Expert knowledge and today's territorial practices: Some introductory notes

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This doesn't seem to be a good time for professional experts. One of the main features of Italian public life in recent decades has been the contempt shown for those who possess and produce specialist knowledge. The role of expert knowledge and the very existence of the places where it is produced – public universities above all – has been cast in doubt in various ways. In this scenario, the creation in 2009 of the *Centro di Ricerca Interuniversitario per l'Analisi del Territorio* (CRIAT - Interuniversity Research Centre for Analyses of the Territory) by a group of urban planners, historians, geographers, archeologists, economists, and ecologists of the Universities of Bari, Salento, Foggia, Sassari and of the Polytechnic of Bari, and then the publication on this journal of some of the materials presented at the first public conference of the CRIAT (at the Polytechnic of Bari, December 2010), could be seen as futile initiatives. In particular, the intention to capture a leading role on the public scene – in accordance with the statement contained in the official agreement that rules the Centre – may seem to be aiming at the moon, taking account of the fact that this intended role is to be played by mobilizing the only capital possessed by the Centre: specialist knowledge distributed in various disciplines, almost all of which with a long, proud tradition.

Complaints can be made, also from this standpoint, about the characteristics and quality of Italian society and of its political elite. But the issue has much wider implications. It is worth mentioning these, even if in the cursory, gross forms implicit in a brief premise like this, because reflections on this topic have

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constituted one of the means of aggregation of the scholars who have brought the CRIAT into being, and can be found, to a more or less evident extent, in the articles in this issue of *Plurimondi*.

The habit of challenging the social role of expert knowledge has gone hand-in-hand with the end of an era, the collapse of the particular form of western society and State: the form emerged between the 19th and the 20th centuries in some European nations amid acute tensions and bloody conflicts, and then spread widely in the 'glorious' thirty years after the end of World War II. This form of the State responded to growing organized social demands overcoming the strictly law-centred liberal political command typical of the 19th century, namely opening its institutions to corporate interests. At the same time, it conserved some elements of distinction between the public and private sphere, safeguarding its character as a third party versus the contrasting social interests. In this way, it continued to produce, even in the new context, acts of *government* of social processes.

One of the ways in which public bodies succeeded in preserving this third party nature was by building an unheard-of link between political institutions and the different fields of expertise, that were, in their turn, undergoing a radical redefinition. As from the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, specialist fields were being defined that no longer had anything to do with the role, so typical of the intellectual classes in the liberal era, of drawing up, supporting and upholding national or social identities. Old and new knowledge was, by then, anchored to the statutes of proofs, to terrain analysis, to the document, the footnote, and to procedures and protocols that conformed to codified communication forms and places and could be controlled by 'peers'. Proceeding along this path, they took their places in supranational fields, and became 'universalized'. At the same time they were 'nationalised' through the issue by each State of certificates that attested the specific skills and equipment of the bearers of the new knowledge, through the public control of research funding, of the institutions where intellectual production and transmission occurred, of the teaching and final awarding of professional qualifications. Under the control of this

new sort of expertise were placed important segments of public decision-making processes, that, therefore, tended to have particular connotations: acts of public volition gained a meaning and legitimacy inasmuch as they were the result of long, rationally constructed sequences that connected the past to the future. It was the era of planning – of the economic plans that encompassed them all, of the plans related to all aspects of welfare, of the territorial and urban planning: a procedure according to which the intellectual product of one or more experts, private agents but in possession of skills certified by the State commissioning them, assumed the status of a public act, becoming a constituent part of political obligations. In this way the political class, erected by its very nature alongside sectorial interests, delegated a part of its decision-making functions, entrusting them to subjects set at a distance from the interplay of competing interests, and therefore able to introduce universalist elements among the particularisms that segmented the *agorà*. By anchoring these decisions to officially recognised expertise, it was possible to prevent the State from dissolving into the maze of social bodies and from succumbing to the tendency to transform the rule of law into an array of different sources of juridical rights. The political command, legitimised, on the one hand, through the democratic procedures of power delegations, on the other through the support of 'universalised' expertise, could run down the hierarchical cascade of public bodies and apparatuses to regulate human living spaces.

