

Large, Unnecessary and Harmful Projects of the 21st Century

Luca Mercalli

When we say "Large Project" we usually mean a building/engineering project of a huge size rather than built for people.

Since ancient times we have distinguished "useful large projects" from "unnecessary large projects".

The legendary Tower of Babel was unnecessary and even harmful. It aimed at reaching heaven and caused God's anger and confusion among human languages

The ancient Roman aqueducts, such as the Pont du Gard, were useful. The Egyptian pyramids and the imperial triumphal arches we admire today, at least from an aesthetic point of view, were unnecessary.

What do I mean by "useful" and "unnecessary" ?

In each handmade object there are raw materials and energy: stone must be dug out and cut, clay for bricks must be baked cutting trees down or burning oil, work must be done by people, animals and machines.

Some projects such as waterworks, sewers, networks, "give back" those resources that have been used to make them, greatly improving society's living standards. Some others, such as a cathedral, a royal building, have only a symbolic value, which anyway shows the purpose to represent the sublime, the divine, the hereafter, power, progress.

This does not mean I want to ascribe a demerit to unnecessary things because even aesthetic and spiritual values are useful for people but, of course, the Tour Eiffel is absolutely "unnecessary" and the 7300 tons of iron used to build it in 1889 might have improved the Parisians' living conditions in a more concrete way, while the Cavour Canal was very useful to feed millions of people.

Up to the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, energy (that is work) was mainly offered by slavery or by exorbitant taxes imposed to citizens and that allowed to make both useful and unnecessary things without any public debate.

Modernity arrived with cheap oil, machines that substituted human work and technology that allowed bold choices.

Post war Italy was a huge building site full of large projects, the Autostrada del Sole (The Sun Motorway), the dams, the electrical and telephone networks were all useful because they allowed to rapidly improve the living standards of millions of people, they had a profitable cost and an environmental cost which was considered acceptable.

People wished and pleaded for them, they were a political project, and the few local resistances were swept away by a huge faith in progress.

Anyway, the disaster of the Vajont Dam marked a break with the past: the economic and self-celebratory aspects of the project itself, the profits for a few people's inner circle, greatly prevailed over public interest and despite all the signs that announced the collapse, politics did not have the courage to stop a sequence of mistakes that led to two thousands victims in 1963.

Meanwhile the living standards improved and the large, useful and salvific projects became less necessary: we can say that in the 80s in Italy everybody was fairly well-off, the maintenance of an existing infrastructure became more important than the building of a new one.

In the 90s there was a twisting : a large project was no more an answer to a problem, shared with a local or national community, and an unnecessary project no more embodied the need for sublime beauty, anyway assimilable to a common good, but it

rather became a monster that lived on its own and turned itself into a mere opportunity for profit.

The companies that built it became tentacular predators of the world resources that, in order to survive, had to swallow up rivers of money giving back concrete flows, it didn't matter what or who for, the important thing was that the bulldozer demolished and the concrete mixer revolved.

We have now entered the age of the large unnecessary projects. That is possible because of the fusion between the technological possibilities and the financial tricks, mock money, created on paper through loans, that will rest on all the future generations.

Most of the large projects of the 21st century are promoted exploiting the rhetorical long wave of progress and modernity, which describes all of that as something absolutely positive and if we have to bear some environmental damages, let's be patient, we have to bargain with that by virtue of a sparkling promise of a bright future.

Money is absorbed by the taxpayer in a hidden way, without any explanation about the weight of infrastructural gigantism on public finance. So damages become irreversible : national debt, agricultural land overbuilding, biomes fragmentation, air, water and soil pollution, waste of energy and valuable raw materials, waste production, landscape devastation.

In this sense we are witnessing a sort of a reversal of sublime : large is no more a synonym of admirable, but nowadays the triviality of the building cement technique and the maximization of profit produce protuberances that have no aesthetic value, whose shape nobody has tried to refine and nobody has ever tried to experiment solutions that might at least link something pleasant for our sight to even an only alleged "usefulness".

A large, harmful and unwanted project turns itself into a bottomless pit that absorbs resources, does not solve problems and produces new damages and criticalities in an overcrowded world, where spaces are decreasing.

Matteo Melchiorre, a young historian from Veneto, grasps this epoch-making change of the now unfashionable interpretation of cement progress through his latest work, which is both a literary work and an essay: *La banda della superstrada Fenadora-Anzù con vaneggiamenti sovversivi* - The gang of the Fenadora-Anzù clearway (together with subversive ravings).

The clearway is part of that whole of major arterial routes of the piedmont motorway near Belluno that are supported by politicians who are a little greedy and lacking in imagination and who ascribe to the new viaduct, the new tunnel, the power to give local economy financial help and to solve a structural decay.

But a small group of respectable people doesn't agree. They break a spell and see the land and soul devastation caused by a never ending building site.

They try to struggle awkwardly but eventually it is too late: the process can't be stopped, "the clearway is more powerful than anything else surrounding it. It expresses an energetic excess that becomes real when it easily knocks down and overcomes any obstacle, following its plan straight away".

They were too late in becoming aware, the minds leading the protest are few, hesitating, naive: *"Words, we are trapped in words. We can't get out from that. Meanwhile, facts might be beyond our control"*.

As far as the Fenadora-Anzù clearway is concerned, facts got beyond control, and the green meadows around Feltre are no more there.

In the Susa Valley where 70.000 citizens are opposing the harmful high speed railway Turin-Lyon, there is still some hope for repentance.