

ERNESTO MAZZETTI

THINKING ABOUT GEOGRAPHY AS A CULTURAL CROSS ROAD

Abstract - The article summarizes the opening speech given by Professor Mazzetti on November the 21st 2013 at the seat of the Italian Geographical Society, on the occasion of the award of the Honorary Membership. Full professor of Economic and Political Geography at the University of Naples *Federico II*, Professor Mazzetti has been member of the Executive Board of the geographical Society for thirty years and Vice president for the last eight years. In his opening speech the author dwelled on three main topics: 1) the cultural background of his geographical education, with particular reference to the experience of the “school” issued from the magazine review *Nord e Sud*; 2) the persisting problem of the development gap between northern and southern Italy, mainly manifested today in the “urban issue”; 3) worldwide connections between urban geography and geopolitics.

The Italian Geographical Society awarded Honorary Membership to Professor Ernesto Mazzetti, full professor of Economic and Political Geography at the University of Naples *Federico II*. Professor Mazzetti has been member of the Executive Board of the Geographical Society for thirty years and ~~its~~ Vice-President for the last eight years. On the occasion of the award of the Honorary Membership on November the 21st 2013, Professor Mazzetti gave the opening speech entitled “*Thinking about Geography as a cultural cross road*” at the seat of the society in Rome, Villa Celimontana. The following text summarizes its contents, touching upon three main issues: 1) the cultural background of the author’s education; 2) the studies concerning the development gap between northern and southern Italy; 3) remarks about the connection between urban geography and geopolitics.

1) First of all, the author reminded of the cultural experience with the review *Nord e Sud*, founded in 1954 by one of his teachers, Professor Francesco Compagna. The review contributed to the rise of a “school” of young intellectuals from southern Italy, some of whom pursued an academic career and committed themselves to the study of human geography.

Compagna and his students asked themselves if a discipline has to reach its goals by separating its methods and areas of research from the ones of any other discipline or if it is possible to use the methodological approach and the results belonging to a different scientific branch. Compagna's education, as for Mazzetti and others, was permeated by historicism. French scholars, such as Pierre George and Maurice Le Lannou deeply influenced their geographical education. According to their cultural background, they believed there is no reason geography should not use, when needed, results deriving from other disciplines to solve specific problems. This is due to the fact that the study of humankind and its territory – which is the main subject of geographical research – is studied by other subjects too. They quoted the works of great historians, such as Lucien Febvre and Fernand Braudel (or Rosario Romeo among the Italians). They believed those works were not only rich in elements which are fundamental to understand the evolution of the relationship between mankind and the territories of Europe and of the Mediterranean basin, but also in significant suggestions of methods that human geography scholars cannot disregard. The works of other French geographers, such as Jean-François Gravier, Jean Labasse and Michel Phlipponneau offered them some ideas, which oriented their works more and more towards the field of the so-called active geography, which is based on the observation of reality to suggest some corrective actions for territorial planning and social conditions.

Ernesto Mazzetti says that even journalistic research may be considered a good example of geographical information, when carried on with intelligence and strictly following the figures – concerning near and far urban landscapes, countries, regions, or environmental surroundings, political scenarios and social conflicts. It could be a good source or a stimulating confirmation to a scholar investigating the same object of study – even though with different tools of scientific analysis.

A widely accepted source of information for an historical reconstruction of environment and population is the “journalism of the past”, characterized by travel writing. Literature in general may also be useful for in-depth analysis carried out in a scientific manner, when it produces works offering acute and relevant awareness of places and communities. Even the artistic heritage composed of paintings illustrating urban and rural landscapes may be useful to rebuild environmental surroundings, urban spaces, societies and the transformation of territories. The geographer Gaetano Ferro – who has been one of the past Presidents of the Geographical Society – believed that landscape painting is a cultural acquisition that can “rebuild the historical importance of a geographical object”.

Mazzetti dealt with such topics in several papers. He stresses though the importance of verifying the quality of information in newspaper articles and in literary works. Images shall also be analysed rigorously: whether they are artistic reproductions from the past or photos and films that have been accumulated from the 20th century. In 1973 the geographer Yves Lacoste wrote that academic

geography is no longer the only type of geography. Nowadays there is also a geography of television, cinema, posters and newspapers. It is a fragmented geography, mixed with everything shown in the media, but geography nonetheless. Through repetition and an endless variety of images and messages, it shows some representation of the present world.

2) The type of research mainly carried out by Professor Mazzetti belongs to the field known in Italy as “meridionalistico” (southern). Again, Mazzetti draws inspiration from the work of Francesco Compagna, who affirmed that a systematic study of the “southern issue” was for him a moral and political commitment. He also believed geography was not only a useful academic subject, but also fundamental to find solutions to the problems causing the gap between northern and southern Italy.

Keynesian economists – especially Professor Pasquale Saraceno, who was a renowned government advisor between the 1960s and the 1980s - considered an economic policy that would promote industrialization necessary for southern regions. Compagna had studied the transformation of the southern society from rural into urban. He believed that the development of southern Italy’s regions needed not only the promotion of industry, but also some adequate territorial policies to enrich the larger cities with new directional, financial and cultural functions. That would turn them into metropolises, along the same lines as the most flourishing and advanced cities of Europe.

