

YOUTH TOWARDS THE THIRD MILLENNIUM: A RISK AND A PROMISE—THE ROLE OF MASS MEDIA FOR AN ECOLOGICAL AWARENESS

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Keywords : Environmental agenda , Common goods , Environmental information , Employment of future generations , School environmental education , Environmental training of journalists

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Summary

The article deals with four questions. First, mass media (newspapers and televisions) play a major role in setting the environmental agenda, both because of their increasing relevance and because the protection of common goods such as water, air, space and soil rests on civil society and requires people's cooperation. Second, In spite of the greater visibility acquired in the last 20–30 years, the environmental discourse remains “separate” from the most crucial questions facing the world at the end of the century. Sustainable development—as defined by the United Nations at the Rio Summit in 1992—remains therefore out of the political agenda in Italy. Third, Mass media have a clear responsibility for all this, since they privilege a nature-oriented approach to environment vis-à-vis a social approach, and cover global aspects more than local, thus creating frustration among the people—who feel unable to act on issues far way from their personal experience—and disinformation more than information. Fourth, the youth would stand to gain the most from sustainable development, given the high rate of young unemployment and the pace of destruction of future resources. To sum up, the paper asks for a better environmental training of journalists and a more integrated program of school environmental education, so that the youth is better equipped to meet the challenges facing contemporary society.

1. Youth and Environment in the Third Millennium

In spite of the greater “visibility” acquired in the last 20–30 years, the environmental discourse remains separate from the most important issues, which characterize the end

of the century. It is considered—in Italy and to a certain degree everywhere—“another” problem, to be added to those already existing—mass unemployment in general and of the young in particular; the slowing down of the rate of growth of GNP; increasing public deficits; globalization, and the growing relevance of financial capital vis-à-vis productive capital; a steady skewing of income distribution such that the wealthiest 20% of the world’s population grows richer while the bottom 20% sinks ever deeper into extreme poverty.

In principle nobody questions the depth of the ecological crisis of the planet: the increasing scarcity of natural resources, in particular energy and water; increasing levels of air and water pollution, to the point of posing a serious hazard for public health; and sometimes even for life on Earth. However the consensus disappears as soon as one tries to identify the causes of the various environmental issues and therefore the interests to be affected by the various possible solutions. At this point conflicting interests coalesce to keep the situation unchanged, or to limit the change to the point of making it insufficient to solve the problem, as in the case of climate changes. With the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, governments have agreed to both reductions and trading emissions of greenhouse gases, thus allowing industrial countries to buy rights to pollute from less developed countries with lower levels of greenhouse gases emission. In this way the Protocol is bypassed and largely neutralized, and this happens with most of the measures decided on paper to reduce environmental damages.

Conflicting interests exist both North–South, among Western industrialized countries and within each country. They are difficult to tackle primarily because environment cuts horizontally all other issues and interest groups. Another reason is that environment has become more and more a “global” issue seemingly located far way from the real places where people live. At the same time the various aspects of “local” environment such as garbage or traffic congestion—which touch directly people’s lives—have been put aside, as if they were not important or nothing could be done to solve them. No wonder then, that the ecological crisis and the socio-economic crisis remain separate, and that the latter prevails over the former.

An adequate understanding of the links between ecology and economy is necessary to overcome the idea that the ecological crisis is a “cost” for society to be paid in order to have development. The reality is just the opposite: the problem is the Western mode of production itself, which has become incompatible with the ecosystem; and therefore creates both the economic crisis (unemployment) and the ecological crisis (deterioration of life’s conditions). Under these circumstances, adequate environmental protection and prevention would eliminate or reduce drastically much of the so-called “environmental” costs (in public health, “natural” disasters, and traffic congestion, etc.).

The Western model cannot be extended to a world population, which has already reached 6 billion, because the planet would implode: the carrying capacity of the Earth cannot bear it. If we see the environmental discourse in this way, then the ecological crisis can lead to the solution of the problem, i.e. the occasion to restructure the present model of production in such way as to reduce the input of energy and all other natural resources as well as waste or negative goods per unit of output. Life styles and consumption patterns would have to change as well. But with new environmentally

friendly technologies there would be plenty of well-paid jobs for the young people, enough to drastically reduce or even eliminate present unemployment. The young people would obviously stand the most to gain from such a change, given that they are the first victims of present unemployment and that present day conspicuous consumption destroys resources belonging to future generations.

Real sustainable development, agreed by world governments in 1992 at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the Rio Earth Summit, is not part of the political agenda of any government. In general governments agree on alternative models of development when sitting at the conference tables, but then—under the pressure of the strongest, wealthiest, and most powerful interest groups—act differently.

Even the present days center-left or red-green European governments seem not to have understood the lesson coming from the Rio Summit. The present historical period is different in many ways from that experienced after the Second World War. One relevant difference is that an increase of investments may produce no new jobs and actually create instead more costs than benefits. To avoid this, investments should be qualified according to environmental parameters such as minimizing the input of energy and other resources per unit of output.

