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Environmentalism and sociocultural movements in Italy

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A clarification on environmentalism and sociocultural movements

The organisers of this conference have invited us to a rereading of the complexities of the *land* or *territory* of Italy, moving away from inadequate, if not specious, simplifications and thus to benefit from the manner in which over recent decades social science has contributed to its reshaping.

Even if this invitation is in itself well-timed and stimulating, I have also found it unique and courageous in its choice of a different point of view, generally speaking, a point of view that in Italy has always been by a minority. These cultures and political subjectivities construct the basis of their claims and projects in terms of territory and have had a very important role in the process of the conceptual and legislative redefinition of space and territory in Italy over the last hundred years.

To deal effectively with the matter and to avoid a misunderstanding, it is important to make a classificatory proposal, albeit unconventional.

Clearing up a misunderstanding

Considering the issue which has been raised and in which *environmentalism* appears distinct to *social movements*, it may be

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useful to clear up the misunderstanding over a simplification, a simplification analogous to those mentioned by Biagio Salvemini in the invitation notes to this conference.

Nowadays, the *mainstream* media tend to distinguish between *good* environmentalism, operating at national and international level and aware of the need for compatibility in all environmental policy decisions, and a *bad* environmentalism, playing itself out on a small, territorial scale, and whose main characteristic is a prejudiced, *savage*, opposition to any innovation affecting the features of a given territory; an opposition demonstrating unawareness of social and economic compatibility as well as being an irresponsible and localist form of selfishness. It is well-known that a neologism has been coined that indeed stigmatises this attitude, the so-called *nimby*, from '*Not In My Back Yard*'. Nowadays, environmentalism seems to be tolerated in the media and politics when acting, mostly ineffectively, on a national and international level yet is indeed stigmatised when operating, often *effectively*, at a local level and to stigmatise it even further it is attributed to an exclusively and selfishly local vision.

Over recent years, my impression has been that this opposition is often instrumental and inadequate in terms of the realities of the situation.

Indeed, it is a fact that the majority of local controversies deemed as *nimby* issues are innervated by a culture that knows and understands the greater territorial dimension, including the global one. Furthermore, in recent years in Italy these local conflicts tend to place themselves on the internet as well as extremely advanced regional and national platforms. Alberto Asor Rosa (1992) described this trend quite effectively as a *new environmentalism*, that is to say a new paradigm of environmentalism in Italy alongside the traditional form, a paradigm that in part offers critique and

in part it spurs on renewal. An event held in November 2011 in the town of Cassinetta di Lugagnano demonstrates this phenomenon well when, for the first time, the representatives of the committees for the preservation of the territory from all over Italy met in a national forum. This is all having interesting consequences in the fields of social and political studies, as demonstrated by the first national conference on territorial studies held in Florence at the beginning of December 2011.

A framework of terminology

In order to deal with the second issue, that of classification, we ought to remember that the term *environmentalism* is relatively new, being between thirty to thirty-five years old. Moreover, it has to compete on a constant and often confused basis with other terms as vague as *protectionism*, *conservationism*, *ecologism* and so forth. Any attempt to distinguish all of these terms clearly, but for a few and very specific cases, has been, in my opinion, unsatisfactory and often not completely justified.

With regard to this, it may be helpful to quote a passage from the latest and most valuable book by Salvatore Settis, *Paesaggio costituzione cemento* (Settis, 2010, p.49):

It is possible, let us say, that on the eve of concreting over some ancient coastal pine forest a group of citizens or an association such as *Italia Nostra*, the FAI or the WWF in appeal to protect the *landscape*, seeks to block the excavators, citing Article 9 of the Constitution and calling on the institutions of the state that are responsible for its safeguarding. It is the possible that the regional authority or the municipality responds by saying that '*everything is in order*', because the planning of that *territory* is within *their* jurisdiction and not that of the *state*. In the end, it is also possible that journalists and politicians, when reporting these skirmishes and conflicts, speak of the protection of the *environment*, and that the insurgent groups against such allotments are defined as '*environmentalists*', even though (let us say) in their written

materials and statements they only talk about the *landscape* and the word '*environment*' never actually appears. In some way, everyone is right.

