

City, countryside, and landscape: from pre-urban condition to post-city

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Before the Countryside

What is there before the countryside? From a naturalistic point of view the answer could be the wild nature, be it rich in lush forests or rather arid and desert. However, from an anthropological and philosophical point of view the answer is: The Garden of Eden, the pure land, where there is no pain and there is no death, or rather there is no awareness of them. With the advent of knowledge such spell has been broken and man has been precipitated from the natural condition of a hominid animal among other animals to the tragedy of the human existence condemned from the birth to pain and death.

This passage is a sort of creation or otherwise an anthropogenesis. In the accounts of the creation of ancient civilizations the Edenic condition is not yet clearly human, even in the Bible, the real human condition begins after being driven out of the earthly Paradise. Adam before that moment belongs to a kind of pre-humanity, as the first people who are born in a human mortal condition are Abel, the shepherd, and Cain, the peasant: two figures who mediate their relationship with nature through work. Work is connected ontologically to human finitude just as measurable time and space are. Immortal beings do not care about work and do not take time into account and therefore not even the space on which their temporal action takes place. All this instead becomes significant with the discovery of death. The one who knows that will die considers the importance of time and especially the activities destined for livelihood, and for this reason he or she tends to measure space and time. In this condition the space subjected to human labor becomes countryside both in the agricultural and pastoral meaning. Thus, the Bible, putting, at the origin of human development, the murder of the nomadic shepherd Abel by the settled farmer Cain, tells us two things: one that the countryside and the agricultural work that it presupposes are intrinsically linked to what Heidegger called to being-toward-death; the other is that we are talking about the transition to a stable condition typical of the Neolithic culture.

The Neolithic is the foundation of civilization, but this foundation is the result of great pain, which echoes in the founding assassination perpetrated by Cain. This is also reminiscent of the assassination of Osiris, cultural hero founder of agriculture, by his brother Seth, and recalled by the murder of Remus by his twin Romulus. There is no countryside without death. Without death instead there is Eden, the paradise on the Earth, or the natural indeterminate. Therefore, the pure uncontaminated nature is in the anthropological sense immortal.

Death and Resurrection

If the countryside is a nature characterized by the awareness of death and the necessity of human labor, it is also an antidote to the anguish that such awareness generates. The countryside is also the place of formation of the mysteries or of the proto-mystery cults. They also derive perhaps from Mesopotamia, where we find the myth of the death of shepherd Tammuz-Dumuzi, who is forced by the goddess Inanna-Ishtar to replace her in the underworld. The alternation of the female-masculine principle is also associated here, in the “science of the concrete”, with the death-rebirth cycle of vegetation and therefore with the possibility of rebirth for the initiate. More interestingly, the birth of the mystery cult is directly connected to the myth of the already mentioned Osiris, inventor of agriculture, which is killed and dismembered like Orpheus. Differently from Osiris, Orpheus is connected to a pastoral context in addition to an underworld’s one. Dionysus and Demeter, the mother of Persephone and goddess of the harvest, are also agricultural deities. Each myth remixes in its own way the elements with variations that we find in other myths that cross all of Asia up to Japan. Orpheus and Eurydice resemble Izanami and Izanaghi. Seth is similar to the god Susano (as Levi-Strauss had already noted), then the period of concealment of the goddess Demeter with subsequent famine in the countryside recalls that of the goddess Amaterasu.

The Duality City/Countryside

In 2003, the philosopher Mario Perniola organized a conference entitled *Natura Coltura Cultura* (‘Nature, (agri)culture, culture’), in which agriculture, which is the field of cultivation and thus the countryside, were in an intermediate position, between the city, which is the place of culture, and the wilderness of nature. So, the countryside in this vision was different only in the degree of culture and wilderness with the city and the forest, as if it were half nature and half culture. This observation sounds very reasonable, but things may be more complex. In fact, the city is not all cultural for the simple reason that man cannot be completely cultural, devoid of instincts, passions and physiological needs. So even the men’s place cannot be completely rational, it must always have a space for some forms of ‘natural’ irrationality. On the contrary, the more you want to reduce it, the more you make it concentrated, making it powerful too. From this point of view the city is like a cell (for instance, an egg, which has a yolk and an egg white that are functional and complementary). This irrational space is the sacred, which therefore contains the wild forces of nature and reconverts them into elements functional to social cohesion. From this space all the institutions are generated, like the organs from the egg. These organs allow social control even in conditions of greater entropy with increasing social complexity and therefore they allow this wild strength to be less concentrated, so that the more the complexity of social organization increases and the more the strength of the sacred decreases, until it becomes a mere shadow of what it was before, setting the conditions for second-generation and second-level sacral forms which, however, we cannot

illustrate here. So, the city tends to secularization with its expansion, generating some lighter forms of sacredness.

