The birth and the rise of the cluster concept: an evolutionary approach

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Abstract

The cluster concept has become an increasingly popular topic for researchers and policy makers. Although this concept is not new, its importance increased during the last decades. Following some authors, the persistence of the cluster concept, as well as its diffusion across different contexts and scientific fields, is a result of its fuzziness. The absence of a unique definition of cluster, as well as a unique methodology for “measuring” clusters favor its loose application to a wide variety of contexts (from economics to management, to economic geography, innovation studies and so forth).

The paper aims at identifying the evolutionary pattern of the cluster concept, from the emergence, to the growth and the potential future development.

The theoretical discussion is empirically supported by a bibliographic analysis based on statistical and social network analysis tools. The point of departure is an original database, consisting of 5332 academic articles about industrial clusters or industrial districts that have been published from 1989 to 2010 in international scientific journals (ISI Web of Science). We first identified the masterpieces of the cluster concept, selecting the most cited articles, second we performed a backward and forward citation analysis, in order to get information on the roots and the future development of the concept.

The results shed light on the milestones in cluster literature as well as on its possible developments. The backward analysis emphasizes the multidisciplinary ground of the concept, which emerges in the realm of the agglomeration economy and local competitive advantage studies and spans over innovation and
internationalization studies. The forward analysis highlights the new dimensions of the cluster concept, which give particular emphasis on the emergent literature on culture and creativity studies, as well as on the open innovation paradigm.

**Keywords**: cluster, industrial district, bibliographic analysis, citation analysis, citation network.