

## FABIO LANDO

## REMEMBERING GABRIELE ZANETTO

In the late spring of this year, on the 5th of April, Gabriele Zanetto left us. A very dear friend, more than a colleague, encompassed by profound respect and sincere affection who left us with a great cultural heritage and a deep sensitivity both for the interpretation of our surroundings and for the analyses of our territory.

He graduated in Economy from the University of Venice with a thesis on Economic geography and obtained a Ph.D. in geography from Bologna, he also studied abroad in Montreal, Canada and in Tokyo, Japan.

The early years of his career were spent with me, two desks side by side, with lengthy discussions on the news which we received via the few English and French journals at our disposition in the old Economic geography laboratory which had recently moved into the palace in Campo San Polo. Many of our initial works were co-signed: it was the product of joint studies and it was difficult and useless for us to subdivide the responsibility, so much so that in the early years, being little known, we were thought of as a single person (an imaginary “Lando Zanetto”), and in truth, from a scientific point of view, it was almost true. For this reason, it is so burdensome to think of and write his obituary. Instead, I prefer to remember him through some of his works, some of which also make up a large part of my life.

Perception geography and quantitative analysis were our initial studies. The first, even with its essence which leans towards the subjective, places its bases of reference on quantitative assessments: the sum and the interaction of the mental images of each single person had to express the community's interpretation of the territory. Quantitative analyses, despite the “neutral objectivity” of the instrument, have always been linked to the subjectivity of the researcher who chooses the data, the instrument of analysis, and interprets the results: I remember well our tireless attendance at the first Geopoint conventions where we began to associate with Claude Raffestein and Jean-Bernard Racine. Quantitative and qualitative, or rather, neutrality of the instrument and subjectivity of the researcher – perhaps in those early years we had a greater propensity for the quantitative – were our first considerations which we presented together with Mario Oggiano in a brief study that was slightly out of the norm compared to others- at the Democratic Geography Convention on the *Inchiesta sul terreno in geografia (Investigation on the ground in Geography)*.

The *Esperimento di Venezia (Experiment of Venice)* is relative to these common deliberations. It was perhaps the first work of its kind on perception geography carried out here in Italy, where having three territorial realities that are equally significant at our disposition (Venice, the mainland of Venice and the lagoon) we took into consideration both an evaluation of the urban spaces through the choice of

residence, and a mental map of the lagoon with a technique close to the elastic mile. Gabriele followed up with a significant analysis setting it in a more general political discussion relative to “the management of the territory” with specific reference to the “diverse and antagonistic perceptions of the environment”. He then continued, primarily with Angelo Turco, to be devoted to problems connected to the perception of the Venetian territory and spoke in various conventions with an interesting analysis on the problems of Venetian *acqua alta* (*high water*), posing the problem of immobility of Venetian politics: *la possibilità di nulla decidere per Venezia?* (*the option of deciding nothing for Venice?*)

Between the end of the 1970's and the 1980's, this preferred field of research turned ever more towards the “quantitative revolution” and in particular, to the use of factor analyses. Our work on Mestre, the first to utilize this analysis which appeared on the *Bolletino romano*, still remains an important example of this research. He then continued to cultivate his interest in the relationships between the use of mathematical-statistical techniques and the consequent interpretation/management of territorial processes. In essence, his reflections regarded both the theoretical-scientific point of view, that is, the link between magnitude/theory; and the operative, meaning the possibility of utilizing similar instruments for the management of the territory. As yet unparalleled is his work which appeared in the *Rivista fiorentina* regarding the use of gravitational models not used so much for “discovering general laws”- never “confuse technique and theory” as he stated- but more for the capacity to “formalize the laws of tendency” useful to better “operate within that complex scheme which links environment and society”. These are the remarks which permitted him to enter on full merit in the important work group, coordinated by Adalberto Vallega and aimed at concepts of *Regione e Regionalizzazione* (*Region and Regionalization*), which had monopolized so well the theoretic Italian considerations for a good part of the 1980's. With regards to this, he had interesting opinions on the General Theory of Systems and its applicability in the geographic field where it posed the likely unsolvable problem: whether or not with the systematic approach, one could hope for “the reunification of the anti-ideographic paradigms of geography”. Together with Angelo Turco and Miriam Odd Ambrosetti, yet again in the field of processes of regionalization, the use of both the *Fuzzy Sets* and the *Teoria delle Catastrofi* (*Theory of Catastrophes*) were analysed; two measures which could probably, concluded the three authors, permit the overcoming of the transposition of determinism of implicit natural systems in the General Theory of Systems.