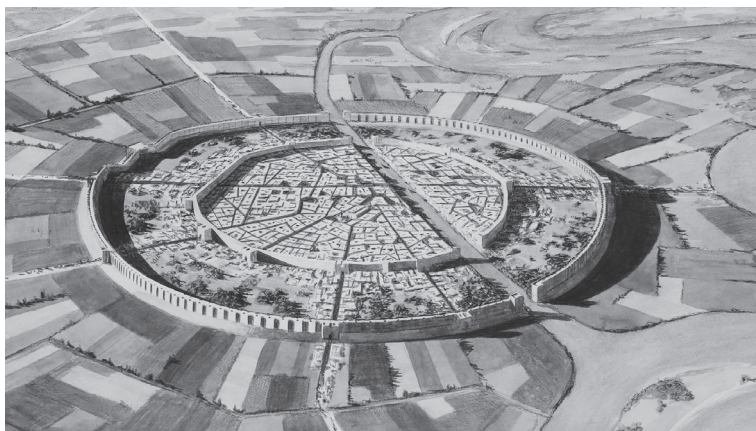


Figure 1. Reconstruction of the city of Mari



Figure 2. The acropolis of Troy (reconstruction)

Therefore, the city is directly connected with the wilderness from the inside. The countryside is the prerequisite for the formation of the city. But then the city, once developed, redefines the countryside as an area from which it draws resources for livelihood. On the one hand, therefore, the city exploits the countryside, but on the other hand, it allows peasants to adopt more effective cultivation techniques. In this sense, then, the countryside is a sort necessary ‘device’ of the city and opposes the wild nature with the city. The idyllic countryside also in its pastures celebrated by the Arcadian poets continue to be the space of death and not the Garden of Eden, nor the wild jungle. So, these spaces continue, despite their apparent naturalness to be a kind of anthropized spaces. This is the meaning of the famous epitaph “et in arcadia ego”.



Figure 3. Guercino, Et in Arcadia ego (1618-1622)

Country Mice and City Mice

It is said that Aesop wrote his famous fables in the 6th century. B.C. and that he was a slave, perhaps of African origins. At that time the Greek cities were developing rapidly but perhaps those tales came from the Middle East where there were ancient cities that had already created a sense of longing for the countryside as a literary *topos*. So, Aesop would not have invented all these fables but would have only collected them as it happened in the '*Cunto de li cunti*,' maybe adapting them to the Greek sensibility. The cliché of the quiet and peaceful farmer and country life is very old and lasting, as well as the cliché of the richest but stressed citizen. However, it is a commonplace that is often contradicted by historical evidence.

Not an Idyllic Life

The clichés about country life have shown themselves to be more immutable than the countryside itself. First of all, the countryside during the wars has always suffered from the passage of troops, responsible for raids and violence. Then the farmers have been expelled from their lands on many occasions and the countryside has become a place of intensive exploitation. A first case has been reported during the Roman Republic, when the patricians enriched by wars, having many slaves, expelled the peasants from the countryside to create large estates cultivated by slaves. These peasants poured into Rome where they became the so-called 'urban proletariat'. The Gracchi brothers tried to deal with this problem engaging a hard conflict with the ruling class. The countryside thus became a place of dislocation for the exiled peasants, but also for the slaves who substituted them, because they had no relationship with the territory and they did not want to be

there.

The Elegiac Aesthetics

The countryside became a place of slavery, but nevertheless, just in this period we find the most ideological attempt to build an image of the countryside as a place of tranquility and intimacy. The Gracchi brothers started a period of struggles between *Optimates* (aristocrats) and *Populares* (middle class) that resulted in civil wars, with Marius against Sulla or Caesar against Pompey. At the end of these struggles, after Caesar's assassination and the destruction of the aristocratic army, Octavian promoted a policy of pacification and mitigation of the political passions. To this end his friend Maecenas conceived a cultural policy that used the ideals of the serenity proposed by the Epicureanism to publicize a life far from political commitment (which, on the contrary, was supported by Stoicism) and return to private life, which passed through the idealization of the country life, away from the stress of the city, where people just mind to their family and to their trusted friends. These ideals were propagandized through the revival of the Greek elegy written by Callimachus and the idyllic poetry of Theocritus proposed by poets such as Tibullus, Propertius and Virgil, to which we can add Horace's satires. This countryside and these pastures, however, are a completely literary construction (even if supported sometimes by sound notions as in the case of Virgil) and have the aim of proposing the countryside as a form of escapist aesthetics.

