

Degrowth, Democracy and the Mafia. How do we face the issue?

The need for detoxifying western societies from the grievous effects produced by the myths of growth has been widely debated in various streams of thoughts (Martinez-Alier 2010). In order to walk toward this desirable destination, the practical paths may be manifold. At the same time, the discussion about 'how do we get there' (in other words 'how do we pursue degrowth') has to consider the way societies are organized and the form of governance societies choose. That is to say that the way toward degrowth is not a rigid one. As a matter of fact, each community needs to find its way starting from its identity and peculiarities. In a global overlook and perspective, we need to consider the differences amongst the various 'northern' and 'southern' communities, using a very general and broad classification. Specifically, in this paper we refer to those 'southern' communities within the 'western' civilization.

Western societies are based on democracy as the only organizational structure, which is widely recognized as legitimate. Notwithstanding, western societies struggle with several issues connected with the limits and difficulties of implementing democracy. Using Putnam et al. (1994) words, the discussion becomes 'how to make democracy work', as a necessary premise when asking 'how to make degrowth possible'. Bobbio (1984) has discussed various aspects related with the issue of keeping the promises of democracy; he identifies several reasons that may influence the way democracy is inflected. Amongst them, there are: equity in distribution and allocation of resources; the way knowledge and information are produced and shared; transparency within relations of power. While the first aspects are widely debated within current degrowth discourses, we want to light a candle on the third one, i.e. on all those forms of obscure relations of power which nurture, for example, controversial financial lobbies, having an apex in criminal organizations. Obscure relations of power have strongly influenced regions of southern Europe and southern Italy (Santino 2007); in these contexts, criminal organizations such as Mafia, 'Ndrangheta, Camorra, Sacra Corona Unita, have driven the political and economic agenda, influencing not only the local scale, but also a more globalized scale, as described for example by Saviano in Gomorra (2006).

We are part of a research group at the University of Catania - Department of Architecture, in regional and urban planning, that has been involved in Participatory Action Research (PAR) projects (Whyte 1989; Saija and Gravagno 2009) since 1995, with a specific interest in the intertwined connection between social and ecological systems (Gunderson and Holling 2001; Pizziolo and Micarelli 2003); we are animated by nonviolent principles of Gandhian inspiration (Sanfilippo 2005; Dolci 1964). As part of this group, we discuss how do these obscure relations of power impact western societies in maintaining the promises of democracy and how do they threaten the efforts of implementing degrowth practices. We question what do degrowth processes need to consider, in order to deeply change societies through a community-based approach in contexts where obscure relations of power (Flyvbjerg 2004) affect functioning democracy. Specifically we focus on the Mafia in its peculiar forms that shape social relations in Sicily, looking at the effects that organized crime produces in contexts where it operates. We highlight what risks and problems need to be considered in order to practically start degrowth practices struggling with the Mafia. We explore how a PAR

approach may be a feasible path in order to produce the necessary social change that may weak the Mafia power in the long run and may facilitate the implementation of degrowth practices in challenging contexts.

Through two stories settled in Eastern Sicily, which we directly experienced as engaged scholars and activists, we practically describe how groups aimed at implementing degrowth practices had to consider and to face social systems that are influenced by mechanisms of Mafia; we define these systems as 'mafiogenic'. Specifically we tell about a metropolitan context and a rural context; the first is a marginalized satellite city, called Librino, in the metropolitan area of Catania; the second is a derelict area in Paternò, along the Simeto River, in the widest watershed of Sicily. The first story tells about an occupied sports complex where a group of activists is implementing social and ecological projects in order to give an alternative of hope for a neighborhood where the presence of organized crime is highly relevant. The second story tells about a community process at a river-valley scale, and about some small scale experiences implemented by groups of young persons who decided not to leave Sicily despite struggles, and to build their lives based on degrowth practices although the rural context is deeply influenced by the organized crime. We present some reflections based on our experience in order to enrich the debate about degrowth starting from the some peculiar lessons that we learnt operating in Sicily.

References

- Bobbio, N. 1984. *Il future della democrazia* (tr: *The future of democracy*), Einaudi, Torino.
- Dolci, D. 1964. *Verso un nuovo mondo* (tr: *Toward a new world*), Einaudi, Torino.
- Flyvbjerg B., 2004, *Phronetic Planning Research: Theoretical and Methodological Reflections*, *Planning Theory & Practice* 5(3) 283-306.
- Gunderson, L., Holling C., 2001. *Panarchy: understanding transformations in human and natural systems*. Island Press.
- Martínez-alier, J. et al., 2010. Sustainable de-growth: Mapping the context , criticisms and future prospects of an emergent paradigm, *Ecological Economics*, 69(9), pp.1741-1747.
- Pizzuolo, G., Micarelli, R., 2003. *L'Arte delle Relazioni* (tr: *The art of Relations*) Alinea, Firenze.
- Putnam, R. D., Leonardi R., Nanetti R.Y., 1994. *Making democracy work: Civic traditions in modern Italy*, Princeton University Press.
- Santino, U., 2007. *Mafia e globalizzazione. Mafia, antimafia e dintorni* (tr: *Mafia and globalization. Mafia, antimafia and the surroundings*), DG editor, Trapani.
- Saija, L., Gravagno F., 2009. Can participatory action research deal with the Mafia? A lesson from the field. *Planning Theory & Practice* 10(4), pp. 499-518.
- Saviano, R. , 2006. *Gomorra*, Mondadori, Milano.
- Sanfilippo V. eds, 2005. *Nonviolenza e mafia* (tr: *Nonviolence and mafia*), Di Girolamo Editore, Trapani.
- Whyte W. F., 1989. *Advancing Scientific Knowledge Through Participatory Action Research*. *Sociological Forum*, 4(3), pp. 367-85.