Settis hypothesises this ambiguous scenario relating to terminology in order to introduce some elements of distinction. Nevertheless, what is of particular interest to me is the conclusion '*In some way, everyone is right*'. Today, I will use the term *environmentalism* in an anomalous way, in that not only will I not try to specify the different meanings, but on the contrary, I will adopt an extremely inclusive definition, inasmuch as I believe it appropriate to this occasion.

Normally, I use the word *environmentalism* in a very broad manner, including all of the cultures and issues since the 1860s that have felt that their mission was to safeguard the most valuable features of the landscape, of the territory and of the ecosystems, whatever these exquisitely spatial terms may have meant and whatever *the most valuable features* may have been. Therefore, as many historians of the environment might well agree, we cannot reasonably include those whose main priority is *not* the protection of the environment, that is to say *nature*, however it may be understood; whereof the clearest example is urban planning in its more general and technical sense.

I think, however, that to address the issue of environmentalism and social movements with the framework of a conference as today's, it is necessary to adopt an extremely broad definition, one which includes a critical and widely scrutinised urban planning culture as well as the field of cultural heritage protection.

On the other hand, many people acknowledge that the environmentalism, cultural heritage protection and urban planning that could be defined as being most '*critical*', inasmuch as being independent and specific fields, have actually encountered and nourished each other throughout

the history of our country to a far greater extent than may be thought. Fortunately, this is still the case today, in spite of the fact that the one person who may have best represented this fruitful union in Italy was Antonio Cederna, a man who sadly died many years ago and whose legacy has still not been fully appreciated to this day.

Centrality at a national level

If we adopt the *broader* meaning of environmentalism, it seems to me that in all its different manifestations over the last 130 years there has been a continuous reasoning that has kept the national dimension as its main territorial point of reference. This has been continued in various ways, influenced by history, and with an ever changeable local, national, supranational, and ultimately global intermixture yet with the nation as the constant focal point of reference. This brings me to the conclusion that the situation today is still the same and may be said when looking at the great milestones achieved by environmentalism in Italy.

The first Italian movement for the protection of nature was, as elsewhere in Europe, extremely nationalistic. This movement sought primarily to protect landscapes and natural areas which were seen as of importance to national history and literature (Piccioni, 1999, 2010). In connection herewith the Ravenna pine forest, the Castagno dei Cento Cavalli (an ancient chestnut tree in Sicily), the Cascate delle Marmore (Roman man-made waterfall in Umbria), the source of the River Clitunno (Umbria), Villa Borghese and the Isola di San Giulio (an island in Lake Orta, Piedmont) might all be mentioned. The aim of the law proposed in 1905 and successively enacted in 1922, was first and foremost that of conserving national heritage for future generations. For this reason the relationship between the

environment and natural monuments as well as artistic and monumental heritage was very strong. What qualified these assets as deserving of protection was their belonging to a collective patrimony, that is to say the heritage of the nation as a whole.

Not even nature in its more *ecological* sense, however strange it may seem, evaded this philosophy. Today, in fact, biocenosis, as early 20th century conservationists used to say, and wildlife are not assimilable to landscapes and natural monuments because they do not bear the symbols of national history. On the contrary, it is the very absence of such human features that often adds more value to them. Nevertheless, the pattern adopted in Italy and in the rest of Europe during the first decades of the 20th century so as to protect even the *wildest* of nature, was almost exclusively that of the *national park*, a heritage institution imbued with the idea of *nationhood*.

