



Degrowth as a territorial-landscape project

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Abstract

The landscape, especially in a country like Italy, is today entirely man-made, and is the other face of urban civilisation. We are faced with a paradox: we enjoy a very high competence of landscape architects, urban and ecological planners, and we have a disastrous landscape, that is the result of the crisis of civilization. The fabric of local societies and urban landscapes can be reassembled and preserved only by inserting them in the construction of a degrowth society. As part of promoting a serene society of degrowth, relocalization cannot be only an economic issue. Politics, culture, and the entire way of life must regain their territorial anchoring. The keyword is *autonomy*, obtained through actions aimed to “re-territorialise”, to re-find a site and re-inhabit it, to organise rural and urban *bio-regions*. A route of de-industrialization will also be needed. Since the landscape is part of the commons, a policy of degrowth will imply the protection of the landscape as well as the search for the common good.

Keywords: Autonomy, Common Goods, Degrowth, Deindustrialization, Reterritorialization

Introduction

Today, particularly in a country like Italy, the landscape has been completely humanised. Wild nature no longer exists in the pure state, and everything has been modified either directly or indirectly by human action, in particular by agricultural and industrial economy and urbanisation. Consequently we can summarise by saying that the landscape is the reverse or the other side of urban civilisation. The town is part of the landscape and the landscape can be urban. Above all the city contributes to creating – but increasingly to destroying – the landscape:

directly, for example, by creating the peripheries or indirectly by means of the creation of motorways, mines or scattered residential areas. If the city is in crisis, for example as Detroit is, the landscape is too, and likewise agriculture.

Before modernity no-one spoke of landscape or city planning, but at the most of gardens and architecture. And yet, in the western world, the beauty of landscapes, like that of cities, has been constructed over the centuries – from the Middle Ages to the Baroque age – through the different ways of living and working of men, and at times, also thanks to the good governance of princes or

republics, like those of Sienna and Florence.

We find ourselves before a paradox. We enjoy wonderful economic wealth and if we are to believe the statistics, the GDP of our countries has increased by about sixteen times with respect to the pre-industrial period (1860). Furthermore, at the very moment in which the urban and landscape disaster into which today's world seems to be irremediably sinking, we benefit from a great number of top architects, town planners (even in the field of environmentally friendly homes) and landscapists. This architecture is often very attractive when one considers small units (in particular detached houses or prestigious constructions), but on the whole it is overall very disappointing, since it fails in the goal of making cities and, above all, because it has not managed at global level to avoid the decomposition of the urban fabric, uncontrolled urbanisation of the territory, urban expansion into the landscape, the increase of ugliness of every day contexts and the destruction of the environment, without mentioning the failure to reduce energy consumption and the carbon footprint. The final analysis of the great Portuguese architect Alvaro Siza is one of urban and landscape disaster: "The most serious thing is the devastation of the territory, the failure in the use of the ground as a discipline...we witness the end of an order of things that prefigures something else that we still do not know. And this was undoubtedly inevitable. But, in the short term, the quality is marginal and we find ourselves before a disaster" (Siza, 2003). The urban and landscape disaster that is before us all is the result of a logic that evidently escapes the architects, town planners and landscapists who, in an attempt to remedy this, have been caught up in this and are the accomplices of the disaster. "Today – writes Rafael Sanchez Ferlosio, everything has been poisoned by duplicity, with no drive being pure and direct. It is in this way that the countryside has become landscape', or the representation of itself" (Baudrillard, 2004, p. 67). In Europe today it is the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and real estate speculation that make, and above all unmake, the rural landscape as much as the urban one. Nor are the national protection measures, like the Italian Code of Cultural and Landscape Heritage, or the European ones like

the European Landscape Convention, or the excellent work of landscapists like Gilles Clément able to put a stop to the catastrophe: they can only limit it. The present crisis, which could slow down or even stop the process, and thus represent the opportunity for a reversal of trend, further aggravates the disaster, letting fields go to rack and ruin, and reducing the already poor resources allocated for the financing of the safeguard of protected areas and the environment.

In order to understand the territorial and landscape approach of degrowth it is important to begin to understand in what way the society of growth generates territorial disaster, to then go on to the observation of the landscape and town planning implications of the degrowth project.