The importance of Gabriele's contribution and his position as a leader in that period of renewal which, even if only for a few years, brought Italian geography up to par with the considerations of international epistemology, was also due to his translation, in collaboration with Angelo Turco, of the book *L'analisi quantitativa in geografia* (*Quantitative Analysis in Geography*) by Jean-Bernard Racine e Henry Reymond; a text which provided us with the founding elements of the quantitative revolution of the school in Chicago guided by Brian J.L. Berry, even if slightly modified by the ideas of the two French geographers.

Towards the second half of the 1970's, Gabriele, in concomitance with the school of thinking on theorizing in geography cultivated a second branch which became ever more important in the years that followed: the relationship with humanistic disciplines. The examinations of cultural sediments connected to typical cultural traditions of self-centering territorialization, the implicit polysemy in the territories expressible in linguistic qualities or better yet, in the dialects of the settled population. Following in this vein is the important translation in 1978 of the book *La geografia delle lingue* (*The Geography of Languages*) by Roland Breton. A successful publication with five editions in 12 years: it is almost as though Italian geography felt the need for a reference which by abandoning the previous classifying and descriptive settings established as a base concept the geography of languages, a collective identity of languages, a sense of belonging, ethnic values which the language - more so than any other characteristic- is capable of establishing. It is an important book because it expresses the linguistic worth of a specific territorialization and can be identified with what Gabriele called ethnic regionalism in his *Lingue e Geografia: l'Etnoregionalismo* (*Language and Geography: Ethnic regionalism*): "the correspondence between a territorial and linguistic system, rooted to the social system, tends to identify region and ethnicity like the manifestations of the associated life itself". Consequently came his translation, completed when he was the scientific director of the publishing house Ulisse di Torino, of another wonderful book by Roland Breton *Etnie* (*Ethnics*), perhaps even more important, theoretically speaking, than the preceding one.

Starting in the 1980's -as a result of his examinations on the geography of languages, on ethnic regionalism, and on ethnic territorialization- there was also the partial distancing from quantitative geography and his committed attempts to integrate geographic theories with humanistic disciplines. Ever more aware that territory is founded on complex ideas of physical surroundings, location and the area where one lives: "linguistic, religious, alimentary practices and cultural customs... however emblematic or symbolic of one's life, they are still capable of ensuring an identity." Due to this, he participated in the Pau convention "Pratique et perception de l'espace" in September of 1984 and the following year at Lescherines "les representation en actes" after which he organized three years later the convention in Venice "Les langages de representation géographiques"<sup>1</sup>. A convention that was much more important and complete compared to its predecessors where he managed to involve the most respected protagonists of European geography.

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<sup>1</sup> Sostanzialmente la sequenza, se ricordo bene, delle pubblicazioni connesse ai vari colloqui sarebbe: *Géotopiques*, 1983, Université de Genève et Lausanne.

Guérin J.P. H. Gumuchian (eds), 1985, *Les Représentation en actes*, Grenoble, Institut de Géographie Alpine.

AA.VV., 1985. *Actes de la table-ronde "Pratique et perception de l'espace" Pau (6,7,8 septembre 1984)*, Pau, Université de Pau et des Pays de l'Adour.

Zanetto G. (ed.), 1987a, *Les langages des représentations géographiques*, 2 voll., Venezia, Università degli studi di Venezia, Dipartimento di scienze economiche.

