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# UTOPIA\_an Italian way to practice transdisciplinarity. Educating alterity

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**Abstract:** Talking about contemporary scenarios means talking about international ones, with a special focus on the Global crisis.

Everyone must go beyond geographic and mental boundaries; design must understand complexity and go beyond disciplinary boundaries by discontinuity, thanks to the transdisciplinary approach.

Through cultural and social sustainability it is possible to carry out a concrete action aimed at the creation of a more inclusive society, through the most efficient tools (education and culture) and thanks to the contribution of service-design.

Italian Design has the skills to work to a new future challenge: a new way of refuge. Italy is an open-lab, where we can imagine a new way of life for new communities, focusing on individual freedom as a social value. The designer is a medium, his goal is the understanding of the present world and he can plan new proposals by his original bravery.

**Keywords:** disciplinary boundaries, transdisciplinarity, Italy open-lab, inclusive society, service-design, new communities

## 1. Introduction

The multiple contemporary scenarios – labour, educational, cultural, migratory - necessarily induce us to relate any reflection or action to an international dimension. In a brief span of time, globalisation has deeply modified our living environments, leaving us for the most part quite unprepared for facing such momentous changes. In Italy as in various other places in particular a deep fragility has emerged: we have understood that the *“technological and scientific progress has not been accompanied by the necessary political and moral progress”* (Bodei, 2016) in order to reassure the population. In particular the question of migration has generated a feeling of fear and instability, since it is an unresolved question to this day, left mostly to the *“whims of time”*, [...], *hoping that things would sort themselves out”* (Impagliazzo, 2013, p. 8) : we have discovered that we are incapable of understanding its phenomena, and therefore of knowing how to manage them. This contribution intends to prefigure a scenario of intervention based in Italy (a country involved in the front-line of the migrant issue) and in particular upon small communities that characterise our region; a concrete action is hypothesised aimed at contributing to the creation of an inter-cultural scenario through the most effective tools (education and culture) thanks to the contribution of

service-design. The aim is to generate a dialogue beginning with children and their small local contexts, with the purpose of generating a dialogue among different cultures (increasingly nearer to each other within these communities), in the attempt to overcome prejudices and to contribute to preparing a scenario which envisages children from all origins as active players in a new and more inclusive future society.

## 2. State of the art: disorder of the world

### 2.1 Immigration and globalisation grassroots

Globalisations asks us to keep our head up, to interpret the phenomena that derive from it and through them the opportunities. The Indian anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has spoken to this respect of global panoramas, introducing the notion of Ethnoscapes, where the flow of people – migrants, transnational workers, tourists, Erasmus students – are now capable, more than ever before, of influencing local policies in the receiving countries (Appadurai, 1996). Mass immigration is one of the “*consequences of globalisation*” (Impagliazzo, 2013, p. 9) and it will not be possible to perpetuate our ideology of “*laissez-faire*” (Becattini, 2015, p. 125) for long, given the particular position of our country “*in the middle of the middle sea*” (Lotti, 2015, p. 16). Italy represents a unique case. Since the crisis of the modern State (centralised English model) which reduced the municipality, it has become evident that it is necessary to rethink local autonomies, aiming perhaps to the possibility of a new sovereignty for the municipality as expression of popular sovereignty, in opposition to the a-democratic hegemonic powers of economic globalisation: Becattini calls it “*grassroots globalisation*” (Becattini, 2015). What is a fact is that the “*disorder of the world*” can be better analysed through the study of the crisis of settlement and anthropisation, that is in the city and the territory, than through the study of economic institutions and their performance (Becattini, 2015, pp. 126, 127): we must analyse and understand as well as possible the phenomenon of immigration, since it will increasingly condition, by re-configuring them, the communities that live in our municipalities. To be ready has become an objective towards which we must all work, overcoming mental, physical and disciplinary barriers, in the way that the complexity of this globalised world requires from us. Both mental and geographical boundaries must be overcome in the name of the common good: the understanding of the world, offering in other words concrete answers to the disorder of the world.