The Countryside at the End of the Empire

The Empire, after the crisis of the third century, begins to suffer an unstoppable degradation of its institutions. Roman society becomes a mix of cultures and an imperial cultural standard made up of Hellenistic literature and Roman pragmatism is established. In cities, social union collapses, and individualism becomes the standard. The works are entrusted to slaves or to dislocated proletarians, the army is increasingly made up of former barbarians. The Italic peoples become disaccustomed to the use of weapons. Nobody wants to sacrifice himself for someone else who thinks only of himself. So when the expansive phase of the Empire stalls and the problem of defending the limes against the barbarian pressures arises, this is always a problem of someone else. The response to barbaric pressure does not take place on a social level, because the people simply call for a strong general to save the situation with his armies. But these armies made of barbarians are less and less effective against other barbarians who have even militated in the Roman ranks. Moreover, more and more often the armies are moved to settle matters of succession to the throne. Cities become insecure places and even businesses have problems, so the aristocrats leave the city and go to their country residences that become large farms. This is the phenomenon of the villas that announces the subsequent feudalism with its relationship between nobles and serfs. So, the countryside is seen as a refuge and an antidote to the crisis in the city. This time, this

movement, which is real, is not accompanied by a literary idealization, as literature is now monopolized by the rise of Christianity, which sees the countryside as a place infested with rude polytheists, called probably for this reason “pagans”, from “pagus”, that means country village (even if there are other theories about the origins of this word). But the countryside is also the place where Christians build their monasteries, places to live according to the teachings of the Gospel, but which attract especially the nobles, who are sometimes large landowners with crowds of slaves. Two of these decided to donate all their immense possessions to the Christians (Brown, 2012), freeing up for the occasion their slaves, that is, of the people who had lived there for long time as serfs and whose liberation ended up once again in the expulsion of the slaves from the lands in which they lived. It is no wonder then that these servants strongly opposed their liberation.



Figure 4. Villa of Colombarone



Figure 5. Villa of Minori near Amalfi

The Destruction

When the barbarians managed to break through the defenses on the limes, they practically had free field. The Roman cities, although populous, were not able to organize a resistance, and were

instead burdened by the fact that their servants of barbarian origin tended to fraternize with the barbarians. The generals then, when they were able, were opposed by court plots that feared their power. The general Flavius Aetius has been killed by the Emperor. The barbarous but loyal Stilicho was murdered by the patrician circles who accused him of playing both sides. The last great generals, in fact, were of barbarian origins. Now Italy was in the hands of barbarian generals, like Odoacer, who deposed the last emperor of the Western Empire and sent the Imperial Colours to Constantinople. Today a revisionist approach tries to shift the blame for the destruction of the Romans on the general of the Eastern Empire, Belisarius, thus exchanging liberators with the invaders, to absolve the latter. The reason is that these historians want to create an image of the Italian identity that should be barbarian and anti-Roman, following the model of France, Germany and Great Britain; an attempt that is actually ridiculous, because it is clear that the Romans were none other than the Italians of the time.

Belisarius and Narses succeeded in freeing Italy, but the project did not go ahead, because the Empire no longer had the necessary funds to organize a response to the new barbarians who then went down to Italy. These barbarians, called Lombards for their long beards, were a population very similar to the Vikings. They found an almost disarmed Italy and could engage in looting and destruction. So, the countryside that had been a refuge to the crisis of the cities, could no longer survive without the trade granted by the city and therefore the decline of the countryside followed the decline of the cities, and in this state of autarchy only survival economy remained. This was the beginning of the so-called dark ages. The accusers of Eastern Romans, today called Byzantines, should remember that while Italy was lying in the worst economic conditions since the Bronze Age, life in the Eastern Roman Empire continued to flow in relative tranquility, with agriculture and trade. The peak of the destruction was however touched in the ninth and tenth centuries when the South of Italy was destroyed by the war against the Arabs (but this time historians accuse the Arabs and not the Christians). The countryside was reduced to such a state that first they were abandoned by the peasants and then finally also by the monks, who away letting the fields go back to the wild state.

