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Ravello

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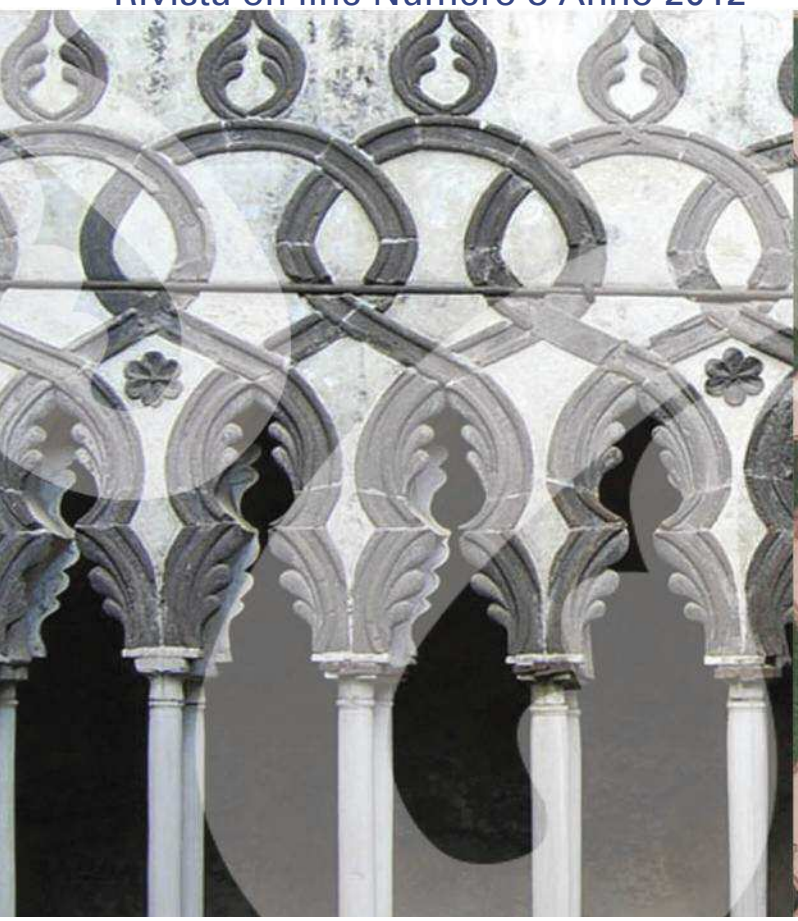