### 2.2 Transdisciplinarity and innovative courage

We realise how the social model as we have always known it is changing: such a transformation does not only concern social sciences, but also many other disciplines. Design, for example, together with sociology and anthropology, must interpret this change, overcoming barriers and the errors of a partial thought, of binary thought, facing the contradictions which can result from such a confrontation, rather than avoiding them (Morin, 2015, p. 16). Design, due to its vocation, will always try to find a mediation that allows it to materialise in some way its contribution. How does one put all of this into practice? Transdisciplinarity can contribute to the management of complexity, thanks also to the principle of discontinuity. Transdisciplinary approach asks of us to accept contradictions, overcoming our mental habits ruled by classical logic, which instead refuses to tolerate them. The creative process represents a great approach to the issue of transdisciplinarity, since “*creativity*” is

synonymous with “*diverging thought*”, in other words *thought capable of continuously breaking the frameworks of experience* (Rodari, 2012, p.165). And what can the guiding principle for this divergent thought be? Maldonado speaks of play and Utopia: the first as “*the typical doing without a project*” and the second “*the typical planning without doing*” (Maldonado, 1970, p.31) and he adds that in most cases the original motor of Utopia is hope : “*if we did not hope, despite everything, in a better world, who would even go to the dentist?*” (Rodari, 2012, p.114). If we imagined placing *play* on the extreme left of an axis (“the typical doing without a project”) and *Utopia* on the extreme right (“the typical planning without doing”), we could think of the project as the element at the centre of the axis



Conceiving, in other words, the project as the means capable of pursuing the scenario that does not yet exist, fruit of the imaginative power of the mind of the designer: “*Creativity is a productive capacity in which fantasy and reason are connected, and therefore the result obtained is always realisable in practice*” (Munari, 2005, p.87). Design, thanks to its pervasive nature, carries with it a *revolutionary charge*, nurtured by an *innovative courage* (Maldonado, 1970, p.33) that is not only technical in nature, but also social and political: it is the necessary additive that transforms Utopia into concrete action. In fact, “[...] *whichever way things are, the designer must act, must definitively abandon the “waiting room” in which he has been forced to remain until now [...]*” (Maldonado, 1970, p.141). A great spirit of adaptation is however necessary, and in this sense design, strategic by nature, perfectly responds to the profile, it is capable, in other words, of pursuing ever changing objectives, without a comprehensive knowledge of all the data of the system in which it operates, yet taking into consideration, at every moment, of the opportunities offered. To have a vision, to have an understanding of the available resources and thus to put into effect an adequate strategy, related to the context in which action will be undertaken. Bearing in mind as well the need to recover a “Latin way”, which, “*contrary to what happens in the Anglo-Saxon world, continues to place practice before critical thought, bringing praxis and spontaneously originated dynamics to a codified thought only at a second stage*” (Ceppi, p. 192). To embrace complexity means to recover that *diffused design* (Manzini, p. 20) which allows every person to project his or her own life outside from the established path, remembering that the etymology of the word complexity means to *embrace*. In this scenario the role of the designer becomes essential: he is in fact capable of facing the “social unrest” that derives from this phenomenon, which is due to the incapacity of individuals to put into practice a life strategy. The designer is capable, in other words, of preparing individuals and communities for better and autonomously planning their own future (Manzini, p. 22): a figure that is increasingly comparable to that of a *cultural mediator*, capable however of synthesising in concrete operations the phenomena in question thanks to his natural *innovative courage*. There is no doubt, according to Maldonado, “*that positive Utopian activity implies the understanding that the world, although imperfect, is perfectible*” (Maldonado, 1970, p.32): a revolution carried out by design is thus possible, if sustainability is adopted as a basis for it, divided into its four spheres: cultural, environmental, economic and social.