2. The territorial and landscape disaster of the growth society

The landscape disaster that is before us all is the consequence of logics that, quite obviously, escape the landscapists, town-planners and, in an ever increasing manner, the very protection bodies themselves. And yet, these bodies become the accomplices of the disaster at the same time that they attempt to seek to remedy the damage. We are before a form of schizophrenia. We still live in productivist cities, devised and organised around vehicles and in shapes that are claimed to be rational. It suffices to think of Le Corbusier's Cité Radieuse with its segregation of spaces, industrial areas and lifeless residential quarters (Cochet, 2009, p. 247). In his *Manifesto del Movimento futurista* of 1909, Marinetti is the forerunner of the Le Corbusier project of razing Paris to the ground and wants to destroy Venice in the name of progress: "Deviate il corso dei canali per inondare i musei! [...] Prendete picconi e martelli! Minate le fondamenta delle venerande città!". Ceausescu realised a similar project in Bucharest, and Pompidou died too soon to carry through the plan for a motorway to cross the capital of France; in the meantime, Brussels has become an example of the destruction jointly

carried out by speculation and modernisation. We have even invented the verb “bruxelliser”.

We can speak of a destruction of cities in times of peace (Michea, 1999) – with the fragmentation of historical centres and the unbridled real estate speculation that drives the middle and lower tiers of the population towards the outskirts, the proliferation of shopping malls, the spread of residential areas, the emergency of the towers, the gutting aimed at the construction of motorways and the multiplication of “non-places”, stations, airports, hypermarkets (see the analysis by Marc Augé and Marco Revelli), and congested traffic. All this contributes to the wearing down of the territory, with disastrous effects on the landscape. This is one of the symptoms of a greater crisis generated by what I would better define as “hyper-modernity”, rather than “post-modernity”.

Following the industrialisation of the 19th century, medieval and Baroque towns were destroyed by modernity, giving rise to problems and enormous hardship as described in the novels of Dickens, Zola and Verga. Nevertheless, at that time a certain balance was still respected or re-established by means of the construction of the grands boulevards (the example of Haussmann’s Paris is emblematic of this). And even when the relationship of respect with the landscape was not maintained (it suffices to think of the coal and iron mines and other industrial disasters), the catastrophe was still partially limited by the fact that humanity did not surpass two billion in number and that industrialisation only concerned a few countries.

This relative equilibrium conferred another just as relative an equilibrium to the urban fabric between the society, with its resilient traditional morals (work ethics, sense of duty of honour and honesty), its institutions (army, education, the fine arts) and the capitalist economics of unlimited gain. The disintegration of this equilibrium was consumed by what we call “globalisation” or “internationalisation”, which symbolically begins with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. It is not the spread of exchanges or finance at planetary level that is new (this had existed at least since 1492), it is the inverse, the commodification and financialisation of the world. With the formula introduced in 1986 by Ronald Regan and Margaret

Thatcher, called “the three Ds” (deregulation, de-supervision, and de-facto decriminalization), the “pancommodification” of the world literally takes place. Everything becomes the subject of trafficking, even the human body, blood and genes. It goes from a society with market to a society of market, from a society with growth to a society of growth, which can be defined as a society dominated by a growth economy and which tends to be sucked up by this economic model. Growth for growth’s sake thus becomes the main aim in life, if not the only one. The cancer of “Growth” with the capital letter is not limited to destroying cities: it tears apart the territory, corrodes the sense of place and unravels the social fabric.

It is the triumph of ugliness. Back in 1972, Bernard Charbonneau, the French ecologist and forerunner of degrowth, had denounced the negative consequences of productivism on the landscape and the environment in his illustrated book *La fin du paysage* (Charbonneau, 1972). There is the “explosion of the urban”, according to the expression coined by Tiziana Villani (2010). This is a process of artificialisation of life. Man claims to recreate the world better than God and nature. GM crops, nanotechnologies, cloning, industrial fish farming etc. are an example of this. The culmination of this would be the cyborg, the artificial man. Nowadays the most evident outcome of all this is the transformation of the real world, the one in which we are condemned to live in the midst of rubbish dumps and waste. The bankruptcy of Dubai and its unoccupied 800 metre tower represents a symbol of the failure of the American dream and its urbanism. The productivist city belongs to the past, but the destruction of the world that it has generated follows on.