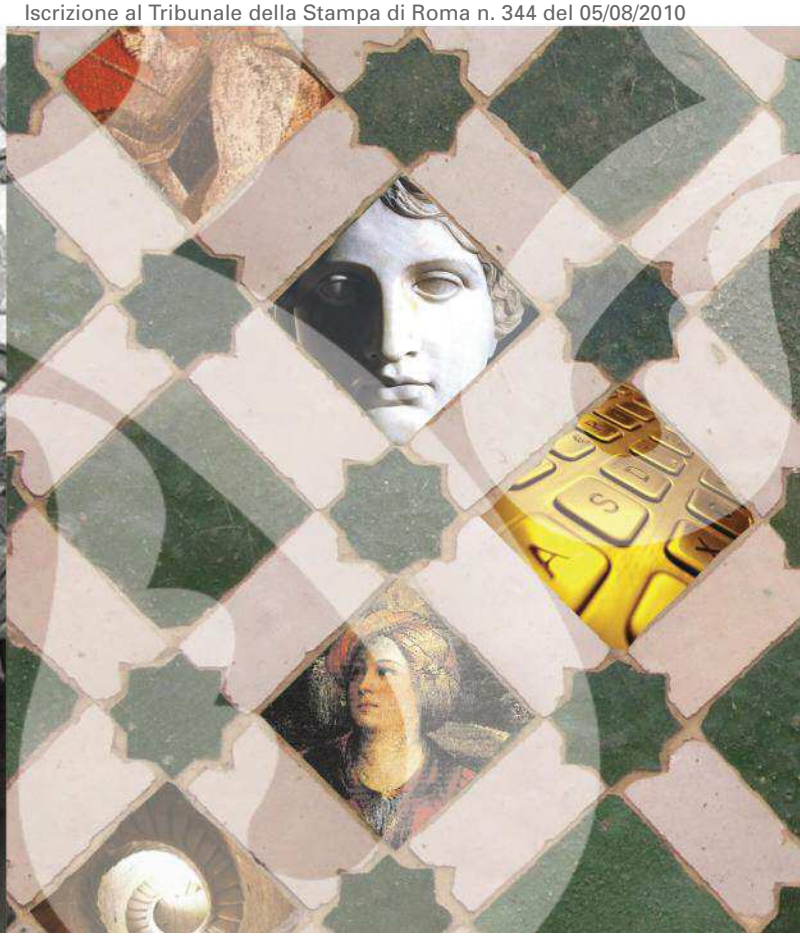

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Ravello

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Luiz Oosterbeek

Looking at a global disruption in three steps, plus one to overcome it

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Memory

First difficulty: current human societies are re-shaping theirs pasts, and this generates a sense of loss (even when it may experience optimism, as in the southern hemisphere).

An impressive advancement of science and technology, for the last one hundred years, based on a growing specialisation of knowledge, enabled an ever growing analytical capacity of humans, as a species. Beyond social and other differences, it is important to recognise this fact, as a consequence of a long evolution starting millions of years ago, when our genes started to be combined choosing a very specific path: to secure their survival and descent not by having many children but by enlarging the length of their maturation, i.e., by enlarging life before adulthood and the duration of their dependence from their parents. This choice to remain as a juvenile learner, so-called neoteny, already present at a minor scale in other primates, made us humans: culture, i.e., learned behaviour, became our way of being natural.

Fig. 1 Memory. Mação. Protohistoric exacavation at Zimbreira.

This process accentuated the diversity of individual members of our species. Whereas uterine learning is mainly conditioned by mothers (even if external features, such as temperature or sounds also play their role), once humans are born they become, mainly, socio-environmental subjects. Combining genetic inheritance and natural and social environmental constraints, humans tend to become increasingly a species made of unique individuals. Diversity became a major trait of our adaptation strategies, alongside social cohesion. Diversity is, hence, a major genetically planned advantage: we are different, but we are socially connected and thus we are able to attend, simultaneously, to many different needs, without each of us needing to know of all the other challenges. The proportion between socially shared knowledge and individual specialisation is a relevant way to assess social complexity. Indeed, we are not only part of a system, we are a systemic species ourselves. Becoming released from basic survival knowledge and competences (feeding, dwelling, moving, breeding) one gets more time for specialised competences; but the fewer basic competences we master the more we become dependent upon others, and the

weaker we are as isolated individuals. Less specialised societies tend to have a lesser flexibility for survival when facing sudden major contextual changes (natural hazards, invasions from other humans, etc.), whereas very specialised societies tend to have a lesser cohesion but to be more plural and thus more flexible, improving on their capability to survive if their human or technological networks are broken.

Human learning process, lasting for at least two decades but often for the whole life, improves diversity even among those sharing a same "cultural environment". Such diversity conditions the understanding of the territory and of the social context, and it enables different ways to perceive the present and to foresee the future. This differentiation is a major selective advantage of our species, but it is also a focus of divergence and conflict among humans.

In this process of identity and diversity building, the place of each individual, and of each ethnic or social group, within the human relations complex, requires the definition of boundaries between those groups or networks of cultural affinity. Various mechanisms, namely kinship, contribute for this process, but memory plays a core role, since it consolidates learned knowledge and is linked to space-time markers that condition it (associations between objects and places, mnemonics and other schemes using various senses).

Memory organisation, in turn, is partially shared. Memory markers may be individual (e.g. the memory of when I'm writing this text), of restricted awareness (the light and atmosphere at the place where I met my wife for the first time, for instance) or widely shared (a battle, the building of a cathedral or a terrorist attack). The more shared each of theses markers are, the less precise they become, and "cultural boundaries" are indeed quite flexible, since they result from a shared understanding of a "common frontier" of those who agree on what they are and which are their memory markers (i.e., their heritage).