Colloqui che poi proseguirono:

Leimgruber W. (ed), 1990a, *La transformation de l'environnement quotidien représentations et pratiques, Rapports et recherches*, vol.2, Institut de Géographie, Fribourg.

Mondada L. Panese F. Södeström O. (eds), 1992a, *Paysage et crise de la lisibilité. De la beauté à l'ordre du monde*, Lausanne, Université de Lausanne, Institut de Géographie.

Here, after exhausting the examination of the ideas of “mental mapping” and of “perceptions of space” the concept of “representation” intended as a “social creation of territorial schemes pertinent to reality” came about: the representation is therefore intended as “an artifact able to offer a sense to social actions on the territory”. Or better yet, as stated in the introduction “what reunites the representatives to this deliberation is the consciousness of the importance of the representation as revealer of different senses which social actors ascribe to space”. And in fact the element which lumps in many important discourses is not so much or just, the representation as a model of construction of the territory but the clarification of the deeper, often not explicit, connections which interlink representation and power. We must also remember both his participation with Francesco Vallerani and Stefano Soriani in the important triennial program “Nature, Environment, Landscape: European Attitudes and Discourses in the Modern Period, 1920-1970” which led him to important and successful meetings with Daniel Cosgrove and Kenneth Robert Olwig; as well as the long discussions and contributions with Claudio Minca at the moment in which Postmodern reflections began to have bearing on Italian geography.

After having won the official selection process in 1989 in Trieste, he returned the following year to Venice in the new Faculty of Environmental Science. Here, he dedicated himself to studying the various environmental problems concentrating his attention on highly complex and problematic environmental issues like Venice, its lagoon and its region. Environments which were often previously used as laboratories of applied analysis, and have now increasingly become the favoured applied field of theoretic reflections on the processes and on the forms of territorial organization. In this way, he kept up and made his own that long and glorious Foscari tradition of great attention to the issues of the city, its port and the lagoon, which previously had Primo Lanzoni (the subject of an important essay by Gabriele) and Luigi Candida as representatives. From this point of view, his studies on tourism were well noted and much appreciated – we must remember that Gabriele was one of the founders and supporters of the Venetian school of the Tourism Economics from which the Ciset derived – on the Venetian portuality with the evolution of its waterfront, on the Veneto model and its factors of growth and weakness and, we must not forget, he was one of the proponents of the Central Veneto metropolitan area, formerly the PaTreVe, now making a comeback as “Venice Metropolitan City”

It was due to these studies, these works and the fact that he was by now a noted and respected figure in the city, an expert and fine observer of the economic social reality of Venice which led him to be called to the first Cacciari administration (1993-1997) where he took on two important departments: the environment and productive activities. The first regarded all environmental problems of the lagoon and more: from the MOSE to general pollution and passing all the way through to the mud in the Port

of Marghera. The second, which was perhaps more complex and saw him more involved was relative to the organization of the economic activities in Venetian urban spaces, defined by an oxymoron “ambulant street vendors with established locations” as well as to the problems of the Port of Marghera, by now in crisis, whose first area was almost completely out of commission and finally, the commerce on the mainland where the first hypermarkets were being built and an area where he could foresee the importance to the region.

Gabriele, with this particular commitment – during the early 90’s, a very particular moment in Italian politics – lived out his duty as administrator not only as a generous and conscientious upstanding citizen who “made available” his own scientific knowledge for the common good, but also as a confirmation of his potential which in his case was a pointed opportunity for geographic knowledge to show its ability to manage and organize as well as, if not better than, other areas of knowledge. Regarding this, we must remember that in his various appearances and interviews in the capacity of councilor, he would repeatedly remind the public that he was “first and foremost a geographer” and not an economist or a politician. Because, as he wrote in one of his last works: *L’identità del geografo (Identity of the geographer)* he wrote:

It was geography, which came about as a result of that long and worrying list of duties written on the card which marked my place at the round table of the municipal council of Venice, because they were chapters in a decision-making machine which would have given shape to a territory, by means of norms and regulations (commerce, markets, environment) but also just words and numbers (toponymistic and statistical) or real decisions to be physically “made”, like the port, the science park or technological innovation.

