



The Vision of the City According to Silvano D'Alto: Conceiving Each Element of the System not Only as a Part of the Whole, but Also as an Element that Contains the Whole

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ABSTRACT

Silvano D'Alto (1938-2020), docente di Sociologia dell'ambiente presso l'Univ. di Pisa e architetto, ha approfondito i temi della formazione del territorio e del senso che accompagna la dinamica storica e sociale degli insediamenti. Su questi temi ha pubblicato: *Città dei barrios*, 1998, *La savana spazio e tempo*, 1984, *La città nascosta*, 1989, *Appartenere alla città*, 1995, *L'obsolescenza delle forme spaziali*, in *Città e anticittà* (con A. Palazzolo e AA.VV., 1969), *La partecipazione tradita* (con G. Elia R. Faenza, 1977) e altri saggi e articoli specifici.



The Vision of the City According to Silvano D'Alto: Conceiving Each Element of the System not Only as a Part of the Whole, but Also as an Element that Contains the Whole

The journey made together with prof. Silvano D'Alto in fifteen years of studies and research, first as his student of Sociology, later as his colleague, has allowed me to deal with the study of urban phenomena from the perspective of the city conceived as a whole; that is, as ONE non-space, no longer confined within the Cartesian two-dimensional flatness, but whose meaning can be extended to becoming a "living space". D'Alto, architect as well as professor of Sociology of the Environment at the University of Pisa, has taught generations of students, planting in them the seed of passion for exploring the phenomenon of territory formation, and the sense that accompanies the historical and social dynamics of urban settlements. Dedicating years of research to the mechanisms that underlie the construction of the city, D'Alto taught his students to observe the form that human life takes in certain circumstances - both spacial and temporal - considering every urbanistic element as rich in meaning. Such meaning would enable one to understand the development of urban places, such as: squares, markets, theaters, banks, but also entire cities, suburbs, or former countryside villages, now turned into cities. Thus D'Alto's book *Paesaggio e società* (2003) originated, in which a sociological glimpse was taken at the evolving of the English countryside. By so doing, sociology became a form of architecture, understood as a product of a co-evolutionary vision between man and the environment. This vision is essential to understand the birth of the city in the British context, as portrayed in the essay "The Spirit of the Place", as well as to investigate those complex processes that concern the transformation of the territory and the energy of individuals in relation to the whole, to the ecosystem.

His research in England allowed D'Alto to investigate the genesis and the development of utopian socialism from an eschatological perspective, in a study he introduced on "Port Sunlight - an English Industrial Village" (1999), conducted together with Edward Hubbard, Michael Shippobottom, and Maximilian Elia. In this study, the notion of environment becomes a holistic, complex concept, in which all parts of the whole (ecosystem/s) cooperate to form the global, the unity. Referring to the space-time structure of the settlements, D'Alto investigates the phenomenon in a systemic relationship, and writes:

«Each part is connected to the whole, depends on it, and influences it (feed back, the effect reacts on the cause). Each element of the whole must be conceived not only as having a relationship with the whole, but as itself a whole because it is the part that contains the whole».

[...] «Perspective is also full of meaning in the world of anthropic systems and their bio-physical limits, that is, of the social and its 'sustainable' development and expresses a need to embrace wholeness: both in the ecosystemic reality and in the study of this reality¹ Therefore, environment is a complex concept with a plurality of meanings» («Un habitat coevolutivo ed equilibrato: ovvero costruire l'unità del rapporto sistema-ambiente», translated «A co-evolutionary and balanced habitat: that is, building the unity of the system-environment relationship», Univ. of Pisa, Department of Political and Social Sciences; *my translation*).

In this context, the urban phenomena that generate Entropia-disordine (entropy-disorder,) take on

¹ Through multidisciplinary, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity. Multidisciplinary, understood as the «sum of the contributions of the various disciplines without any synthesis or integration operation being performed; the cooperation between the various disciplines involved is added to the concept of multidisciplinary and the contribution that comes from each of them reinforces the knowledge of the others». Interdisciplinarity «involves the interaction of two or more disciplines to tackle the study of a problem». In transdisciplinarity, integration and cooperation between the various disciplines is at the highest level and this can lead to the overcoming of epistemological barriers and the birth of new disciplines (Pulselli *et al.*, 2007, p. 102).

importance. Today, the urban-territorial condition enhances the entropy-disorder dimension and denies the entropy-order one. The “wasted lives” mentioned by Bauman (2005) represent the waste of an entropic process that has been accelerating too fast on Earth, of a turbulent process, prone to continuous developments of chaos.

Human beings, as they appear degraded, exploited, marginalized, and excluded, also fall into this entropic process.

The outcast, or the excluded one - namely the one who does not work -, is just as important for the hyperactive urban machine as the productive man, since, as a condition of its functioning, the energy machine requires to dissipate a part of the energy, that is, to make this part “waste” of the system². It is precisely in this same direction that we find the Micheluccian spirit of «order and disorder» which has always interested D’Alto, and permeated his work. In fact, already in 1984, Michelucci wrote: «a dual world that should not surprise us because in its own way this is the very dynamic of life and of the city, in an incessant movement»³.

