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Well-being, Landscape and Sustainability of Communication

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Abstract

The paper deals with the concept of well-being and its relationship with landscape and agriculture.

According to the literature, well-being is a multidimensional and subjective concept, it is related to happiness but it does not depend on mere economic welfare. In fact, the bond between material wealth and well-being is not causal: GDP is not the optimum way of assessing the level of well-being.

On the contrary, there is a strict relationship between well-being, agriculture and rural development. The man/farmer, transforming the rural landscape, creates modifications that reverberate first on natural landscape, then on the whole territory, and finally back to the man itself. In this context, the generative communication arises as a model that best interprets the need to represent and promote the circular nature of the relationships between man and land. By doing this, it enhances and protects cultural diversity, social and natural environment of the territory itself. Hence, it strengthens the well-being of those who work and constantly transforms this landscape.

The paper closes with the analysis of two case-studies, the “Comunicazione generativa per il Programma di Sviluppo Rurale 2014-2020 della Regione Toscana” project (in english: Generative Communication for the Tuscany Rural Development Programme, RDP, 2014-2020) and the “San Casciano Smart Place” project, both developed by the Communication Strategies Lab.

The methodology used for the development of the projects is the generative communication (Toschi, 2011), with its recent specification towards the concept of sustainable communication.

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Well-being, landscape and sustainability of communication

Our society is often times referred to as a welfare society, a concept that stems from the “Glorious Thirty”. We are talking about the three decades following World War II in which industrialized societies experienced extraordinary levels of economic development, material well-being and improvements in social justice. It seemed that the glorious years would never end. That was until the 1973 oil crisis, which was followed by the spread of neoliberalism in the 80s (“no such thing as society” - Former Prime-Minister Margaret Thatcher), the Third Way of the 90s and the current financial crisis, all which undermine the idea of future economic and social progress.

The questions are then: What does well-being mean today? And how do we measure it? What relationship exists between well-being and happiness? A question found at the center of philosophical, social, and in recent years, economic research.

First we will introduce the notion of well-being. According to the literature, well-being is a multidimensional concept (Rawls, 1971; Sen, 1985; Nussbaum, 2000). One should not merely focus on economic measurements of well-being. According to the Stiglitz Commission Report (Stiglitz et al., 2009, pp. 14-15) in order to correctly measure well-being the following variables should be considered:

- Material living standards (income, consumption and wealth);
- Health;
- Education;
- Personal activities including work;
- Political voice and governance;
- Social connections and relationship;
- Environment (present and future conditions);
- Insecurity, of an economic as well as a physical nature.

Well-being however is a subjective concept. It is extremely difficult to obtain a true representation of what well-being means through a set of objective indicators. It is closely related to happiness, and happiness does not depend on mere economic welfare.

The Easterlin paradox (1974) further complicates the relationship between economic welfare and happiness. The American Economist noted some not immediately intuitive elements, such as the fact that within a country the richest people are not also the happiest; this was found to be true when comparing the richest countries with the poorest countries. In the end he noted that the change in the course of human happiness does not depend on income changing conditions. From this Easterlin concluded that the increase of wealth and material welfare conditions don't always correspond to a relative increase in happiness. According to the study, the first increase in wealth does correspond to an increase in happiness, but beyond a certain point this correlation ceases to be at all significant and at times even reverses.

Connected to the just described phenomenon is what economists call “positional effect” (Bruni, 2011): the happiness we get from our actions of consumption is relative and depends on what our consumption level differs from the people around us. Additionally, an increase in the economic prosperity corresponds to an increase in expectations. These expectations therefore require more resources in order to reach success (Stiglitz, 2012, pp. 170-171). Surely we are not talking about a recent phenomenon, as already Thomas Hobbes in the 17th century faced the topic in his famous Leviathan.

An accredited model of well-being is proposed by Liu (1975): the level of well-being and quality of life is given by relative amounts of physical factors (PH) - material goods and public services - and psychological factors (PS), intangible items such as self-esteem and dignity. This approach leads to a radical rethinking of the concepts of economic development and progress. It also follows the footsteps of a reflection made with ruthless clarity (as usual) by Pier Paolo Pasolini (1975) on the dichotomy between development and progress.

The bond between material wealth and subjective well-being is so labile and not causal. Further confirmation on the fact that material wealth and subjective well-being are diverging can be found in the US Robert Lane (2000) work on *The Loss of Happiness in the Market Democracies* (Robert Putnam came to the same conclusion that same year in his work *Bowling Alone*).

We know that at least since 1972, our development model is not sustainable in the long term. That year, the results came out from the research commissioned by the Club of Rome to scholars at MIT on *The Limits to Growth*

(Meadows et al., 1972). In 1972 experts predicted that if population growth, industrialization, pollution, food production and consumption of natural resources had continued at those levels, the development limit would arrive within a century. This would have had unforeseen and tragic consequences, including a sharp decline in the world's population.