Moreover, it is interesting to observe that the origin and development of modern environmentalism in Italy between circa 1880-1935 was accompanied by intense territorial/spatial instruction; the one nourishing the other. It was a conscious and ordered effort to create a unified and systematically complete image of the national territory that even included its richness of structures. There are many examples of this instruction, but it is important to remember that one of the great supporters, although often adopting ambiguous positions, of Italian environmentalism over the last 120 years has been the Italian Touring Club. As an association the club has made a continual, scientific and indeed huge contribution to the creation and dissemination of a unified and inclusive image of Italy. The greatest success of the Italian Touring Club in publishing are still today the *Guide Rosse* (red guides), which, a hundred years after the first issue, represent a kind of a monument to the nation.

Adherence to political nationalism, the national dimension of the respective associations involved and the fact that environmentalist issues have always been the expression of a cultural élite with a definitively supralocal education and sense of civic pride, have played an important part in the tenacious growth of this unified vision of the country.

Even though these delineations have definitely been fading over recent decades, nevertheless they still endure alongside within the framework of relations that go beyond the national level and assume continental and even global dimensions.

Multiscalar conflicts

Environmentalism, both in the traditionally *limited* sense and in the *broader* sense adopted herein, has from the outset been a systematic producer and a conscious and tenacious populariser of a territorial vision. Beginning with ethics, material needs or concerns for the future, it has elaborated and sought to spread unconventional, often unusual and counter-intuitive visions that have contributed to the reinterpretation and redefinition of concrete spaces; thus a component of the visible landscape, an almost untouched ecosystem, a local area or the built-up spaces of a city.

Nevertheless, this complexity of vision, in which there is often interplay between different territorial criteria as well as this motivational complexity, in which highly contrasting ambitions may become interwoven at very different levels of abstraction, may lead to bitter and complex struggles over the ownership and use of territorial space. Given the chaotic Italian institutional situation, these conflicts seem to be concerned especially with the different authority structures (state, regions, provinces and municipalities), however frequently, and at the most profound level, they

concern sections of society whose paramount interests and main sphere of influence exist at different territorial levels. For instance, a fascinating area of study currently involving sociologists, geographers and historians, examines the dynamics between the social acceptance and conflict engendered when a conservation area is either proposed or recognised. This is a typical example of a redefinition in *status* of a territory that arises in the conflict between needs and differing territorial models (Depraz, 2008). In contrast, yet albeit structurally similar, there are the dynamics of acceptance and conflict with regard to large infrastructures with a hefty environmental impact.

On these issues, as relevant politically as they are stimulating in a cognitive sense, there is a broad and growing literary movement, however this is perhaps beyond the scope of this work.

Territorial environmentalist structures: visions, projects, laws, and conflicts

I would like to dedicate the last part of my report to some effects concerning *territorial creations*, and especially to their consequences in law, an area that has hardly been studied in the past and yet that has, of recent, aroused great consideration.

I would like to put forward the hypothesis that in Italy the relationship between the elaboration of environmentalist territorial visions, the law and institutional policy has undergone three phases.

Enlightened or moderate liberalism: circa 1905-1960

The first phase would be from the early 19th century right up to the end of 1960s. This phase could reasonably be

called the phase of *enlightened liberalism* or *moderate liberalism*. This phase was characterised by the criticism of a minority élite, at times more than a little influential, against utilisation of territory that was based exclusively upon the needs of private property. Furthermore, this critique succeeded in bringing about two visions and two policies.

On the productivist and utilitarian side, with a collective and far-sighted view, projects of integrated territorial management emerged in the Giolittian Era, particularly through the initiative of the circle of technocrats around Francesco Saverio Nitti. These projects proposed a sustainable utilisation of forests with the aim of controlling fluvial watercourse systems. It was a territorial policy and only in a broad sense environmentalist as such, however it had as its clear ends the organisation of natural resources and in reality a general vision of the territory and environment (Gaspari, 2002; Piccioni and Raffaelli, 2002). It was not by chance alone that this initiative was avidly sponsored by the Italian Touring Club campaign, 'Il Bosco e il torrente' (The Forest and the Flood), in 1911 (Gaspari, 2002; Piccioni, 2002; Sulli and Zanzi Sulli, 2002).