According to Alberto Magnaghi:

“La via senza ritorno della deterritorializzazione è stata aperta con la recinzione dei beni comuni, con la privatizzazione e progressiva mercificazione dei beni comuni naturali (la terra, per cominciare, poi l’acqua, l’aria, le risorse di energia naturale, le foreste, i fiumi, i laghi, i mari, etc.) e con quella dei beni comuni territoriali (le città e le infrastrutture storiche, i sistemi agro-forestali, i paesaggi, le opere idrauliche, l’igiene, i porti, gli impianti per la produzione di energia)”.

And he adds:

“La nostra civiltà non produce paesaggio, e ancor meno produce i luoghi dei quali il paesaggio sarebbe espressione. Essa si occupa di altro, e contribuisce anzi a distruggere i luoghi lasciati in eredità dalla storia. [...] Con i paradigmi economici propri dello sviluppo, la civiltà contemporanea ha prodotto principalmente effetti distruttivi del paesaggio e dell’ambiente, distruzione dei luoghi, ha prodotto l’aggressione degli elementi che sul lungo periodo strutturano l’identità di una regione, e il degrado attuale della nostra urbanizzazione diffusa post-urbana. [...] Con il territorio sono stati sepolti: il paesaggio, il luogo, la città, la campagna. In cambio abbiamo i non-luoghi, le discariche e le bidonville” (Magnaghi, 2014, pp. 36-47).

In 1977, the American architect Charles Jencks came (rather hastily) to the following conclusion: “Modern architecture died in Saint Louis, Missouri, on 15 July 1972 at 3.32 pm more or less), when the sadly Pruitt-Igoe notorious housing development programme, and more precisely some of its imposing high-rise blocks received their deathblow and were blown up with dynamite” (Rey, 2014, p. 11). This entrance into post-modernity, despite a few positive experiences, has unfortunately not changed much at all. Before the present economic-financial crisis we already had a systemic crisis of the territorial-urban-landscape complex.

This crisis is both political and societal and therefore the remedy must be so too. This is the reason why the degrowth project must necessarily go through a refounding of policy, starting with the polis and its relationship with nature. The urban/landscape project is necessarily second to the societal organisation project. The urban “disaster” is not due to a failure of architects and landscapists, but to a crisis of civilisation. The local and urban fabric cannot be recomposed and the landscapes preserved or reconstructed except through the realisation of a degrowth society.

3. The degrowth project and its urban and landscape implications

In order to outline what the town-planning, architecture and landscape could be in a degrowth society, the sense of the project must be defined and the urbanistic and landscape implications be seen. First of all, as a rallying cry degrowth insists on the need to abandon the plan of development for development’s sake, growth for growth’s sake. It is clearly not the caricaturing reverse of such a senseless project, which would consist in proposing degrowth for degrowth. In particular, degrowth is not negative growth. It is obvious that a simple slowing down of growth drives our societies into a vortex of unemployment, and the abandoning of those social welfare, cultural and environmental support programmes that guarantee a minimum level of quality of life. We can imagine the catastrophe that would be produced by a negative growth rate! The rallying call of degrowth has above all the aim of stressing the urgent need to abandon the senseless growth project as an end in itself. We should be speaking of a-growth (just as we speak of a-theism) rather than degrowth. To be precise, it is a question of the abandoning of a faith and a religion: that of economy.

The problem of cities and territory that have been destroyed and which must be entirely rethought has to be seen in the wider context of a world that has been torn apart by the loss of references and the crisis of the localised place. The urban disaster is accompanied by the rural disaster and the destruction of the landscape. However, in the viewpoint of the construction of a serene degrowth society, relocalisation is not simply economic: politics, culture, the sense of life must find their territorial anchorage. The keyword is autonomy.

What is certain is that today’s protection is not enough. Most of the time it is a question of lists of good intentions denouncing the symptoms without tackling the causes. The first article of the European Landscape Convention states as follows: “‘Landscape’ means an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors”. And Article 5 states: “an essential component of people’s surroundings,

an expression of the diversity of their shared cultural and natural heritage, and a foundation of their identity". The problem is that in reality all this does not result in the protection of such component.