The nature of a researcher joins that of a traveler, and D’Alto visits countless cities in the world, lingering for a long time in South America. For eight years, he devoted himself to the study of the city of Caracas and the “barrios” of Venezuela, from which one of his most exciting books, *La città dei barrios* (D’Alto, 1998), came out.

Greedy for knowledge, D’Alto investigates the reality among ordinary people, among the most marginalized and relegated ethnic communities at the foot of the mountains. A researcher of truth, he reflects on the reality of these settlements, places capable of expressing all the beauty of an architecture that arises spontaneously, and which traces disjointed lines, far from the regularity of city constructions. Since the 1970s, Caracas has taken on a double aspect: the legal city and the peripheral city of the barrios, where the greatest number of emigrants - a mix - of unemployed are concentrated and where is a high crime rate which, however, shows an original way of living. This «other modality» is not limited only to Caracas but to the whole of Venezuela, and D’Alto reports: «the barrio is a milieu, a world of life, with its own developments that it is necessary to understand in order to discover in which direction the city can evolve, when it is understood as the whole, as the new space-time universe of an Indian-American history» (*ibid.* p.103; my translation).

What are the «empty spaces» of the city in a Taoist sense? They are the streets, the squares, the open spaces, the gardens, the avenues, the lawns, the parks, etc. that is, everything that has the value and the breath to give life to a complete ecosystem: system and environment. The system flows into the «empty», with its heavy energy loads that devolve into energy that can be considered as dissipated for the system, but still productive of «novelty» for the ecosystem. The «empty» allows the ecosystem to breathe. It allows it to become a living organism. Pulsating in the rhythm of life. Like an organic cell: totality of being (my translation).

If, on the one hand, emotions, feelings, landscapes of the soul dominate; on the other hand, relationships and communities arise, that are opposed to cities made of bricks, and to the political rigidity of the system. The birth of entropy lies precisely in the opposition to the system, in distancing oneself from it.

Emma Viviani

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² Silvano D’Alto develops some unpublished reflections relating to thermodynamics, which is ‘historically’ the science of complexity (Prigogine, 1984-87; tr. It. 1988, p.25), that is, capable of seeing the whole. The cultural breadth of the thermodynamic vision is now clear, which places us in front of a real conception of the world, a message on the structure of the universe (Prigogine, 1979; tr. It. 1981 / 99, p. 80) , based on that notion of entropy (irreversibility of phenomena, instability, self-organizing dissipative structures).

³ Michelucci G., “Order and disorder”, in *La Nuova città. Notebooks of the foundation* (5), December 1984, in Viviani, E. (2015). (preface); my translation.

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Savonardo L. (a cura di). (2021). *GenerAzioni Digitali. Teorie, pratiche e ricerche sull'universo giovanile*. Milano: Egea.

Pubblicato da Egea, il recente volume, *GenerAzioni Digitali. Teorie, pratiche e ricerche sull'universo giovanile*, curato da Lello Savonardo, costituisce una preziosa raccolta di riflessioni concernenti l'immersione dei millennial e della generazione Z nel pianeta mediale. Per poter analizzare le dinamiche sociali che coinvolgono i giovani, gli autori, a partire dall'insieme di teorie già esistenti sulle tematiche trattate, ne elaborano di inedite, in maniera originale e feconda, corroborando le ipotesi avanzate sulla base di rigorosissime ricerche empiriche. Il gioco grafico del titolo allude al «generare azioni», evocando, in particolare, le azioni promosse dall'Osservatorio Territoriale Giovani e dall'Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II, che hanno avviato e sostengono processi di innovazione didattica, scientifica e politica, nel nobilissimo senso che l'etimo di quest'ultimo termine suggerisce. Come sottolinea Savonardo in *Generazione Always on*, illuminante saggio introduttivo, la virtualità digitale sortisce radicali trasformazioni nell'orizzonte fenomenico, dissolvendo le consuete coordinate spazio-temporali e riconfigurando l'attività sociale. Ambienti altrimenti inespugnabili disseminano i luoghi attraverso la loro estensione on-line, nonché la creazione di circuiti itineranti, transitanti sull'orizzonte ucronico e utopico del World Wide Web. Nell'ambito informativo e comunicativo deterritorializzato, la pratica della connessione moltiplica le intelligenze all'interno dell'*hic et nunc* dell'esperienza, dando vita a dimensioni attive e viventi, emergenti dal complesso di relazioni prodotte da soggetti transindividuali, che utilizzano lo spazio matematizzato come strumento di autodefinizione.

Tale mutazione epocale, a parere di Amalia Caputo, autrice di un lavoro che non esiterei a definire seminale, *La questione giovanile e le tappe di transizione dall'adolescenza all'età adulta*, fornisce una riconfigurazione teorica degli snodi dell'itinerario compiuto nella transizione dall'adolescenza all'adulthood. Attraverso un laborioso esercizio sperimentale sulla popolazione giovanile italiana ed europea, la studiosa compie un'approfondita riflessione critica sulle svolte che segnano l'esistenza degli individui, nonché sulle mutate, reciproche relazioni esistenti tra tali articolazioni. Dalla ricerca,