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GEOGRAPHY AND THE *NOVUM*\*

Alongside the remarkable innovation in the structure of the works, which transcends the mere organizational aspect and becomes a method capable of increasing the potentialities of research and critical confrontation, the thematic proposal of our Congress “The contribution of geography between revolutions and reforms”, acquires an extraordinary depth well beyond the recurrences it intends to evoke. To begin with, it obliges to address a question, or rather a set of questions, which lay at the core of the current geographical investigation; furthermore, with courage, it indicates a path, sets objectives, and broadens a horizon of commitment on which to build the expansion of the knowledge base that pertains to Geography. Perhaps, this subject takes a deeper look than other fields of knowledge are currently able to do.

In my opinion, by choosing this theme, the Italian Geography at the congress, gathering the inspiration that comes from the underlying scientific community, which maintains increasingly intense and fruitful relationships with the international geographical research, intends to be an essential reference point for the understanding of the *novum*, namely the novelty of what, unheard and unseen, never experienced and not even imagined or dreamed, breaks into the horizon, becomes concrete and reorganises our present, our world.

Geography is paradoxically “condemned” to the present by a status that wishes it to be engaged in reading the world as it is, in the immanent, while the world shrinks, or even barricades itself in the anguish of *hic et nunc*. Geography, yearning to break through the wall of time, dares to become a bridge to History, between the *nunc* and the *post*. Not only in terms, albeit ambitious, of shedding light on the homologous evolution of the world, but also on the *katastrophé* of the world, on its upheaval, on

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its radical and revolutionary transformation. On the *novum*, precisely.

The world appears more and more as the expansion of the current times and as such is read and interpreted: distances are cancelled and the elsewhere abandoned; differences are homologated and the otherness ignored. Geography claims, with good reason, to be the most equipped knowledge – or at least one among the best equipped – to give depth of knowledge to the encounter with the new.

The reason lies in its intimate and radical connection with travelling, with exploring, with transgressing, that is to say with meeting the unknown in order to render it usual, familiar, domestic. Geography, in doing so, makes the Earth *nova* and *the Mundus, novus*. With good reason, as declared by ancient mythology, Middle Ages patristics and early modern history, when geographical and cosmographic discoveries revolutionise the world and forge the new existential dimension of humanity.

In the formidable decades of the Renaissance, which have been often invoked lately, Geography has been the bridge between past and future, has generated novelties, has connected them to the past and has framed them in a new overall design. Geography knew how to and has been able to establish a continuity between what belongs to the experienced, the discontinuity generated by it and the unknown, the uninvestigated, the *novum* (Formisano, Masetti, 2007).

In this regard, it is also necessary to admit that geographical science, when confronted with dynamics, in the attempt to establish appropriate methods to equip itself in order to grasp the passage from a state of the world, or of its partitions, to a subsequent state, whatever its quantitative and above all qualitative evaluation was, witnessed only weak and insufficient advancements, if not real failures, which generated frustration and subordination to other apparently more pervasive horizons of scientific investigation. This is the case, first of all, of the dependence and, at times, subjection to Earth Science and its relations with time, marked more by the history of the Earth than by the history of Man and, therefore, by the factual hypotheses of the influence of the historical past with respect to the fixed laws of nature. Secondly, it is the case of a reference to history which translated into a rigid anchoring of the geographical reflection to the forms produced by the development of the relations generated by the relationship between society and nature, that left no space, except in rare enlightened exceptions, for the processes underlying

these relations; processes that would have been considered from the productive perspective of society.

Thirdly, it is the case of the influencing by geographical research on social sciences and, in particular, on economics, which apparently was able to capture the connection with time, through the elaboration of a sophisticated dynamic modeling that had produced the idea of development and of qualitative change from one structural state to another. This reverence suddenly turned out to be misleading in the face of the shipwreck of paths: the more complex they became, the more they absorbed research efforts and showed a lack of results of any real meaning (Gambi, 1969; Barbina, 2010).