The authors, however, did not seem too concerned with the fate of humanity. Even though, it was clearly the right time to change course. They probably overestimated the ability of policy makers to implement comprehensive policies based on prudence and common sense. These same authors, in fact, published twenty years later (Meadows et al., 1992), this time in a much more alarming tone: the limit had in fact already been surpassed. A third update (Meadows et al., 2004) further confirmed we had exceeded the limit.

GDP is also not the optimum way of assessing the level of overall well-being. In a famous speech Robert Kennedy pointed out why GDP was a bad measurement for well-being. GDP fall into two main mistakes categories: on the one hand it excludes some key variables related to well-being and, on the other hand, it includes other factors negatively impacting the population well-being. GDP measures too much and too little at the same time.

After taking a look at these premises, we can safely say that some economic reductionisms are inadequate when handling multidimensional concepts such as “well-being” and “happiness”. Weber (1922) had argued that “Reduction to exclusively economic causes is in no sense sufficient in any sphere of cultural phenomena, not even in that of economic processes”. The “inventor” of the concept of GDP - Simon Kuznets - in 1934, during a speech to the US Senate said “the welfare of a nation can scarcely be inferred from a measurement of national income as defined above.”

The quality of social relationships, beauty and landscape protection, characteristic types of lifestyles, eating habits and sustainable management of soil are all elements that, if they cannot fully substitute the economic indicators in the definition of and in the increase in levels of well-being and happiness, they certainly must be taken into account when dealing with these concepts.

In this case it can be useful to reclaim the metaphor proposed by Toschi (2015) in front of a turning point where we must decide if these resources are considered as a glider or an airplane:

«Cultural heritage cannot be interpreted as an airplane which takes off and takes us wherever we want, but more as a beautiful glider that needs dirty, smoky engines which have nothing to do with art, culture and history. They will support but they will never be able to be the strength capable of starting a new economic and social process. We need to change the way we look at reality, the resources we use and learn from this paradigm crisis to bring about a new idea of values» (Toschi, 2015).

The ground - intended to be an environmental, exhaustible resource and a territory that produces vital benefits for the environment and mankind - allows us to draw interesting points about well-being in relation to agriculture and rural development.

The Future of the Rural Society, published in 1998, is a document written to orient the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) through the agricultural development sector and the inner workings of the rural world. The document not only provides effective economic solutions, but also contributes to ecological balance and common well-being of a wider system.

Part of the economic research stems from the academic article The Future of the Rural Society, following the footsteps of research previously done by rural sociologists (Jan Douwe Van der Ploeg among others) whom moved from focusing their research on local systems to study the double role (productive and cultural) of rural territory.

The argument which follows the idea that multi-functionality is part of the European agriculture's character (Henke, 2004; Casini, 2009), argues that agricultural activities produce “positive externalities” (such as landscape transformations, environmental protection, social and cultural heritage development) which are all uniquely related to the main function of food and other goods' production.

Emilio Sereni in his *Storia del paesaggio agrario italiano* (in english: History of the Italian agricultural landscape) essay demonstrates the strong ties between agriculture and the Italian territorial landscape. Agriculture has played a big role in many ways throughout the years, in order to modify, transform and organize the national landscape which can yield serious identity, symbolism, and awareness consequences.

Rural landscape should not be considered a still, food-production oriented object but rather a dynamic and controversial field in which the actions and creativity of the men/farmers (Strassoldo, 1996) intertwined with

historical, cultural and social pressures, producing a narrative plot containing in nuce, stories that should be developed and stimulated.

On the other hand, the modernization of agricultural practices, the industrial sector's requests for high profits and globalization lead to transformations in the landscape and agricultural production processes. They pose the biggest threats to landscape, agricultural heritage and the future well-being of mankind.

The criticism of agricultural modernization focuses on the economic and social un-sustainability of these kinds of modern agricultural practices. The main direct consequence of this new kind of agricultural modernization is total dependency on the agricultural industrial system and a progressive detachment from the local agriculture production.

Without a political project based on the strong connections between men working on landscape and landscape itself, the farmer -in an industrial and mechanical production context- is only a part of the gear in the assembly line system, losing his creative and managing capabilities. These abilities would otherwise allow him to use his knowledge to experiment and optimize (increase) production.

Just think, for example, about productive natural elements such as water, earth, seeds, and livestock. These elements were once resources effectively used for production; they were not consumed but regenerated and used as other resources.

