of ‘Tocai Friulano’ in Italy’s Friuli region saw this development as more than just the loss of a name which they had been using for centuries; reminiscent
of the statements above about ‘home’, by Horace on patria, McCall Smith on Botswana, and Stephan Orbelian the poet on Armenia, a local wine-maker stressed that Italy must defend its wines ‘as part of its identity and tradition’. Indeed. These two cases buttress the statement made above, that mental schemata are complex representations of the world around us: in the world of marketing what others do in relation to our product may greatly affect its standing in the marketplace – and ‘product’-related issues may go much beyond product-only considerations and end up involving the entire identity of a people.

To put it differently, ‘where a product is made’ is much more than ‘where a product is made’ – it involves everything from how images about foreign products are created in consumers’ minds to how brands and products are intertwined with everything from manufacturing to social identity. Perhaps nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in two international kerfuffles some ten years ago, concerning the meaning of ‘Italian food’. In 2002, Italy’s then-minister of agriculture Giovanni Alemanno announced plans about a ‘seal of approval’ for Italian restaurants worldwide if (and only if) they were prepared to submit to certification verifying their use of authentic Italian ingredients. This was followed in 2004 by a similar plan about what is a ‘real’ pizza. The ideas were benign and reflected both pride and pragmatism: if a restaurant in, say, Toronto, New York or Melbourne flies the Italian flag and claims to serve ‘Italian’ food, it had better use true Italian ingredients. But . . .

But, perhaps predictably, the world media greeted the announcements with hoots of laughter, as indicated by this sampling of newspaper headlines: ‘Spaghetti justice’ (Ottawa Citizen); ‘Italian taste police coming to a restaurant near you’ (The Guardian); ‘Italy’s pizza police will leave no tomato unturned’ (Chicago Sun-Times); ‘Italians take aim at world’s pasta pirates’ (Toronto Star/Reuters). But behind all this merriment were some very real issues. For example, a country’s name is its brand, and its flag is its logo – and if, as it is often said, the brand name and logo of a Coca-Cola or a McDonald’s is worth billions, how many trillions are Italy’s name and flag worth in the food business? And given this, why should Italy not protect its market assets the same way that Coke and McDonald’s protect theirs? On the other hand, such thinking can lead to a potentially slippery slope; as those following the EU’s ‘protected origin’ legislation, which so far includes several hundred placenames, know well, the issue isn’t just one country or place. As an article under one of the headlines cited above asked, ‘what’s next’? If China takes an interest in how ‘Peking duck’ is cooked in a Parisian restaurant, Greece in how ‘Greek yoghourt’ is made in the US, and so on, then many places and foods – indeed, the entire food sector as well as many other sectors – are in for a long battle over what
‘made in’ really means and who has the right to fly which flag under what circumstances.

As can be seen, the issues surrounding the made-in construct, both generally and specifically in the case of Italy, are many and complex – which leads to the last, but certainly not least, strength of this book: the substance and quality of the book itself, and its ability to deal effectively with very complex subject matter. This is not just a random anthology of articles that simply happen to be related by virtue of a shared theme (made-in) and provenance (Italy). Having read all the chapters, I believe, instead, that this volume reflects a well-coordinated effort with a much tighter focus than one finds in collections of this kind. Part of this focus is due to the steady hand of the two co-editors, Dr Giuseppe Bertoli and Dr Riccardo Resciniti, who are well-qualified to lead this type of work. Both are very well published: Professor Bertoli mainly on globalization and a range of branding issues, from co-branding and brand value to made-in effects; and Professor Resciniti on fields ranging from logistics to small and medium-sized enterprises, competitiveness, and various topics in international marketing.

Another reason for the book’s successful approach to its theme is, of course, the individual chapter contributions, which come from authors who know the area well and have carefully chosen which issues to address. The chapters refer to a wide range of issues, including made-in effects in relation to ethnocentrism and to corporate social responsibility in small and medium-sized enterprises, the interactions and synergistic effects between product-related made-in images and the images of places as tourism destinations, distribution channel issues, made-in topics in relation to emerging markets and, of course, a review of the relevant literature on country of origin effects. The approach of the chapters that comprise this volume is academically rigorous and at the same time managerially relevant, which is why I believe the book helps to push the made-in research agenda forward at the same time as it provides practitioners with new ideas they can apply to their brands. I should note that notwithstanding the Italian emphasis, the chapters individually and the book as a whole cover a lot of territory within the made-in domain, and so they have much to offer to the broader audience of researchers and practitioners in other countries.

To conclude, then, what more can one ask for than a book that offers a high-quality discussion on an important issue, from the perspective of researchers who understand its focal theme, ‘Made in Italy’, better than anybody else? In short, through their solid scholarship these chapters give us answers to many questions and tools for practical applications, but also
more of what we can never have enough of: new questions and much food for thought.

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