So this is the rediscovery of the roots of geographical knowledge and wisdom that pivots on the cultural dimension of research, making experience the only real source of creativity, originality, inexperience, *novum*. Cultural Geography, as a perspective that certainly owes its existence to multiple and connected perspectives of scientific reflection on man in particular, but that draws mainly and consciously on the overall scope of knowledge to its original stock of knowledge into a self-referenced vision (Vallega, 2003).

A turning point, that of Cultural Geography, which, for the reasons given, is potentially able to ensure that Geography can connect the *notum* to the *novum*, the *mundus notus* to the *mundus novus*, to produce the desire to break through the wall of time, as I said earlier. To give authentic breath to this potential, it is necessary to work and fight for the University: the only place in which, thanks to its characteristics, Geography, and the geographical knowledge, can have full citizenship.

The University, as we know it, is transforming into a mass institution and therefore is at serious risk of extinction in Italy and abroad.

The evolution of the university institution, in response to the structural tensions imposed by globalization, or rather by a certain way of making globalization explicit, is leading to the loss of identity of the *universitas studiorum*, the very essence of the university, that is to say, the quest for knowledge as a collaborative, cooperative commitment

Universities are, in fact, increasingly crossed by competitive, and antagonistic jolts, internally and with each other<sup>1</sup>. In this way, the role of

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<sup>1</sup> The university has developed in the Western world, starting from Italy, between

civil training to the critical conscience of the students is lost to the exclusive advantage of the training of workers; the role of the transmission of knowledge in its entirety and variety is lost to the exclusive advantage of the components of immediate expendability.

A University emerges which, in spite of those declarations, aimed at building a society of knowledge, appears increasingly oriented to be sired to the construction of a society of utility for the *hic et nunc*, as said at the beginning of this intervention (De Martin, 2017).

A University now very far from the Humboldt model, which is losing the cultivation of knowledge and of its various sectors, that in this moment in history are considered useless. Clamorously disproving the philosophical, epistemological and economic assumptions of the declared objective, the function of human sciences is increasingly compressed and residual and the humanist perspective of the knowledge society, with its flow of creativity, flexibility, imagination, valorisation of the other and of the elsewhere, is increasingly brought back to zero.

Among the useless knowledge, which belong to the Human Sciences, there's certainly the Geography, as if the fate that concerns the realisation of Wilhelm von Humboldt ends up also concerning his younger brother Alexander and his activity of foundation of the scientific Geography.

Our commitment as researchers – and citizens – must therefore go first of all to the University, as an elective place of action, in which to maintain the conditions of legitimate existence of Geography and possibly strengthen them. This is where to cultivate and experiment the methodological renewal of Cultural Geography and to provide the basic

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the 11th and 12th centuries, first as *universitas scholarum*, then as *magistrorum et scholarum* and, then, *nationum*, dedicated to the teaching of the *trivium* and *quadrivium*, and has always been characterized by institutional autonomy and the universality of knowledge, also in relation to the Catholic Church, which was at the origin of it. Autonomy and universality of knowledge that have further established themselves to the point of transcending the same student and teacher dimension, the university community itself, with the affirmation of the Humboldt vision, following the Enlightenment season and the pace of the industrial revolution. The physiognomy of the University, which owes to the approach of Wilhelm von Humboldt and which has been preserved until these last decades, while not renouncing to the autonomy from the State, was based on the union between research and education, where the first term, in particular, took on the highest importance in the gratuitousness and disinterest of his motivation (Brizzi *et al.*, 2007).

contribution that will help the world confront itself with the *novum*, understand it and regulate it, as much as possible, for the *bonum*, bearing in mind that the novelties that concern the world are quite different from the rumors that fill, and in some ways distress, the world wide web.

The world wide web is revolutionary and is irreversibly marking the transition from analog to digital<sup>2</sup>, in such a new way, that it generates a new world to know, interpret and understand in never experienced ways. A passage towards an unknown land, since we are becoming aware that it does not concern a mere, albeit fundamental, technological revolution or communications and the media system, but the understanding of the reality itself, that as such leads to the transformation of society in all its forms and in all its projections, including the geographical one generated by the territorial production of the same transformation in progress. A revolution that affects way more when we consider that it finds its genesis in engineering culture, unlike the world we have known, generated by humanistic culture.