Looking at landscape from a consumeristic standpoint, it is a consumption resource used for tourism, intensive agricultural development, and sprawl. This attitude brings stress to the community because of the fear of losing part of their identity, symbolic common spaces, and breaking the tie between man, his country, and the resources that have always been a part of rural areas.

In this context it is strong the reference that touristic activity is passing by. It is giving life to a business constantly in growth and transformation that highlights the fact that historic-artistic heritage is closed on itself and it does not contribute to develop and sustain economy. The real risk is to succumb to a crisis if the heritage does not recover its relationship with the historic value in a system where: «historic memory and contemporary production cooperate to create value». (Toschi, 2015).

At a time when the debate about local development (Becattini, 1987) and new forms of economy is being sharpened, one should not be surprised that alternative proposals for Rural Development, based on an economic and sustainable kind of agriculture are gaining popularity. Based on the production model farmer (van der Ploeg, 2009) where the agricultural entrepreneur is seen as the center of the rural system (Pèrez-Vitoria, 2005), the alternative models state the rural system as a co-production system in which the relationship between nature and society lead to common economic well-being.

Karl Polanyi, in his famous essay *The Great Transformation*, mentioned nature and society commercialization as a problematic phenomenon: «A market economy must comprise all elements of industry, including labour, land and money. But labour and land are no other than the human being themselves of which every society consists and the natural surroundings in which are exists. To include them in the market mechanism means to subordinate the substance of society itself to the laws of the market» (Polanyi, 1944, p. 94).

Degrading nature and its resources to a simple market gear means to subdue landscape and its vital, social and identity processes to the market laws system.

It might seem that intensive landscape exploitation could create a big value and economic development, and that these elements could increase community well-being. But an unlimited exploitation of land, based on industrial logics and uncontrolled innovation -«the divinity that everybody bows down to» (Toschi, 2012)- is not the way to create well-being for most of the Europe and world population.

In a contemporary neoliberal society context, physical space loses its anthropological connotations and transmits to the users certain identity characteristics and references to traditions (Lefebvre, 1974; Harvey, 1990); men, reduced to mere consumers, losing their identity as citizens and farmers, lose their capacity to create their own landscape.

How can we contrast this neoliberal tendency?

The interaction between the production and the use «creates the “aura” which surrounds our products. It doesn't have anything in common with the special effects that we are used to see in advertising or the communication OF the products. This “aura”, when recognized and communicated, is part of the product itself. It tells the story of the

quality of the product and the relationship that it continually maintains with the production process and environment» (Toschi, 2015)

Communication is present inside the product itself. It evokes the system composed of a network of relationships which gives a unique value, not reproducible, that, in this case, refers to: «a dynamic system of knowledge, competences and “know-how” which composes the entire social and cultural vision and economic aspects that is impossible to de-localize from the local context which represent its identity, like a DNA trace, of all the products. This is the element that makes the “Made in Italy” quality unique, in an age in which everything and everyone is faster and more easily reproducible, because the experience of the product cannot be isolated from its context and the network of relationships which produced it». (Toschi, 2015)

All of man’s transformative activities come from the agricultural landscape presented above which consequently reflects life, culture, ethics, and politics. The symbolic dimensions of places are communicated to everyone/everything who lives in and passes through the agricultural landscape. The symbolism found in various spatial environments, the relationships that define this symbolism, ecological aspects, and aspects about the human condition of those who live in this environment all form part of the patrimonial identity. This identity is part of the communal territory that comes from the man’s activity of transformation of geographic space into urban, agricultural, and rural landscapes. At the same time this identity at times defines a particular regions territory, which in the end influences man, his actives, his relationships and his identity.

Therefore, considering the agricultural landscape as a result of all the complex intersections between the material human actions that modify the geographic space, countless number of narratives from district backgrounds, typology, medium, content, the importance of “good communication” throughout the course of the development of a territory (both economic, social and cultural) is out of the question. We refer to “good communication” when talking about the communication that focuses on the identity of the subjects involved and on the elements of knowledge that these subjects brought: a generative communication able to offer cognitive tools of knowledge which are necessary to find and constantly verify the real correspondence between tangible and intangible, real and symbolic. In this context Italian products generate: «communication model as well, namely socialization, unique of its kind, more or less, at least in terms of intensity: they make us feel the need to place a material product, through the perception of its intangible value, inside an original context of fruition and physical experience. This means that a product not only invites you to take part in that community of which it is an expression, but also it gives you the chance to experience that need for belonging, sharing, community, which today is so lacking at a global level.