Unfortunately, the employment rate and the situation of economic activities – especially over the past decades – show the failure of the policies hoped for by both Saraceno and Compagna. Almost every big factory in southern Italy, whose capital belonged to the State, was abandoned. That determined the collapse of many related activities. Without the support of industrial activities, the economy of the larger cities in the South has become more and more based on bureaucracy and trade. Sometimes parasitic, as long as it needs State financial interventions. The crisis of local financial and credit activities deprived the main cities – Naples, Palermo and Bari – of qualified urban functions. The working class shrank and its social role decreased in every metropolitan area in the South. Those circumstances entailed some negative cultural changes.

In his most recent works, Ernesto Mazzetti analysed the transformation of the Italian society and its territory and economics of the past decades. He affirmed that if a “southern issue” – relevant at national and at European level – still exists today, that issue shall be considered mainly as an urban matter, with relevant cultural and geopolitical aspects. If twenty years ago the set of problems causing the territorial dualism was limited to the very geoeconomical boundaries, today the significant aspects of the “southern issue” make it a geopolitical problem with a great impact on a national scale. The reason is that a large contingent in the northern regions refuses to consider the permanence of imbalances between North and South as a problem of the whole country. They believe the southern

problem is only a problem for “southerners”, and not for the entire country. Some political forces welcomed that opinion. The same public believes that, since the southern regions consume more than what they produce and prove to be unable to boost their growth alone, they are a “ball and chain” slowing down the economic growth of the whole country. This is also due to the fact that organized crime – especially in Campania, Calabria, Apulia and Sicily– is a reality hard to eliminate.

3) In the second half of the 20th century the economic changes brought to an accentuation of the gap between the very different halves of the World – one characterized by a growing abundance set aside for a minority of human beings, the other characterized by a persistent disadvantage of a majority of people who cannot provide for their basic needs. At the same time, the urban dynamic led to very different scenarios. The similarities in the categories of buildings between different urban areas in the North and South of the world cannot and shall not distract from the substantial diversity of the urban landscapes – both materially and existentially – in each hemisphere.

On one side, there is a “megapolization”, i.e. the diffusion of metropolitan values and functions on large territories, within which positive technological innovation flows and people enjoy satisfactory living conditions, thanks to a dynamic modern economy in the tertiary.

On the other side, there is a demographic overgrowth of the metropolises in the third world. Urban growth here is pathological. In Africa, Asia and Latin America it appears often like an urban cancer. In the countries affected by economic underdevelopment and political disorder, the situation is uncontrolled, unlike the developed world, where urban overgrowth has been put under control and has often been turned into an opportunity of economic progress and cultural promotion. This is true not only for those living in urban areas, but also for the regions, or even for the States. On the contrary, the growing disquiet of those living in the pathological urban concentrations in the developing countries has proved to be a fertile environment for dictatorships and religious fundamentalisms, which in turn foster political terrorism.

Some geopolitical scenarios have taken shape behind a broader economic scenario, which appears promising for the rulers and the entrepreneurs of the West and of the northern hemisphere in general. They moved from being disturbing to being dramatic. They are also the key to understand the tragic attack to the Twin Towers in New York on-September 2001.

An urban geography issue is here extended to Geopolitical and International Policy issues. Mistakes have been made on the way to cooperation, for which many opulent countries, the selfishness and the strategic interests of great powers are to be held accountable. Nevertheless, the ruling classes of the countries in need are in most cases the first culprits. The results of more effective measures worldwide would reduce the current disadvantages only in the long term. In the meanwhile, the demographic

growth in depressed regions will inevitably continue to encourage migratory movements towards the most flourishing countries.

In his opening speech Mazzetti concluded that social science scholars – no less than planners with governmental authority – can and must analyse every issue connected to a need, that is as simple to describe, as it is hard to respond to: to elaborate and implement choices aiming at reaching a balance between mankind and territory. Not only in one hemisphere, but also worldwide.

It is a hard balance to get right and it will remain so until cultural imbalances – before uneven technological and economic development – will exist. It will remain so especially until there will be different ways to conceive of civilization.

Western culture has learnt the lesson of the Age of Enlightenment. Our culture leads us to respect the different ways to see civilization. Seven billion people today inhabit the world. They will be ten billion in a few decades. It is about time we asked ourselves if these billions of people will be able and willing to share this lesson of respect and tolerance.

Just like philosophy, geography intends to find answers to the main problems of human life and death. Nonetheless, when dealing with new questions, geography should be more and more considered as a cultural crossroad. Geographers have to ask themselves if there is an equivalence between modernization and civilization, or if it is right to assume that higher technological levels and better economic conditions do not always correspond to political institutions guaranteeing freedom and higher education. Geopolitical scholars try to understand if there is only one culture and one civilization or if it would be fairer to accept a plurality of civilizations and cultures. Therefore, even though they risk to be wrong, they need to continuously deal with the intricate crossing of general opinions and specific situations, utopias, phobias and concerns that compel to permanent updates of the geopolitical scenarios worldwide, which are always connected to geoeconomic, environmental and demographic ones, nationally and continentally.

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