One of the most obvious traits is, of course, the possibility for the majority of humanity, in the face of various forms of digital divide, to have access, in an almost gratuitous manner, to a quantity of information that was unimaginable only a couple of decades ago. Nowadays in our smartphones we already have “all” the culture produced up until now (books, music, plays, etc.) and we witness live the process of its production. A possibility that certainly clashes with the ability to understand, through filters and appropriate consideration, the mass of data (the so-called *big data*) available: the opportunity to order and shape them, which has never been experienced before, not even by the very small circle of the leaders of the past who have had exclusive access to the globality of information, that was extraordinarily more modest<sup>3</sup> (Rezzani, 2013).

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<sup>2</sup> In order to better understand the revolutionary scope of the introduction of digital technology, in addition to mentioning what has already been experienced on a daily basis, it should be considered that the power of micro-processors is usually doubled every eighteen months and that, if the pace is maintained, in fifteen years micro-processors will be a thousand times more powerful than the current ones.

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that against the “democratic” potential, represented by mass access to information, there is an actual contrast between the most dangerous oligopolitical control and management of the information itself by those who are in possession of the necessary algorithms: a sort of “algotocracy” able to exercise a growing global power, either of a “ordinary” economic nature, or of a more subtly political

A revolution that brings cultural, social, political and economic consequences of extraordinary extent; it radically changes the relationship between spaces and territories and generates a new world quite as much as the nautical revolution, at the early stages of the modern age, represented the beginning of Vespucci's "*mundus novus*".

Geography, with its specific baggage of consolidated and purpose – built tools, is called on to pay attention in order to give an authoritative reading of such an upheaval and its consequences.

In particular, in the current creation of territory and in the new formation of spaces, which are being already investigated from various perspectives, within the reference of what has been called cyberspace, it will be mandatory to delve into the expansion of cloud computing that is becoming increasingly intense on a global scale, because of the extraordinary incidence on the private sphere and its progressive reduction, but also for the ubiquitous growing perspective of individual and aggregative geographical subjects (Tabusi, 2008).

The cultural implications, especially for the role of social media, appear still to be explored, as well as the very strong attenuation of the cultural and social roles attributed to the diversity of age, parental rank and gender.

In this regard, the robust speculation developed in the wake of Gender Geography will be expanded to include, in addition to the gender and the trend of establishing structures with androgynous prevalence, the fall of differences of status and attributes related to the role in family organization and the pyramid of age: in general, the revolution of those differences that used to be taken into consideration at the registry office and their impact in the production of territory. However, the trends that most directly concern cultural structures must be considered as those that concern social dynamics.

These appear to be determined by formidable processes of progres-

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nature (Dugain, Labbé, 2016). This last dimension has intuitive repercussions of vital importance for people's rights and individual freedom. Yet the anthropological, cultural, and therefore geographical, consequences of the informative homologation imposed by the algorithmic oligopoly seem not to be negligible. The extreme exemplification of information as a filter and sieve for the communicative conveyance to growing masses of subjects, reduces and narrows the depth of the sensory and cultural environment, facilitates social integration, but dangerously reduces diversity, cultural richness and geographical variability.

sive concentration of wealth and income flows, both in classes stratification and in the articulation of spaces. Said concentration has not yet found any form of containment of inequalities and is amplified and consolidated by the *jobless* character of the economic development typical of the current digital revolution (Cipariani *et al.*, 2018).

It is to be assumed that the spreading of inequality and social exclusion will fuel tensions and conflicts both within the State and – and above all – at a global scale.

The radicalization of social relations will be reflected into the political dialectics, with forms of exasperation of the contrasts that reduce the space of action already exercised by the middle class and the exercise of democracy as it has been known until recent times from the liberal experiences.