If, as I believe, this configuration ever existed – and it is evident that it has never and nowhere existed in a pure state – it belongs to a world we have lost forever. Some of the articles published in this issue, especially the one by Ivan Blecic and Arnaldo Cecchini, urban planners at the University of Sassari, follow the footprints of the huge reams of scientific literature about the transformations that occurred during the decades straddling the 20th and 21st centuries, in order to delineate the ongoing processes that are attacking landscapes and territories with a violence unprecedented in the history of humanity: as regards society, the impetuousness of the flows and their dematerialization, the delocalization interwoven into the

emergence of local identities that are sometimes exclusive and threatening, the flood of practices divorced from any form or planning and refractory to any form of regulation; from the standpoint of the apparatuses, the emergence of supra- and infra-State instances, the multiplication of juridical sources, the diffusion of public decision-making processes that call upon private citizens to play an officially recognized role, the decline of the political obligation and the weakening of the role of procedures, that is of that 'lifebelt of form' invoked by Natalino Irti (2000). In this scenario, the *agorà* seems to have taken on a new form, that of a 'democracy of moderns' open to a potentially wide participation by all those envisaged as included, while at the same time producing new exclusions and threatened by neither mediated nor regulated strength relations.

In these new 'material constitutions' that are currently being defined, the role of universalistic expertise is declining. The words of the specialists go more and more unheard in the noise of conflicting demands, pressures and clamour of the bearers of practices. The social capital of these specialists, that had taken on the value of a public function, is being challenged, on the one hand by dilettantes who aggressively brandish new communication tools; on the other, by the reinvention of local, ancestral knowledge, often of doubtful authenticity, invoked as a brake on the evils of globalization but in reality more useful to act 'on the people's expectancies and perceptions', according to the territorial marketing techniques described and discussed in this issue in the article by Gianluigi Guido, an academic specialist in this new discipline. What is more, important changes are underway in these same disciplinary fields and intellectual functions that might provide further impetus in this same direction. In the institutions where expert knowledge is built and transmitted, that in the last decades underwent violent massification processes and are now subjected to equally violent policies of retrenchment, significant intellectual sectors draw back vengefully and spitefully into the ivory towers of their specific specialties and academic rites. This phenomenon is paralleled by the tendency to confine the knowledge produced in public research institutions to functions subordinated to private

interests, and by the spread, especially in the social sciences, of weak conceptions of rationality that regard uncertainty and unpredictability as intrinsic characteristics of the new territories. A prey to irreducible levels of complexity, reality now seems to be best understood through images, evocations, sensations and illuminations, adopting a storytelling attitude that weakens the age-old distinction between creative prose and analytical prose.

The debate on these issues was the soil that gave origin to the CRIAT and continues to nourish it. The reader may learn from the various articles about the outcomes of specific analytical works that, in this issue of *Plurimondi*, begin to be published under the aegis of the Centre. They have been written by researchers who are conducting investigations along well defined, highly diversified specialist itineraries, that have often started many years ago and have already produced rich results, expressed in the particular style of analysis of their own discipline. What they do have in common is a general attitude that is both political and scientific. They think that when contending with the overwhelming, novel trends of today's society, it is extremely dangerous to do away with all forms of regulation: the *governance* needs to be *governed* in its turn, also by restoring a social and public role to specialist knowledge. At the same time they maintain that this regulation sustained by the expertise cannot be achieved by reproposing the structures, characteristics, concepts and languages of the disciplinary fields as they developed in a past irretrievably lost. We need new forms of expertise. But this struggle for novelty must not lead to the subordination of the expert knowledge to the new overbearing private and sectional demands, or to its transformation into a variety of storytelling and amateurish practices. We cannot do away with the *analysis*, that is to say with the knowledge procedures that the founders of CRIAT wanted inscribed in the name given to their Centre.

