

INTRODUCTION

From the second half of the 1940s, when postwar reconstruction began in Italy, there were essentially three driving forces of environmental change. The first was apparent in the uncontrollable process of urban sprawl, fueled by considerable migratory flows from the countryside and southern regions toward the cities where large-scale productive activities were beginning to amass. The main consequence of demographic growth was an urban expansion model—following an explosion in building favored by a cartel of interests that united builders, real estate professionals, landowners, and the investment banks—characterized by the overseeing of scheduled settlements, by an infrastructural system tilted toward road networks, and by the lack of public services (e.g., greenspaces, public facilities). This model was repeated in all the cities that were spreading like wildfire, creating new urban areas built in a disorderly manner on portions of land set among industrial premises and inhabited chiefly by factory workers and their families.¹

The second driving force of environmental change was unruly industrial development, which was tolerated since it was seen as the necessary tribute to be paid to progress and modernization. The paradigm of modernization was understood as the “path of exit from the rural condition, experienced as a condition of material scarcity in a static, restricted and introverted social and cultural context.”² Precisely this paradigm rendered possible a system of in-

dustrial relations that hinged on a social contract in which enterprises were allowed to liberally exploit natural resources in exchange for supplying employment, the economic resources indispensable to freeing oneself from poverty. The signatories of the social contract (enterprises, workers, citizens, policy makers, institutions) did not at all consider any possible negative consequences of such a development model, which is to say the *degenerative metabolism* by which industries and urban centers appropriated resources in their entirety (waterways, sources of energy, raw materials, the land) and returned them in the form of degraded *metabolites* (biologically dead stretches of waters, polluted soil, air tainted by the emissions from houses, factories, and the means of transportation). The endurance of the social contract was made substantially possible by collective repression of the environmental damages, which were also clearly visible and, above all, continually denounced by scientists. Repression of environmental problems, then, was not fed by scarce collective consciousness or the absence of information, but rather by awareness that the benefits produced by this development model—in the eyes of the great majority of citizens and of political and economic policy makers—far outweighed the disadvantages.³

The second half of the 1960s saw the first manifestations of a third powerful driving force of environmental change: mass consumption. Failure to perceive that individual use of the environment generates a collective damage lay at the heart of the proliferation of the most common styles of consumption, such as the use of motor vehicles (which emit harmful substances that contribute to pollution of urban air and are partially responsible for the greenhouse effect) and the purchase of prepackaged goods (which contribute to the exponential increase in solid waste, whose disposal may generate metabolites dangerous to human health, such as dioxins).⁴ Not all collective models of consumption are of a hedonistic nature—take the example of chemical products that can improve harvest yields or eliminate garden-infesting weeds—but they have played a role of fundamental importance in the onset of environmental crises, especially in urban areas.⁵ Industrial production has in fact the aim of satisfying individual and collective needs; in market economy societies the quantity and quality of goods to be produced are determined by consumers' choices which, for all that they are influenced by sociocultural and psychological motivations (fueled, for example, by advertising), are chiefly induced by motives of a utilitarian nature. The examples are numerous: the car (whose success was essentially determined by improvement in the freedom of personal movement, not comparable to any means of public transportation); the washing machine (whose fortune was due to the enormous consumer buy-in, freeing them from the slavery of washing by hand); prepackaged food products (which meant

quickly prepared meals at limited costs), and also plastic materials, which made it possible to produce objects that rapidly became widely used.

As Jared Diamond has efficiently shown, the history of humanity offers numerous examples of environmental crises caused by collective behaviors and lifestyles of societies that were unable to measure the impact of their actions on the environment.⁶ On a par with the Danes in Greenland and the inhabitants of Easter Island, the postwar society repressed the environmental damage it was causing because it evidently saw the advantages produced by the development model as being far greater than the disadvantage of living in an ecosystem deeply modified by anthropic activities responsible for a growing environmental deterioration. Working in the factory, traveling by car, buying in supermarkets, living in newly built housing outside the old town centers, taking part in the rituals of consumer society (e.g., Saturday afternoon shopping, weekend trips, summer holidays at the seaside or in the mountains) were activities with a higher social value in comparison to the possibility of living in a more salubrious and less degraded ecosystem.