Radicalisation, contrasts and crisis in democracy are - moreover - already in evidence, while the physiognomy of the new political subjects incubated by the digital revolution has not emerged at all, and which, in all probability, will have a completely new character compared to the outdated subjects children of the analogue society, that are now facing a crisis. There will be a new genesis of geographical subjects even in the territorial organization. Subjects that are to be identified among those that act on a global scale, rather than regional or local, and among these the city will still be the space of reference, regenerated in the wake of the new functions dictated by the digital (CTI – Liguria, 2014).

With some reliability, however, among the new players, by virtue of the transformation of economic structures, both on the production side and on the consumer side, the major financial players will have a role of certain importance given the drive to financialisation of the economic world system. In the same way, the role of subjects in charge of assessing the orientation, such as the large rating agencies, will be increased in the various fields in which the economic-financial system is divided and the same economic, political and even institutional subjectivities are distributed.

Finance and evaluation will, in any case, have to interact and talk to those who hold the production, that will be increasingly oriented towards immateriality (Quintarelli, 2017).

The transmigration of populations is not inferiorly new, and although it is often referred to with adjectives such as “biblical”, “epochal” or sim-

ilar, it is not possible to fully grasp its revolutionary significance, the authentically epiphanic nature of the birth of a new world.

Extraordinarily evocative, in this regard, are the similarities of the analogies with what we know happened when, at the height of the globalization of the classical world, the already declining center was first strengthened and then, gradually regenerated in new original ways by people from the outskirts, by forming new spaces and new territories: a new world once again.

In this regard, in a preliminary way, it is necessary to be aware that any attempt to raise barriers (of any kind and form) intended as a solution to the problems that the phenomenon – due to its quantitative and therefore qualitative importance – carries, while it is certainly vain, if we consider a time span slightly far from the present, is also certainly against nature and, therefore, destined to succumb before history, where it is imagined with the aim of reducing diversity and to ensure, within defined geographical boundaries, anthropological homogeneity.

In other words, the migration of humanity throughout the surface of the Earth is a vital process and as such has a *construens* dimension that, when contrasted, inevitably ends up becoming *destruens*. Geography is the *ab origine* fruit of human migrations and their recognition. The opposite is the denial of Geography.

In order to grasp what is genuinely new about the world, there is a need for geographical research, production of geographical knowledge and of understanding where the cultural dimension is at the center, even methodological, of scientific practice. The cultural dimension of scientific knowledge that, if properly cultivated, would be an excellent antidote to the poison of discord, violence, abuse and indifference that accompany the ongoing changes and whose convulsions are erroneously labeled as the result of a conflict of cultures and civilizations.

In fact, where culture is correctly understood as the source of the ethical sense of the collective purpose of humanity, even if articulated in the different and multiform societies and civilizations of the world, it can be affirmed that knowing, recognizing, valuing, preserving and nourishing cultural processes and their products can be a commitment to solidarity, to design, to progress, to remember the past and to project oneself and the other into the future, one from the other, one with the other. Thus the self and the other unequivocally involve the Here and the Elsewhere,



that is to say, the production and the cultural products that become the territory itself and shape geographical spaces, geographical articulations of the different and multiform societies and civilizations that form and in-form the only human civilization.

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*Geography and the novum.* – La Geografia, “condannata” all’oggi, al presente, da uno statuto disciplinare che la vorrebbe impegnata nella lettura del mondo qual è, mentre il mondo si restringe, si rattrappisce o, addirittura, si barriera nell’angustia dell’*hic et nunc*, si presta ad interpretarne le modificazioni.

Mentre il mondo appare sempre più come la dilatazione del presente e come tale viene letto e interpretato, con la distanza annullata e l’altrove dismesso, la Geografia può, a buon diritto, rivendicare di essere il sapere più attrezzato per dare profondità di conoscenza all’incontro con il nuovo. Il presente contributo intende mostrare come, in particolare, la Geografia culturale sembri connettere bene il *notum* al *novum*, il *mundus notus* al *mundus novus*, a dar conseguenza, cioè, alla brama di sfondare il muro del tempo.

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