In fact, each one is several individuals at once: himself, his family, his friends' group, his colleagues,… one may be at the same time Portuguese, and European, and student, and writer, and… an endless series of strictly cultural identities.

Without memory there is no knowledge progress, but memory is also the foundation for cultural divides and building segregation. Broken, disarticulated, conflictive memories, generate disruptions. Do we all have, today, the same memory of the 20th century?

Culture

Second difficulty: participatory society is a growing reality, but so is alienation and oblivion.

Being cultural means being capable of living within such systemic network, which implies a certain degree of understanding of basic positional notions: space (where am I?), time (when did something happen?) and, relating both, causality (the cause of something precedes it in time and is spatially related to it). Regardless of which notion we have (irreversible or circular time, continuous or hierarchic time, rational or magic causality), society is able to move forward in a conscious similar path if those notions are widely spread. If there are contradictions in them, then society will face major difficulties. This is, I believe, one of our current contradictions: basic notions are not understood in a similar manner across different cultures, not to mention different social strata.

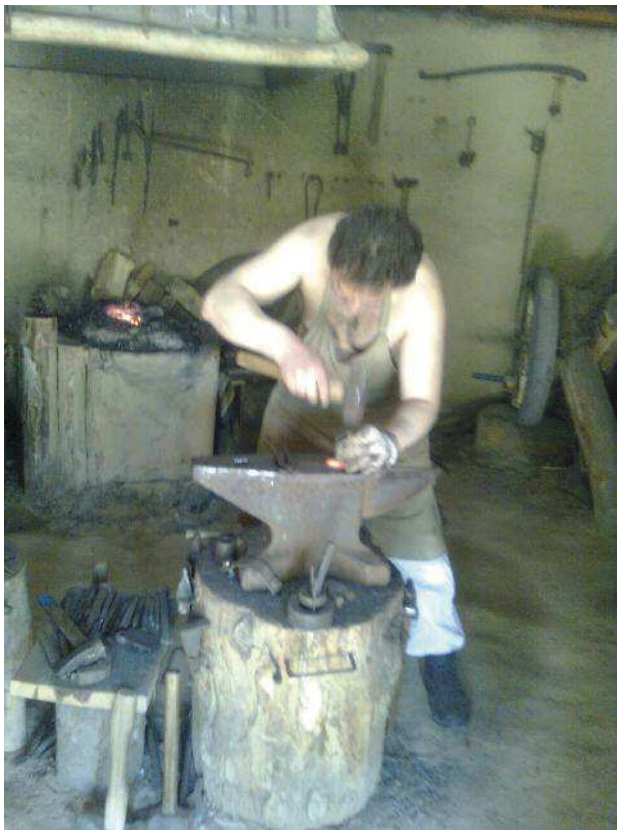

Fig. 2 Culture. Kiev. Cossac smith.

At the onset of our consciousness, we may only perceive space. It is by observing space transformations that we infer time (LEVI & SEGAUD 1983): this is why traditional societies have a notion of cyclic time, since it is hard to imagine what cannot be perceived, and we don't live long enough to perceive irreversibility, except that of our own lives. Our identities are based on timeless myths (Henry the Navigator, Charlemagne, philosophers from ancient Greece, the cave bear or the rain deer), that we believe have founded our current lineages and thus provide us with self-estime while diminishing our own dimension (except for short episodes, living human cultures always feel themselves minor, when compared to their mythical past).

Space is the scenario where our aptitudes are performed, as Kant said. In the space we establish relations and perform actions, meant to satisfy our (physiological and cultural) needs. Growing social complexity means growing needs, growing memories, growing learned knowledge, growing relations and actions, growing energy consumption. Hence, culture (the needs) binds together economy (the actions), society (the relations) and environment (energy). The socio-economic relations are, within a similar environment