New investments should therefore be concentrated in a program of ecological conversion of the economy, so to rebuild all that has been destroyed in the period of the industrial “development”. Compared with 20–30 years ago, I believe that the ecological discourse is more visible, but at the same time the green radical thinking—which existed at that time—has disappeared from the mainstream environmental discussions. We now have “green oil,” as well as “green employment,” and “green business,” but the end result of such “green-washing,” is that serious environmental transformations are more and more removed from reality. They are portrayed as a risk, not an opportunity, and perhaps a promise.

2. The Duty to Inform and the Right to be Informed

The duty to inform is included in all the international conventions—climate changes, bio-diversity, and desertification—that charge national governments with the responsibility to promote education, public awareness, and information on matters related to the environment. In this context, mass media are called upon as the most important instrument through which the public should be made aware of environmental concerns and put in the condition to evaluate public policies in this area.

The responsibility to inform, educate and raise public awareness of “sustainable development” is moreover specified in *Agenda 21*, the Charter approved in 1992 at the United Nations Rio Conference On Environment And Development, both at point 36.10, “*Promoting Education, Public Awareness And Training*” and point 40, “*Information For Decision-Making*”. [*Ibidem*, pp. 697 and 732 respectively].

The right to be informed and therefore have access to environmental information of all kinds (on air, water, soil, territory, nature as well as economic activities and policies

related to the same) in the hands of public authorities (governments at all levels—national, regional, and local—civil service, and public agencies) is recognized in Europe by the EU's Directive 313/1990, fully implemented in Italy in 1997.

Over the last 20–30 years consensus has increased on the view that protection of common goods such as water, air space, and soil rests on civil society; and requires people's cooperation. The possibility to know the precise conditions of one's own environment has been perceived and recognized as an individual right of all citizens. The availability of information on the state of the environment has thus become a guiding criterion of environmental policies. [In the US, the right of citizens to be informed on environment was introduced in 1969 with the National Environment Policy Act].

The European Community favored this line at an early stage, and consequently has ruled on important aspects of the environmental issue. Examples of this are the first European Seveso Directive No. 501, concerning risks of relevant incidents deriving from industrial activities, approved in 1982, and the first European Via Directive No. 337, concerning the evaluation of the environmental impact of relevant public works, approved in 1985.

In Italy, the duty to inform and the right to be informed on the environment have been imposed in 1986, by the law No. 349 passed in 1986, establishing the Ministry of Environment. The law prescribes in article 14, paragraph 1, that "The Ministry of Environment mandates the most extensive distribution of information on the state of environment" and para 3 that "All citizens have the right to any information on the state of environment existing with public authorities". Moreover article 1 of the same law charges the Ministry of Environment (para 3) with the duty "to take all the necessary initiatives through mass media to sensitize public opinion to the necessities and problems of the environment"; and para 6, with the duty to present to Parliament a report on the state of the environment each two years.

To comply with its duty to inform on the environment, the Ministry established back in 1988 an information and monitoring national system (SINA Sistema Informativo Nazionale sull'Ambiente). SINA should collect, process and make available information coming from all the subjects having responsibilities in the field of environment (Regions, Provinces and Communes at the local level; Ministries of Health and Agriculture, and national agencies/bodies of all kinds such as ENEA, ENEL, ISTAT etc at the national level; the European Union, the World Health Organization etc, at the international level).

Nonetheless SINA is not in place yet, nor are most of the environmental structures created in the last 10 years in Italy. Only very recently funds have been allocated by Parliament (law 344/1997) sufficient to hire and train the Ministry staff (almost doubled in 2 years from 520 to 900 people) and to take new initiatives in the field of information. Two initiatives can be mentioned here, a specialized journal, which started publication last Fall, (*L'Ambiente informa* is published every 2 months, and so far has focused on single questions. The first issue came out in June 1997) and a national conference on the problem of information to be announced shortly. (The national

conference on environmental information is being prepared for basic research monitoring the Italian mass media's coverage of the environment).

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Biographical Sketch

Giovanna Ricoveri is an Italian living in Rome, Italy. She studied Political Science at the University of Pisa (*laurea cum laude* in 1958), and then Economics at Columbia University in New York (PhD candidate, 1967). Visiting Professor at the University of California at Santa Cruz (1985). Fulbright Employment Fellow in 1990 (Washington DC, Boston-Mass, Chicago, Akron-Ohio). Editor of the Italian

quarterly *Ecologia Politica*, which she co-founded in 1991. The journal (www.tiscalinet.it/ecologiapolitica) is part of an international network of journals (the north-American *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, editor James O'Connor; *Ecologie Et Politique*, editor Jean-Paul Deléage). Member since 1994 of the European network IRENE (Industrial Relations and the Environment), together with representatives of research institutes and universities from Germany, England, Denmark, Holland, Sweden, Belgium, France and Spain. Advisor for environmental issues to the Italian research institute IRES (Istituto Ricerche Economiche e Sociali), located in Rome. Contributor to the Italian Ministry of Environment in matters concerning the relationship between labor and environment.

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