The distinction made by UNESCO between different examples of cultural heritage, aimed at justifying the protection of some areas and the exclusion of others is perverse, since, as stated by Magnaghi, if we take the reasoning to its extreme consequences, the area recognised as being protected is so starting from a difficult procedure that has the goal of taking away some areas of the territory from development (achieving the remarkable level of 18% of the European territory). From a certain point of view, such areas undoubtedly represent the patrimony that today permits us to experiment new models of human settlement based on the quality of life, and thus renegotiate such an individual thinking of the territory. Nevertheless, such procedure was set up with the intention of defending those areas of the territory of natural and/or cultural value which were saved from the eco-catastrophic rules of development that govern the rest of the area, that is 82% of the European territory, in which most of the population happens to live (Magnaghi, 2014, p. 19). This same extension of the conversion/innovation binomial to the whole territory is proposed both in the European Landscape Convention (focussed on the lifestyle of the populations), and in the Italian Code of Cultural Heritage and Landscape (which proposes landscape projects concerning the regional territory in its entirety). It is easy to understand how fragile such protection is, especially in times of economic crisis. Furthermore, it is a question of containing the disaster by attacking the symptoms, while, on the contrary, degrowth sets out to fight the causes.

Relocalisation therefore has a central position in the actual utopia of serene degrowth and deviates almost immediately into political programmes. However a bad localism also exists. As Magnaghi stresses, it happens that local economic sectors carry out rapacious localism: "Conoscendo bene l'anima del luogo, utilizzano le risorse socio-territoriali fino all'esaurimento del patrimonio (umano, territoriale, ambientale), per infine delocalizzare la produzione lasciando dietro di sé il degrado" (Magnaghi,

2014, p. 20). Instead, the territory must first of all belong to those that take care of it. In this sense the theory of degrowth seems to renew the old formula of the ecologists: "think globally, act locally". To relocalise the economy and life is a *sine qua non* condition of sustainability. If the degrowth utopia implies a global thinking, today it can be realised only by speaking of territories. This is *riterritorializzare* (according to Alberto Magnaghi's expression, 2003), to rediscover a site and reinhabit it.

"Si deve cambiare radicalmente la visione del problema per passare dalla terra come contesto, spazio topografico, supporto tecnico omologato della città-fabbrica fordista, dalla 'macchina per abitare' lecorbusiana e dalla città digitale dell'informazione, al territorio come soggetto, prodotto umano vivente costituito di luoghi dotati di personalità, secondo la definizione che fu di Vidal de la Blache" (1908) (Magnaghi, 2014, p. 14).

The territory should be considered as an immense work of living art, produced and preserved in time by the populations inhabiting it. In this case it will be a common good, since it represents the essential environment for the material reproduction of human life and the establishment of socio-cultural relations and public life.

One can also dream of creating urban bioregions. The bioregion or ecoregion can be defined as a coherent spatial entity which conveys a geographical, social and historical reality. This could be rural or urban – a distinction that is unfortunately endangered. The urban bioregion, made up of a complex set of local territorial systems and having a strong ecological self-sustainability capacity, has the aim of reducing "external diseconomies" and energy consumption.

A reconversion will be necessary, along with a certain degree of deindustrialisation. The result of this deindustrialisation, achieved through sophisticated but eco-friendly equipment, would be the proof that it is possible to produce diversely. If even the self-produced part were

not total, it would be important nonetheless (Granstedt, 2007)¹.

4. Conclusion

While awaiting the necessary change in world “governance” and the coming to power of national or regional governments that have endorsed their objection to growth, numerous local players are embarking upon the fertile road of the degrowth utopia. While the local project has obvious limitations, we do not underestimate the possibility of an evolution in the policies in this field. The following are worthy of mention: the Network of the new municipality, the network of the slow cities, the post-carbon cities, the various experiences of the virtual cities. The movement of the transition towns born in Ireland (in Kinsale, near Cork) and which flourished in England (in Totnes), is perhaps the form of construction “from the bottom” that is closest to a degrowth society. These cities, according to network map, primarily aim at energy self-sufficiency in view of the end of fossil fuels and, more generally, at resilience; it meanings the capacity to face the challenges of the ecological crisis². Considering that the landscape is an integral part of the common good (the commons), coherently with a policy of degrowth the protection of the landscape must be part of the search for the common good.

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¹ At the end of his life André Gorz developed similar ideas (2007).

² The concept is borrowed from physics and scientific ecology and can be defined as the qualitative permanence of the network of interactions of an ecosystem or, more generally, as the capacity of a system to absorb disruption and reorganise itself essentially preserving its own functions, structure, identity and retroactions. See Hopkins, 2008.