From a most impartial and strictly environmentalist point of view, the need to face the progressive degradation of natural assets and precious environments due to technological progress and rapid urbanisation on the one hand, and disillusionment in consideration of the factors at play on the other, led to the identification of a number of serious priorities in need of protection. Natural beauties and monuments were protected by an act of 1922, revised in 1929, which remained the only general law of protection until 1985 with the same legislative measures in respect of art treasures and monuments, that is to say an official report and a veto on modification. In the case of national parks, created in 1922 the philosophy was one of selecting

a limited number of precious ecosystems to be protected with special regulations (Piccioni, 1999).

After the economic boom, such a restrictive and defensive framework, with such feeble means available to it, indeed revealed itself to be inadequate. The great economic growth during the subsequent years brought about a reconstruction of two opposing and yet complementary phenomena. On the one hand, there was territorial devastation of exceptional dimensions and exponential growth (De Lucia, 2006, 2013), and on the other, a gradual increase in environmental awareness, which from the latter half of the 1960s was no longer merely the prerogative of the *bourgeois elite* (Meyer, 1995).

The reformist phase: circa 1960-1990

The second stage, which I would willingly describe as the *reformist phase*, began in the 1960s. It was a far more complex and dramatic but also more productive phase than the previous one. I have named it *reformist* owing to its need to *reform* institutional and cultural assets as well as for its progressive political attitude which was more given towards planning.

In this phase, environmentalism was more conscious, more ambitious, and more influential than in the past. It produced a series of important enhancements, many of which were to become law. The *territorial domain* of this new environmentalist generation was far greater than that of the previous generation, a *domain* that had previously consisted of precious islands to protect from the ravenous, albeit legitimate, appetite of modernity and of all those people who, with a mixture of both suspicion and reverence at the beginning of the century, were seen as *practical men*. In its place emerged a vision, not particularly new in Italy, yet little theorised or put into practice in the first half of the

century, of this *space* as a *continuum* to blended with functionality, bearing in mind pre-existing values, occupations and potential. This was a domain in which the aesthetic and patriotic dimension typical of the *landscape* and of the *natural monuments* that had so interested the first conservationists, went hand in hand with new factors, such as ecology, environmental rights, the right to health along with rationally planned, sophisticated and *welcoming* urban areas.

Beginning in the mid-1960s and in which, at least in theory, we ought still to find ourselves today, this phase *de facto* came to an end in the late 1980s. It produced an extraordinary growth of the collective consciousness and gained a certain attention, albeit never a conscious and regular sense of responsibility, within some institutions and some political circles. This attention was reflected in a series of important, often very advanced achievements, yet with rather limited efficacy.

Without going into too much detail, suffice it to provide a short list of planning notions and legislative achievements that transformed this general vision of *space*, a vision in which the categories of landscape, natural environment and territory became the bearers of indispensable technical and civil values with a tendency often to become the focal point of human activity as well as the future of society. Between 1970 and 1993 there emerged the Progetto 80 (1970); the idea of the Apennine '*green belt*' (1970) a forerunner of the 1990s projects, Abruzzo Regione Verde d'Europa-ARVE and Appennino Parco d'Europa-APE; the '10% Challenge' launched in Camerino in 1980 to achieve the official protection of a tenth of Italian territory through the creation of protected areas; the Galasso Act of 1985 and the two, almost contemporaneous, pieces of framework legislation on the hydrographical basins in 1989 and natural conservation areas in 1991. All of these projects and

measures were ambitious, generous and open, and in the 1970s they were linked to some very advanced regional legislation, legislation including the law on urban planning in Piedmont in 1977, the landscape plan in Emilia-Romagna approved in 1993, or the creation of many regional protected area networks (Piccioni, 2014).