Once completed his mandate as councilor, he accepted the presidency at VEGA, Venice Gateway for Science and Technology, where he became a tireless organizer and promoter of VEGA seeing in it the logical evolution of the industrial area of the Port of Marghera.

He refused to continue his political experience and returned to university life committing himself full time both in his studies and in faculty life becoming a specific point of reference for the various courses in environmental science which were conceived in the late 1990’s and consolidated under his guidance. In these courses, he was able to unite, alongside the scientific and technological knowledge found in the lectures held by his chemist and physicist colleagues, new programs of territorial, social and economic types. With the idea of the interdisciplinary challenge in mind, to him we owe the conception and creation of two important pre-eminent centres: the CESD (Centro di Eccellenza sullo Sviluppo Sostenibile; Centre par Excellence of Sustainable Development) and IDEAS (Centro Interdipartimentale per lo Studio delle Interazioni Dinamiche tra Economia, Ambiente e Società; Interdepartmental Center for the Study of Dynamic Interactions between the Economy, Environment, and Society).

Two centres which constituted for almost an entire decade (2005-2012) a proper school for geographers, economists, ecologists and chemists, where a large group of colleagues and growing researchers faced challenges of environmental complexity, examined with an interdisciplinary eye.

He was a teacher, a leader, an educator who knew how to listen and involve people: a rarity in academia. In this respect, we must remember his involvement as coordinator of the disciplinary group for geography, in the “Commissione Brocca” which at the end of the 80’s re-designed a new role for the subject in secondary schools. It was an excellent and surely successful attempt to update the instruction of this topic in secondary schools and it is still interesting to look over once again geography programs as he planned them.

I would like to close by remembering him with his thoughts found in two articles regarding geography and its problems. The first article was written towards the end of his experience as councilor when, mistaken for an economist, urbanist or politician, he felt the need to clearly define his identity as a geographer specifying his field of study. *Riflessioni su una diversità necessaria (Reflections on a necessary diversity)* is the title: geography is not presented as a single and non-tarnishable monolith but as a science with its own internal complexities. Not because “Geography is what geographers do” which does not simply mean that it varies according to who practices it but because our research experiences “lead to the variety of languages as well as to the same amount of theories implicit in these languages themselves” it is clear that all of this conducts an internal variety of the field which “before being an advantage, becomes an inevitable sign of our cultural climate. Since the alternative is voluntary silence, it gives up forcing a reality that is too complex into an improbable order”. But if geography has no choice but to present itself as a complex knowledge: who is the geographer and what could be the “*identità del geografo*” (*identity of the geographer*)? Obviously identity is also measured by antagonism, by the differences compared to one’s peers, whether they be urbanists, economists, historians or naturalists. But our identity cannot be defined as just a series of differences and boundaries which separate us from the others. Our identity should be able to define itself- primarily- from within: “it is necessary to believe that internal diversity...be less than the one sanctioned by that difference”. But this *assumption of identity* cannot be distinguished only as the combinability of our knowledge: certainly “also an uncouth method like those bibliographical references at the end of an article which have more significance than appear at first glance”. The key element, for Gabriele, is linked to the fact “that a discipline exists only if its members are supportive, look for each other, talk to each other, agree with each other on research themes and recognize each other. And they accept each other through the acknowledgement of common ancestors”. And this because:

“Being a geographer means recognizing oneself in other geographies, accepting a single extraction, a group logic and its hierarchies but also accepting to be neither the first nor the last of a long history, but members of a community which is the progeny of its predecessors and more so, a necessary teacher to our young successors whose quality basically depends on us and not on the deterioration of the times and the traditions”.

Gabriele Zanetto wrote over 200 articles: I, however, would like to remember him with those which, in my opinion have left its most lasting impressions.

Fabio Lando

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