### 3. From resources to capacities

#### 3.1 Individual freedom

A similar objective envisages the distancing from the Utilitarian tradition, well aware, however, of the fact that Capitalism itself has contributed widely to the extension of the scope of the social obligations in general and of the responsibility of the State and of the civil society in particular (Sen, 2011). Shifting the attention from utility to individual freedoms means increasing the capacities of the individual beginning from the social order, shifting *“the accent from primary assets and resources to capacities and freedoms”* (Sen, 2011, p. 30). If one accepts the belief that individual freedom should be the condition of life to which everyone has a right to, it can be understood how the freedom of participation is extremely linked to it: *“the various conflicts existing in the world cannot be understood unless they are evaluated from the point of view of an involved participation”* (Sen, 2011, p. 68). It thus becomes essential to work on the community from a *“social choice approach”* (Sen, 2011, p. 83) through which to present efficient consensual solutions, precisely because based upon agreement. The great contemporary dilemmas need *“more creative proposals [...] A unilateral indication, although coming from the greatest experts, is not capable of offering by itself any solution”* (Sen, 2011, p. 101): co-design assumes a central role in the management of complex issues. Assuming individual freedom as social commitment means that the obligations from society include not only health-care and basic instruction, but also support to poverty and forms of social security without which the exercise of freedom remains very limited (Sen, 2011, p. 96). *“Freedom is linked to security”* and it is necessary to make life more secure in order to exorcise the myths produced by fear and insecurity: *“myths, although unverifiable, take root in times of crisis”* (Bodei, 2016). It is thus possible, for example, to agitate the fear of immigration, due to ignorance or devious electoral calculations (Impagliazzo, 2013): reason and fact are weak when they face ideological models, and thus we often end up by taking sides, rather than by reasoning. The ways of thinking we inherit are not developed: it is our duty to analyse them and re-elaborate them. Only this way can complex phenomena such as immigration be understood. The state in which we find ourselves is a sort of *“provisional permanent morality”* (Bodei, 2016) from which we can take our distances only through an *“intellectual battle for liberating mankind from delusion”*, initiating that *“cause of human liberation”*, necessary condition for achieving a *“capitalism with a human face”*. (Becattini, 2015, p. 119).

#### 3.2 The Italian case: beyond the consciousness of place

In this scenario, design can act efficiently from a community centered approach, aware of the fact, however, that future communities will be increasingly inter-cultural in nature and that it will be necessary to face the immigration question: the moment has come to pass from emergency to silence to interaction, beginning from those that are our most efficient resources. First of all our human capital, constituted by what Becattini defines as *“consciousness of place”*, or *“a collective consciousness that permits the inhabitants and producers to “chorally” aim production to the valorisation of the heritage of the territory with the purpose of satisfying collectively determined human needs”*. We are referring to human and cultural infrastructures that are not repeatable in other contexts, *“because they have developed throughout the centuries, in any given physical environment, in freedom of migration and exchange”* (Becattini, 2015, p. 125) and characterized by

factors which Becattini defines as “*essential factors*” (Becattini, 2015, p. 105). The *essential factors* of a place, and therefore of a community are the following:

- natural conditions;
- productive infrastructures (among which the know-how of the working population);
- the level of education;
- the representative character of the people (typification of the behaviour of the various peoples).

*Flux factors* represent instead the actions of individual citizens and of the public authorities: the relationship between the two factors is that of cause-effect, that is the dialectic of everyday actions of the inhabitants and of the government which influences the character of both subjects and the territory (Becattini, 2015, p. 109). Where can we situate the “migrant factor”? It is important in the first place to not how the terminology has changed from the past century to this: we no longer speak of “immigrant” but of “migrant”: why? Umberto Eco explains how the difference in terminology regards the typology of phenomena:

“Europe is no longer a continent invaded by immigrants, like America was between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, but the place of a migration. Immigration is when some individuals [...] move from one country to another, and immigrants mostly accept the customs of the country to which they immigrate. Immigration can be controlled politically, limited, encouraged, programmed. Migration, on the other hand, is when an entire people slowly moves from one territory to another, and it is not relevant how many remain in the original territory, but rather to what extent the migrants will radically change the culture of the territory to which they have migrated” (Eco, 2013, p.65).

Or:

“Migrations, whether peaceful or violent, are like natural phenomena: they happen and nobody can control them [...] Europe will be a multi-racial continent, or colorful, if you prefer. If you like it will be like this, and if you don't it will be like this anyway” (Eco, 2013, p.68).