The debate and investigation on this concatenation of problems conducted in the last decades in the hard and soft sciences, often labelled as the 'reflexive turn', have been both lively and inconclusive. The CRIAT intends to act within this reflexive perspective through a risky step out: it does not intend to

circumscribe its activities within the reassuring confines of a specific discipline, but rather to produce pluridisciplinary area studies in the context of an area that is itself very difficult to define. In particular, it intends to call upon different specialist knowledge experts, with their different analytical and communication styles, to reevaluate the territory in the era of the 'end of territories' (Badie, 2010). The term territory, as pointed out in this issue in the article by Francesco Somaini, a specialist of the centuries between the late Middle Ages and the early modern times, is now more polysemic than ever. It refers, as stated in the title we have chosen for this issue of *Plurimondi*, to a multi-dimensional spatial object that is not *given* but must be *sought*. Conducted from within widely diverging scientific traditions, this research runs the risk of leading to mutual incommunicability; but, on the other hand, it may benefit from an experience of confrontation and contamination among the different disciplinary fields that has not been barren of fruitful results. First of all, the juxtaposition of the essay by Somaini with that of Blecic and Cecchini has a salutary disorienting effect: the ancien regime tangle of territories described by Somaini have a strangely familiar air with some of the characteristics of the postmodern age evoked in the article by the two planners from Sassari. The areal, juridically smooth, continuous, saturated, calculable territory that underpins various implicit assumptions that are still operative today in spatial analysis and institutional procedures, is obviously an extraordinary political and intellectual construct. Nevertheless, it is situated within a very precise space of time, that can be dated back to the decades of upheaval between the 18th and 19th centuries, and that has now been irretrievably left behind us.

In some cases it is the very specialist foundations of the fields that have been radically challenged when faced with the task of explaining the complexity of our contemporary human spaces. The recent transformations of landscape archeology reported in this issue by an expert on the Middle Ages, Pasquale Favia, and the landscape ecology described in the work by Pasimeni, De Marco, Petrosillo, Aretano, Semeraro, Zaccarelli and Zurlini, converge toward the construction of a 'holistic and

transdisciplinary science'. On one hand archeology is opening its humanistic foundations not only to material culture, but also to the natural constraints within which civilisations emerged. On the other, landscapes are configured as a 'panarchy of nested jurisdictional social-ecological landscapes' (Pasimeni *et al.*): people, cultures, conflicts, influenced by nature, retroact on a nature that therefore incorporates an irreversible time, and that therefore is not a stationary scenario but, on the contrary, an *actor*. Once 'social-ecological landscapes' are seen as 'whole co-evolving and historically interdependent systems of humans-in-nature', it becomes possible 'to move beyond the traditional separation of social and ecological component' (*ibidem*): historians and naturalists can try to create a dialogue and to build common analytical spaces.

And, of course, they can lean out toward the world of *planners*, that is toward the specialist discipline that in recent decades has practised the 'reflexive turn' in what I dare to call its most radical forms. Once spaces are no longer seen by the town planner as more or less satisfactory and efficient containers of society, but rather as an intrinsic part of the social dimension (Roncayolo, 1996), all the languages and concepts of the humanities and social sciences become analytical resources and, potentially, means for action. The case studies published in this issue – the work by Sechi, Borri, De Lucia, Skilters on Lithuania, which makes ample reference to the tools of microeconomics and the cognitive sciences; the one by Tedesco and Copeta on the port and maritime areas of Bari, that is the fruit of collaboration between a town planner and a geographer; the work by the town planner Paola Briata on 'social mixing policies', conducted from the perspective of urban microsociology – are all significant examples of the voraciously inclusive attitude towards other disciplines of current-day town planning research. Dealing with the classic theme of trust as a pre-condition for development, Sechi, Borri, De Lucia and Skilters apply to the regional scale a concept of territorial identity that is neither nebulous nor evocative, but can be adopted as an analytical tool also at the urban scale employed by the authoresses of the other two works. Obviously, on the close-up scale, building, acting on and