The communication inside the product, then, indicates that the model of unity through diversity, the variable network ontology, of which Italy always represents the prototype, a paradigm, new and old at the same time, expresses a social, cultural, economic, political, model, for which you feel a great need». (Toschi, 2015)

Generative communication (Toschi, 2011) addresses directly the identity issue: its focus is the communicative identity and therefore, if applied on a territorial scale, its focus becomes the identity of landscapes. It is a kind of energy capable of creating new relationships between subjects and – in general - stakeholders. Although at times the relationships are occasionally unpredictable and apparently contradictory, it successfully reaches the objectives. These objectives can be reached analyzing the knowledge available, optimizing and enhancing it even when the knowledge itself is implicit.

The generative methodology is proposed as a tool for rewriting and redesigning the territory itself more than an instrument for the promotion of a territory (territorial marketing) interpreted like a product. Every territory is a unique infrastructure mix, encompassing the natural environment, networks of relationships and social conflicts, productive and agricultural actives, stories and traditions. Consequently, it is not possible to communicate such complexity with strategies, projects and instruments that presuppose a neutral or a standard approach, because each communication strategy, project, and instrument carries with it unique values, interpretations of the past and narrations of potential futures. In this scenario Marshall McLuhan’s exceedingly famous quote that says the medium is the message, fits well. Without a careful analysis of the territorial context, every territorial communication strategy would prove to be -in the best of cases- partial.

The generative method is presented as a condition for a sustainable communication (Toschi, 2014). This method’s sustainability comes from the redefinition of the concept of resource: the redefinition follows the recognition of the subjects involved in every communicative action as value engines in a symbolic and material sense. Given a certain territory, with its productive activities, material resources, symbolic resources, generative and

sustainable communication would give the subjects involved the opportunity to get to know the strengths and criticisms of the territory itself. This would consequently create networks according to connections ever practiced before, thus finding reference points and similar interests where there previously seemed to be differences. A communication therefore that does not limit itself to simply informing about a reality, and instead it brings reality into existence.

Given these premises, it becomes easier to truly understand the reasons behind the two projects that the Communication Strategies Lab (University of Florence, Department of Political and Social Sciences) has carried out in the last period: the “Comunicazione Generativa per il Programma di Sviluppo Rurale 2014-2020 della Regione Toscana” project (in english: Generative Communication for the Tuscany Rural Development Programme, RDP) 2014-2020) - in partnership with the Tuscan Region, the agricultural world associations, and the farmers of the area - and the “San Casciano Smart Place” project, that is a result of the collaboration between the Communication Strategies Lab and the administration at San Casciano Val di Pesa, the famous town in the Chianti area, during the celebrations for 5th centenary of the Niccolò Machiavelli’s book *The prince*.

Both projects are based on the generative communication paradigm, which the Communication Strategies Lab experimented within the territorial marketing field with subjects ranging from local governance, cooperative culture, health, didactics, security, and many other areas.

The main objective of the project “Comunicazione Generativa per il Programma di Sviluppo Rurale 2014-2020 della Regione Toscana” consists of promoting the Tuscan territory through a generative approach aimed to create a communication strategy based on the knowledge about regional rural development.

In order to better communicate Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2014-2020 for Tuscany, the project has used participatory tools and communication sessions to facilitate the knowledge sharing, using both top-down and bottom-up strategies. In short, the project was working towards implementing simple information in the form of communication, „good communication“ that can generate sociability and reinforce the values of cohesion. Values that will be used to intervene more specifically with the technical measures of the Rural Development Programme.

The output will be a territorialized network for bottom-up communication and a web channel for top-down communication in the Tuscany Rural Development Programme 2014-2020. This will all be done through a set of participatory tools and many sessions aimed at facilitating the knowledge sharing. This process will hence create a networking environment that involves all stakeholders: from the institutions to the farmers, to all the productive activities operating in the area until all the citizens in the area are involved.

Similarly, the “San Casciano Smart Place” project improves the information related to the productive activities of the area by insisting on the usage of storytelling strategies as an opportunity for the creation of sociability. The project’s output is a network of social actors of the territory, a knowledge-based network that comes from the redefinition of the potential of Augmented Reality as applied to tourist use. The network is used to create innovative itineraries through the territory of San Casciano. These paths hybridize the symbolic (widespread culture, history, traditions, etc.) and material aspects (typical products of high quality, artwork, etc.) of the territory.

For example, the path “Ghosts of the Prince” runs between Florence and Sant’Andrea in Percussina (Machiavelli House) on the trail of the public and private story of Niccolò Machiavelli. While the path “San Casciano Smart Place” runs through the historic center of San Casciano walking through squares, monuments, churches, museums and other great historical, cultural and artistic places.

What makes this project peculiar is the innovative application of digital storytelling (Lambert, 2010; Ohler, 2013) and Augmented Reality strategies: content in the right place, at the right time, to the right people, with the goal of promoting the area telling engaging and multimedia stories (text, images, audio) to stimulate interest and participation by users.

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