What is truly interesting in Eco's words is the concept of migration as a natural phenomenon: one can only accept it. It therefore reinforces the need to understand, accept and manage a momentous event which cannot be programmed. The migrant can be associated to a flux factor, which will bear a great influence on the essential factor: he will deeply mutate the culture of the territory to which he has migrated. The faster we understand and accept it, the better we will be able to keep our heritage alive. It is thus fundamental to overcome the concept of “consciousness of place” and to work toward a true opening of both places and communities: design has the ability to read and interpret the complexity from hidden and unexpressed essential factors, and “*manages to propose innovative scenarios and development projects regarding the crisis of the models related to globalisation*” (Magnaghi, 2015, p. 16). New creative forms of management of territories are of the utmost urgency, and the first infrastructure on which to work on is moral in nature: it is the infrastructure of trust (Zamagni, 2016). Working on relationships is thus essential, especially if we consider that communities as we know them will have to necessarily face the change produced by the migratory phenomenon, which in most cases will put in question and de-construct their representative features: they will then have the choice of suffering it or turning it into an asset. Our social capital is the “*true strategic factor*” (Zamagni, 2016) but only if it will be capable of regenerating itself, in a balance between endogenous (the territory with its essential factors) and exogenous factors (migration); design can contribute to the managing of this combination by drawing from implicit

knowledge (the true strength of the territory) together with codified knowledge, combining them in light of the new changes, giving life to instruments which, through education, connect shared behavioural values. The relationships between inhabitants represent “*trust relationships, not obligations*”, they are chords woven by the feeling of trust and the whole of the chords constitutes precisely that social capital that exists thanks to the “*reciprocity*” (Zamagni, 2016): this nexus of reciprocity must be constantly nurtured if one wishes the links of trust to persist in time and be renewed. The exogenous “migrant” factor must necessarily become one of the chords and constitute the new social capital: it is clear that it can be done very efficiently beginning from “*education and learning [...] Knowledge is forever open*” (Nicolescu, 2010, p. 27).

## 4. One objective: educating alterity

Both the wish to belong, and thus also to confirm his own identity, and the tension toward the new, fueled by curiosity and the capacity to be surprised and to admire, experimenting new areas, are features of man. For this reason cultures are in constant transformations, and permeable to each other. In this search for balance, the original culture of the individual is transformed: but what has been found in the culture of origin does not strike as important, because it has served as the basis in the formation of the person. On the other hand, what changes due to circumstances on which the individual has no possibility to intervene is perceived as degradation because it weakens our sense of existence. The contemporary era, in which collective identities are called to transform more rapidly, is thus also the era in which groups take on an increasingly defensive stance, claiming with force their original identity (Todorov, p. 82). Which solutions exist that wish at the same time to consider the originary cultural diversity, [...], and to act in view of a culture shared by all future citizens? (Todorov, p. 103). The question may find an answer if we turn to the world of childhood:

“Contrarily to what is believed, children put their synthetic and analytic attitudes at work spontaneously, they spontaneously feel connections and solidarity. It is us who produce modes of separation and teach them to build separate and closed entities... [...] It is necessary to recover a critical consciousness in order to face the complexity that surrounds us; the child is capable of grasping the complexity of reality, whereas the adult, trained as he is by academic teaching, no longer can” (Morin, 2015, p.73).

The outstanding vocation of children for social innovation, united to the small dimensions of communities in our country, can represent the perfect combination for an innovative scenario for intervention: not to feel menaced in the recognition of one's own identity is the starting point for the opening process. It is necessary to work toward a “habitat of meaning” (Hannerz, p. 27), against the idea of autonomy and closure of a community; the habitat can expand or contract, permitting external element (which will however encounter resistances) to interfere with the processes of reproduction of the local culture. Communities must progressively become “communities of understanding”, creating symbolic and social constellations which go beyond those identified by the nation-state. (Hannerz, p. 26) To this purpose, work in schools will be essential in order to efficiently plant the seeds of awareness of oneself and of one's own roots: every individual is multi-cultural. Cultures are not monolithic islands, but rather weaving floods (Todorov, p. 77) and service design can contribute to ease this process, so that the encounter can become concretely experienced. In

accordance with what has been affirmed by Stickorn and Schneider, ethnographic design, as part of the field of service design, can make the task easier. Taking inspiration in everyday life, ethnographic design allows to draw on a deep knowledge of the reference context, from the perspective of the people involved, leaving for a later moment the analysis carried out as a concept, first, and then as implementation. The bottom idea is to build a case study in which, from ethnographic methodologies (in particular cultural maps), the necessary contents for favouring inter-cultural dialogue are identified. The tools that carry this message will be mostly based on play, so as to facilitate the overcoming of prejudices through a direct experience, thus favouring inter-cultural dialogue among children who will be the adults of tomorrow.