interpreting the territorial identity are tasks beset by determinations and problems. In the case of Bari, the innovative attitude that regards the tensions and conflicts triggered by interventions that affect urban spaces not as limits or obstacles to be overcome, but as an essential contribution to efficacious planning, runs up against the problem of the complex 'logics of collective action' (Olson, 1965). The move onward to organization and action is not at all automatic for individuals and groups affected by spatial manipulation: not all the actors succeed in making themselves heard in the interplay of vertical and horizontal communication typical of governance, nor are the loudest voices necessarily those of the largest or most strongly affected sectors. In the work by Paola Briata, the 'social mixing approach' that dominates 'debates on planning in multi-ethnic contexts' is challenged on the basis of empirical work on some Italian urban situations, where there is no presence of the ' 'pathological' forms of concentration' found in other nations, that make 'ethnic neighbourhoods' appear as a 'world apart'. Briata challenges the widespread and 'politically correct' positions that consist in 'breaking up problematic groups' concentration through social engineering', assigning to the public hand a role 'more focused on managing the coexistence of people with different (and not only ethnic) backgrounds, potentially but not necessarily in conflict'. While it may be that local identities are not a gage of salvation from globalisation, as is sometimes imagined even in the academic town planning literature, nor are they necessarily 'meurtrières', as in the famous book by Amin Maalouf (Maalouf, 1998).

The expert reader will be able to judge the proposal made by Paola Briata better than myself. What I would like to stress at the end of this introduction is the pathway followed by the authoress to reach her conclusion, since it seems to me a good illustration of the sense of this monographic issue of *Plurimondi* and also of the activities undertaken by the CRIAT. Briata states that 'social mixing policies ... may be seen not as one of the possible answers to concentration, but as an embedded answer to descriptions based on concentration'. Individuating the 'embedded answers', the implicit assumptions that lead to foregone conclusions

before going on to verify them analytically, is traditionally numbered among the essential tasks of intellectual workers. But it is a fundamental undertaking above all for those researchers who aspire to rediscovering their social role in a world in tumult. Briata suspects that 'as researchers, we try to frame problems in a way that cannot lead to existing tools and "solutions". But, in this way, we do not produce "usable knowledge" '. The ability to produce a knowledge that is usable not because it is subordinate to any given interests, but because it can be employed to govern them, is a central issue for those, perhaps influenced by the 'ethical problems' mentioned by Gianluigi Guido in his article, who do not sell territories to people not belonging there, but rather act on those territories in order to improve the lot of the people that habitually frequent those spaces. On these premises it is possible to imagine, as suggested by Blecic and Cecchini, a 'role of the town and regional planner … wrestling in the midst of the city's local economy, the crisis of the nation-states, the globalisation and the virtual'; a role that 'cannot have points of reference in the past, or in the minimalism of the "plan-as-you-go" school, nor in the megalomania of the demiurgic, old-school comprehensive planning'.

In this sense Blecic and Cecchini advance five hypotheses about the attitude of the ideal planner. The reader could check whether they can be found within experiences that have come face-to-face with the crude, concrete real territories. One of these experiences is presented in the *Observatories* section of this issue of *Plurimondi;* that is the thoughts and actions of a professional planner who is temporarily on loan to territorial governance policies, namely Angela Barbanente, Councillor in this sector for the Apulia Region. The dialogue between Carla Tedesco and Angela Barbanente published at the end of this monographic issue is focused on a specific point that is absolutely central and strategic to modern-day territorial analysis and governance: the interplay between the different levels of regulation that produces complexity in the very institutions that have traditionally been deputed to reduce the complexity of human spaces. The language of the two authoresses is deliberately guarded, and any palingenic perspective is smoothed by accurate analysis. The

prospects appear to be uncertain but not inexistent, and demand the introduction of elements of procedural rationality into governance practices.
In this interview, in the same way as in the other essays published in this issue, 'lifebelt of form' and 'lifebelt of analysis' seem to be convergent tools that may help to build possible good territories.

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