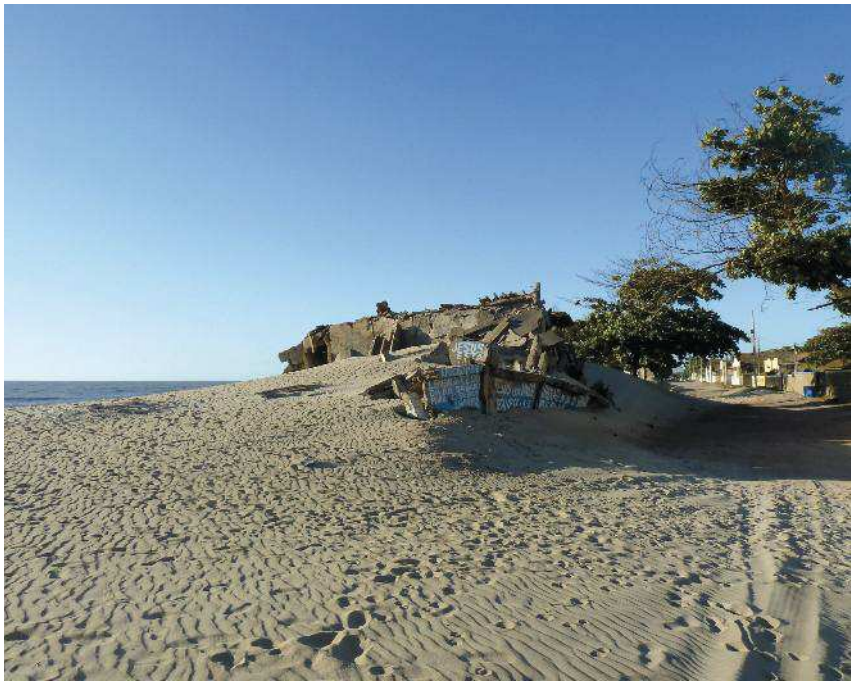

Fig. 3 Territory. Dunes destroy human construction in the Brazilian shore.

(in the past as today) basically guided by the same basic needs, but they are performed through unique cultural ways. The quantity of energy that our bodies need, or the needs for dwelling, transporting or storing are very similar across the planet, by humans act on them in different ways, based on their memories, beliefs and technical knowledge, i.e., based on their cultures. Cultural knowledge of the basic notions of space, time and causality is obtained through practising: when the child of a Palaeolithic hunter learns how to prepare an arrow, he is learning the location of different raw materials (space), the effort required to assemble them (time) and the relation of that process with the hunting process as well (causality). Yet, when we digitalise our relations, finding ready made "everything", from clothes to food, we experience what Charlie Chaplin illustrated in "Modern Times": alienation.
Participation is crucial for the future of humans, but the participation based on alienated people generates unrational behaviour and generates disruptions. Is the "Arab spring" a gentle path to social equity, economic growth, environmental preservation and enhancement of cultural diversity?

Territory
Third difficulty: re-shaping global economy and finances for economic growth and social equity pays a heavy tribute to territorial resources that are unevenly distributed.
Humans have needs and design logistical strategies to relate them with resources, i.e., with material and also intangible realities that are required to satisfy those needs. Material resources

(natural, but also human) are dispersed in the territories, and may be of potential interest for different groups, hence generating competition, tension and disruptions. In order to have a systemic balance, no group may improve or degrade too much its needs/resources ratio.

The territory is a system of resources, many of which non renewable, that requires an integrated management that protects them and secures an even access to different human groups, which implies the articulation of different and often contradictory perspectives, interests and agendas. This is because human groups are, themselves, part of the territory, i.e., they are resources for other groups, each perceiving the territory differently. These differences of perspective over the territory is what we may call "landscapes". There is just one territory, but each individual and each human group perceives it in a different way, according to its previous knowledge, needs or other interests, i.e., according to its culture. Hence, despite the fact that we may today monitor in a very rigorous way most territorial variables (MIRANDA & MESEGUER et al. 1986), we face the difficulty of mastering the perceived lansdscapes within the territory, which may be social or political, but often imply a deeper dimension. When one thinks of major long lasting conflicts, as in the Near East or in Cashmere, it is this cultural understanding of the territory, this tension between perceived landscapes, that is also in stake. Human history is full of examples of this dimension from the debate on the existence of soul among Amerindians in Modernity to the fundamentalist destruction of Bamyan Buddhas: human groups face a difficulty in recognising the wider frontiers of their own species, since their landscapes are focused on their need to capture resources, and the denial of the full human nature of competitors (labelled "foreigners", "inferior", "lazy", "arrogants", or something else) is a requirement to turn them into proper resources as well.