The quarter of a century, from more or less the end of 1960s to the beginning of the 1990s, represented an important social and institutional *laboratory* for the transformation of territorial/spatial ideas from within environmentalist circles into projects and definitive legislation. During this lively phase it became apparent to those most abreast of the situation that the wealth of debate and the importance of these achievements might all too easily be nullified by a complex series of factors, some new but others traditionally Italian. These would include such factors as non-compliance with the law, the rather inadequate implementation of regulations, the ongoing and slow but steady remotion of many measures, the paralysis due to conflicts arising from overlapping jurisdictions and so forth. Until the early 1990s, the *zeitgeist* was officially that which has been already been defined as *reformist* yet inasmuch as it was respected in official rhetoric it was largely negated by the reality of the actual situation.

The neo-liberal phase: from 1990 onwards

The neo-liberal phase commenced in the early 1990s and could be defined as the phase of *space without quality* or, perhaps, *one-dimensional space/neo-liberal space*. It is a phase that appears to be distinguished by three features.

Its first feature is the prevailing idea of a territory regulated only in order to suit the needs of land owners and make a profit for construction. In this phase all of the planning and regulation work elaborated in the previous phases is not

only misapplied but also blatantly ignored. Furthermore, at this point a territory is deprived of all its assets other than those that are immediately profitable. This is the recent history of urban regulation, or *deregulation*, well-described by Settis, of the legislation on landscape and cultural heritage, it is the history of conservation areas and of the faulty application of the laws on hydrographical basins. There are many other examples, epitomised perhaps by the tragic aftermath of the earthquake which struck L'Aquila. Here, an extraordinary and historic array of environmental, artistic, economic, social, and cultural values has been completely ignored, and consequentially, irreversibly devastated so as to favour the immediate profit of a few so-called *friendly* businesses that are not even local.

Its second feature is a progressive separation of institutions and political representation on one side and the world of environmentalism on the other; two spheres, which between the 1960s and 1980s, had initiated a fragmentary and problematic, yet fertile dialogue at cultural level, and a form of collaboration at an operational level. The neo-liberal philosophy, in an apparently sophisticated version, be it that of the *neo-reformist* élite or at a more basic level that of the *berlusconian* majorities, alongside its crisis variant (Naomi Klein's '*shock economy*'), has led to institutional and political impermeability with regard to the environmental demand and need for a well-structured and not one-dimensional consideration of *territorial space*.

Its third feature bears witness to the necessary defensive withdrawal on the part of the majority of the environmentalist initiatives at a local level, that is to say a war being waged *asymmetrically* between neo-liberal use of the territory and its defence linked to a broader vision yet reduced to the scale of a *proxy war*, apart perhaps from some of the dramatic yet unsuccessful cases such as Soru's attempt to regulate use of the Sardinian coastline. The

expression *asymmetric war* is far from hyperbolic and is also not meant only as a metaphor. This is indeed borne out by the *crisis philosophy* that transforms infrastructural initiatives into militarised zones, initiatives that have been subtracted from normal planning mechanisms and the democratic processes available to citizens and thus it denies those citizens any opportunity to pursue legal action in order to protect their territory from ensuing environmental devastation.

The 150th Anniversary of the Unification of Italy has thus been celebrated, as could not otherwise be expected, in a climate in which complex territorial planning policies fail and those tirelessly adopted in previous decades are progressively laid to waste, in the meantime the significance of basic factors is rapidly fading away other than within small groups of élites and those citizens who are directly affected. These factors include those such as the aims of a conservation area, the need for a city or a region to have effective means for territorial governance and the fact that part of a territory could have a meaning beyond that of mere private property and the right to dispose freely thereof.

The triumph of the *berlusconian* slogan '*master of my own home*', and a European record with regard to territorial consumption, that is to say about a tenth of national territory concreted over since the 1950s at a pace that shows no sign of relenting, all seem to sound the defeat of any environmental vision of territorial space and it may only be hoped that this state of affairs is temporary.

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