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The sad science

Paolo Avarello

Perhaps because of the now imminent university counter-reform, in the last few years the academic debate on the 'scientific nature' of the various subjects has increased. For town planning the problem of a scientific status is no novelty, but stems from the very origin of its 'modern' phase, in contrast with its 'engineering' phase in the 19th century, which also purposely included certain 'scientific' interests, e.g. in its social, medical-hygienic, economic and environmental aspects, etc. In Italy, university courses in town planning started in the first faculties of Architecture, conceived by Gustavo Giovannoni, to train technicians who were also humanists and towards being 'scientists', while maintaining the 'artistic' features proper to the architect. A formative model that remains even to this day, and is a rarity in the international panorama, where 'schools' of Architecture are often not part of the universities.

The thirties bequeathed to town planning the law of 1942, but not the underlying policy, that is the 'containment' of urbanization, not even the powers assigned to the municipalities (under ministerial protection) to carry it out, based on the 'preventive' expropriation of all the areas (of expansion). A model that with the Republic could not be put into practice, but which was maintained in its form, and distorted in its substance, complicating the 'town-planning procedures'. Town planners for long remained attached to said model, striving to apply it and putting its failures down to the incapacity or the bad faith of the administrators.

To gain 'authority', on a par with other professions (e.g. doctors, lawyers, etc.), the 'planning documents' then started being swollen with 'analytical apparatuses', in reality 'descriptive' ones, which however were hardly ever corroborated by the 'plan forecasts', in fact borne out by just a few statistical data (inhabitants/families and rooms/houses) extrapolated simply to cover twenty or more years. All the plans were in any case over-dimensioned, in terms of houses and building areas, also because, lacking public measures, limiting the quantity of building areas would have led to more 'speculation' for the sites. Paraphrasing J. K. Galbraith, who referred to economic forecasts, planning 'forecasts' made horoscopes look serious in comparison.

With the 'interim ('bridge') law' (1967) and the transfer of competency to the regions (1972), the 'standardized' plan started to spread, as 'prescribed' by law, conferring a certain 'power' on town planners who knew the laws and regulations, and a bit more on those who managed to force the limits thereof. For more than two decades it thus seemed less urgent to display 'scientific' contents, to accredit professional capacities and/or to strengthen the dialogue with the administrators.

But slowly more complex instruments were being

developed, which offered new opportunities to investigate traditional themes (e.g. urban growth), and opened up fresh fields of study, especially in the territorial and environmental dimension, until then somewhat neglected. While using a scientific instrument does not make the one using it a 'scientist', around the new subjects of research it was attempted at least to construct rigorous methods of investigation (e.g. *It.Urb.*, directed by Giovanni Astengo). Less, however, on the cities, while the municipal plan remained at the centre of attention.

The Nineties saw the first development of territorial plans, independently of municipal plans, although the latter, also, but with difficulty, tended to evolve. Even if 'experiments' on the cities, in the true sense of the term, were hardly probable, freeing development from the 'machine plan' and the new planning principles opened up many spaces for research, which could be at least sounded out on a rigorous basis. For instance, verifying the objectives, the pertinence of the operations outlined, their concrete feasibility, their relative effects, possible 'impacts', and so on.

The main trend however seems to be towards a rhetorical bloating of every new plan or programme or project, by definition 'innovative', 'strategic' and 'sustainable' (especially 'European' ones), neglecting aims and contents and always avoiding balance-sheets *ex post*. Rather than 'scientific' contents, it thus seems that the aim is to solicit enthusiasm and consensus with ever bolder and more imaginative 'visions', palmed off as 'innovative' (in which ignorance helps), which are then passed on to the policy-maker of the moment. Perhaps wasting an opportunity to learn at least something.