To carry out a “*reform of thought*”, synthesised in the form of usable services capable of having an effect on the education of the child, may offer a contribution to address the inter-cultural challenge that the future citizens will have to face, becoming an active part in the construction of a more inclusive society.

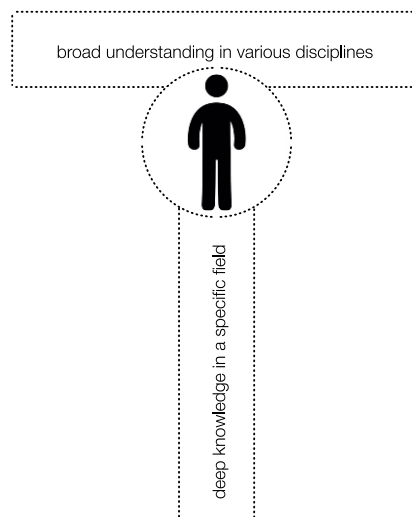


Figure 1. The T-shaped person (IDEO, Kelley, 2000)

The model of the “general will”, understood as the sum of the differences, represents a horizon for everybody's education. (Todorov, p. 247). The objective is high and difficult to attain, but necessary: especially considering that a content, happy individual, will build a more equitable society. In such a scenario, even the tools must be finely tuned: the indexes, for example, which today are incapable of interpreting the fundamental values of a society, among which the quality of life and the degree of happiness. Undertaking a “*thought reform*”, synthesised into new tools that only design can imagine,



generate and trigger, must have as ultimate purpose to bring about the happiness of people and consequently of the community at large, redefined in its new inter-cultural version:

“The happiness of people is not measured by the G.D.P., but by the complex factors that determine the quality of life and of producing in a certain place, and are therefore relatable to social work and life relationships, to the material and moral enjoyment of the places of work and life, to the growing quality of artifacts connected to the typicality of the products, to the quality of the life-styles representative of the group identity, and so on” (Magnaghi, 2015, p. 15).

With his “*HDI, Human Development Index, the UN measures three fundamental aspects of the quality of life: longevity, education and income*”: these are the factors that distribute welfare and reduce poverty and inequality, setting the bases for a good life. The fact remains that happiness is not a measurable factor, although some experiences attempt to demonstrate the contrary. It is an unrepeatable state that has to do with many different aspects of mankind:

“Our life company, the enjoyment of our living and work environments, the type of work we do, the compensation of our work, in coin or in kind, such as to allow us to live a life more or less similar to our neighbour” (Becattini, 2015, p. 3).

It is clear, however, that a rise in welfare reflects on the happiness of people: it is thus necessary to refine these complex indicators, make them easier to be used, with the aim of better understanding welfare and the satisfaction of people's needs. In addition “*a fairer society is a more efficient society*” (Maffettone, 2016) and is the basis for that “*human flourish*” described by Aristotle. The issue is the height, the gaze toward the future from the standpoint of that asset without comparison which is our country, with its serious problems, but also with its great underlying, sleeping potentialities, which want to be awakened and set in action. Our tradition can truly make the difference in the management of the migratory phenomenon and in the proposal of new development models.

## 5. Conclusions

It is quite evident that what service design will put into practice, today, will be effectively verifiable a decade from now. The children who will be able to use the tools developed by the project and aimed at a thematised reform of thought, are the adults of tomorrow who will put into practice the results whenever they will find themselves having to face social pressures that are generated and will continue to be generated in the years to come by such complex scenarios. To act today for creating a more equal society tomorrow is what we are all called to do, in the awareness of the fact that great issues need complex, articulated solutions. The question of transdisciplinarity returns, of its noble objective (the understanding of the world) and of its exhortation to overcome all barriers. Based upon work undertaken on the education of individuals (children) and on the quality of relationships (the infrastructure of trust), we can contribute efficiently to the construction of a new and more inclusive, and therefore also better society: if we believe it now, it will not remain a Utopian hope.

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My research is based on social innovation, especially focused on inclusive society. Interacting with children, my goal is to integrate ethnographic methodologies and service design studies in order to give a new contribution to education to alterity.