In this situation, up to the mid-1970s the necessary conditions for tackling environmental problems with serious protectionist and rehabilitation interventions were lacking. The whole country was paralyzed by the paradigm of modernization: the rhetorical imperatives were to modernize infrastructures and lifestyles in order to bring Italy into the assembly of industrialized and developed nations. Collective adherence to the development model was almost total. Generalized consent contributed to repression of the damages that economic growth and urbanization were inflicting on the environment; the material advantages were so evident and coveted that environmental damages were considered a modest tribute to pay for progress.

The context began to change, very slowly, only around the mid-1970s when the environmental crisis became evident and the need to supply a remedy could no longer be put off. This was made possible by the concurrence of the first industrial restructuring, following a slowing down of the economy caused by the oil crisis of 1973–1974. The first companies that closed down or relocated factories built in the new suburbs—or, attracted by favorable financing, opened new premises far from the big central-northern cities, thus emptying great portions of urban areas—were an early sign of the clear transformations brought about by a development model based on the twofold term *industrialization/urbanization*. Those who were left unemployed, residents who found themselves obliged to live next to the now lifeless industrial pachyderms, also began to become aware of the environmental damages produced by development. The first rehabilitation policies were set in motion at both national and local levels at this time. The interventions, however, were rarely incisive and

continued to be vigorously obstructed by pressure groups, such as the unions of industrialists. We need only consider, for example, the events of Law No. 319 on waterways: the law was first emptied of content and then the application of its regulations was continuously put off until, almost twenty years later, the European Commission (EC) forced Italy to get in line with its directives.⁷

That said, the knotty question of the attitudes of workers and trade unions must be faced. It is entirely too easy—and demagogic—to place the blame for delayed implementation of environmental policies exclusively on the bosses, which, far more frequently than one might think, coincided with those of the workers. Companies certainly tried in every way (licit and illicit) to delay application of the (few) regulations that existed, and very likely also concealed the danger of certain work processes from the workers. But for decades the workers themselves had subordinated the safeguarding of their health and the environment to the guarantee of a job; this is demonstrated by the people of Prato, who were proud to see the waters of the Bisenzio River change color because those unnatural shades meant work and well-being. But there were also quarrels between citizens who protested about the smells and fumes produced by the factories and the workers who feared losing their occupations because of those protests.

The first real break came in the second half of the 1980s, simultaneously with the creation of the Ministry of the Environment and the victory of environmental petitions in the 1987 referendum on the civil use of nuclear power. These first significant changes in the attitude with which environmental problems were tackled gradually became increasingly incisive in the course of the 1990s, for two reasons: First, the great numbers of adherents achieved by the environmental movement after the accident at Chernobyl contributed to the subsequent electoral results obtained by the Green Party, which gained the Ministry of the Environment in center-left coalitions. Second, European treaties, by constructing a more solid and efficacious corpus of legislation, obliged reluctant countries such as Italy to produce regulations in line with European directives. In brief, the hetero-management of the EC played a role of fundamental importance that forced the European Union (EU) signatories—even the recalcitrant Mediterranean countries—to take care of their environmental problems within an ecosystem framework they had previously ignored.

There was a third cause, resting outside the purview of political and institutional decision makers: the rapid deindustrialization already begun during the late 1980s and then accelerated in the course of the 1990s. Progressive industrial desertification favored operations of environmental rehabilitation and made application of the regulations much easier. In short, a significant part of environmental improvements should be ascribed not to environmental

policies but to the fact that the factories were moved elsewhere, exporting to other places the environmental problems that had previously afflicted Italian urban areas.

In this context the book (which brings together texts written from 2004 to 2016) seeks to delineate a path of research that lies within the vein of relationships between urban areas and the environment.⁸ *Environment and Urbanization in Modern Italy* concentrates on the twentieth century and particularly on its last five decades, when the intensification of urbanization and industrialization led to a massive increase in the exploitation of natural resources.