The scientific, rational, perspective on the "humanity" is a recent and still minority understanding, often fought in surprising ways, as when a paternalist concept of the "right to be different" justifies the "right" to racism, xenophobia or women torture in non-European societies. Humanity isn't, therefore, present in all "landscapes". It is certainly not in the landscape of religious fundamentalists, but it is also absent in the "political correct" understanding of a unique understanding of (western) democracy, often mixed with a strong dose of hypocrisy of "real politics". This has vast implication, since it means that

the current global crisis cannot be perceived in the same way by all humans, for social reasons (some experience decay, but many are escaping poverty for the first time), economic reasons (the international monetary system is striving for a new "Bretton Woods" but the growth of non-formal economy benefits from it), environmental reasons (water shortage is a growing global problem, but millions are acceding to "acceptable" water since long time ago) and, mainly, for cultural reasons that shape all the previous understandings (some understand the globalisation process and try to use it or refrain it, while the majority simply doesn't understand it, being captured in "landscapes" governed by a cyclic notion of time, a discontinuous perception of space, an ethnocentric approach to humankind and a magic vision of causality.
Resources are unevenly distributed, and human groups perceive them differently, but most of them without a proper integrated scope. Any strategy within a common system requires a differentiation of tasks. Once we all share the same global territory now, is it possible to set the same agenda anti-crisis for all: "import less and export more"?

A cultural way out

Within a global system, disruptions will not be overcome without an integrated set of strategies, which must be rooted in diverse but shared memories and based in a single common territory but encompassing the various cultural understandings of it. Non shared memories generate xenophobia, alienated people within participatory dynamics generate prejudice, while the failure to understand that humans look for resources in perceived landscapes (and not in "the territory") generate global crisis.
Sustainable development, ensuring the durability of resources (MICARELLI 2002), requires an integrated approach that focuses on human capital building, on the didactics of dilemmas and contradiction and on looking at new governance solutions. The three-bottom-line of sustainable development must not be read as a compound of different "things", but as an analytical approach to a single systemic reality. Otherwise, the dominant and false understanding of it will continue prevailing, looking at economics as the "bad, polluting, part", society as requiring a sort of purgatory (humans being seen as good but sinners) and environment as the "good, suffering, part".

A systemic approach understands that humans, as part of the environment, organise themselves (society) in order to design strategies to satisfying their needs (economy), and do so in specific ways regulated by their techniques and traditions (culture). It is crucial, hence, to re-integrate the three dimensions of sustainability with culture (BATISTA 2010; FARO & POUSA et al. 2005).
It is possible to build such an approach. Several attempts to do it in various regions, and namely within the European Union, have improved a lot in terms of governance. Yet, it is clear that Europe faces today a major conflict between social, economic and environmental interests, all taken in a separate way.

When all seems to be changing, the need exists to accept that the near future will not only be different from the present, but to a large extent remains unforeseeable. Some certainties we may have, though: there will be different human groups, with different cultural traditions and understandings; the basis of their economic strategies will be the territory; they will have to reorganise themselves in that territory. How they will do it may vary, but a basic territorial organisation will be crucial. Hence, the immediate task must be to consolidate territorial matrices, rooted in local cultural memories (that are generated by technological and other knowledge). These matrices will prove to be resilient, since unlike other more complex social structures, are of use to any more complex governance model. As for the governance itself, bringing together local authorities (proximity and legitimacy), universities and schools (knowledge and innovation), NGOs (flexibility) and private companies (entrepreneurship), is a resilient cradle for different governance solutions. After a first experience at a smaller scale in Mação (Portugal), this process is being implemented in several territories, in Europe and Southern America, lead by the Instituto Terra e Memória, the Instituto Politécnico de Tomar (Portugal) and the Instituto Bio-Atlântica (Brazil), under the label "Integrated Landscape Management" (OOSTERBEEK & SCHEUNEMANN 2010; SCHEUNEMANN & CARVALHO et al. 2010). Culture finds, within it, a new role, out of the ghetto where it was put for the last decades, and back into a close relation with society and economics.

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