Medieval Nature

The nature of the early Middle Ages is therefore wild, and the countryside is minimal. In the late Middle Ages, however, thanks to the trade with the Arabs, after having expelled them from Italy, the economy flourishes again and also agriculture. Free communes are created, and serfs take refuge there in order to obtain freedom and protection, protection that is granted to them because the nascent artisan and commercial bourgeoisie need employees. Something similar happened also in Germany where appeared the saying “Stadtluft macht frei” (urban air makes you free). The Italian cities were not very big, but in Europe only Paris was bigger than the Italian cities.



Figure 6. Bologna during the Middle Ages (reconstruction)

Bologna had just over 50,000 inhabitants, but it was very lively and full of towers, so that it seemed like a sort of Manhattan of the Middle Ages, therefore it is not surprising that the first university is born there. In Italy there was a strong urban culture that also provoked repercussions especially in the religious sphere with mystics like Bernard of Clairvaux, Joachim of Flora and especially Francis of Assisi. It is the latter that, in reaction to the hypocrisy of urban life, rediscovered an almost pantheistic spirituality, in which nature, generically intended as the creation, is considered as a sister. The interesting aspect for us is that, in this way, Francis no longer distinguishes countryside and forest, but simply considers the city, place of sin, in opposition to nature, place of creation, in which, since there is no free will, even violence is innocent. The countryside, on the other hand, is re-evaluated in the secular field, for example in Siena. Here Lorenzetti was commissioned to paint a large fresco, in which we find the opposition between the city and the countryside resolved under the common denominator of the government. We are referring to "Effects of Good Government (in the City/in the Country)". This painting is important because it is the first real landscape of post-classical culture in the West. Franciscanism, however, though had a wide cultural influence, did not develop a truly pictorial landscape. The landscape in the West, in fact, was born above all thanks to the Nordic culture and it is not by chance that in Italy it is mainly developed in the Venetian culture.

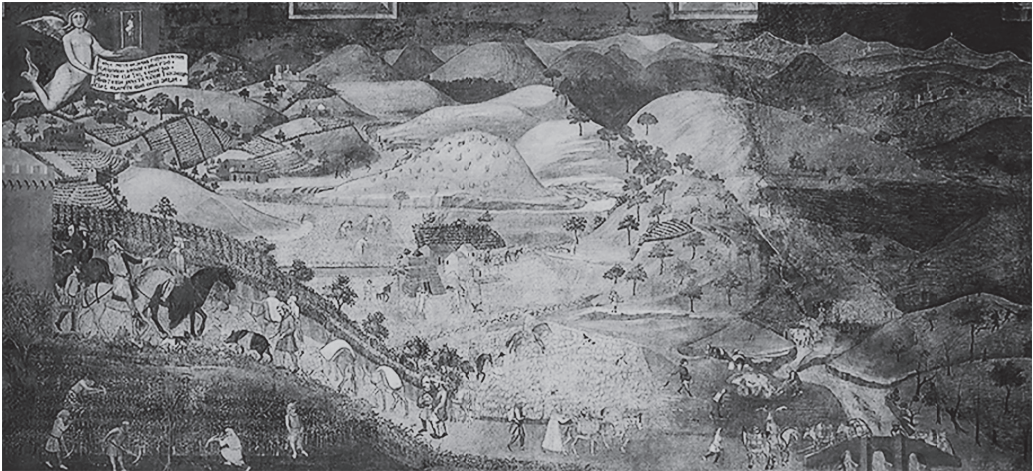


Figure 7. Ambrogio Lorenzetti - Allegories of the good and bad government (1338-1339).

The landscape is, therefore, a fruit of bourgeois and Christian sensibility that does not oppose places anthropized to wild places, but the city to everything else that is unified by the fact of being a sort of background seen from the perspective of the city itself.

The Countryside of the Modern Age: From a Symbolic Place to a *Tabula Rasa*.

If the image of the classical countryside had been theoretically supported by the transition from Stoicism to Epicureanism, the typical movement of the modern age, which transforms the countryside into landscape from an aesthetic point of view and in a simple territory from an economic point of view, is supported by the passage from Neoplatonic to Aristotelian philosophy and therefore to Empiricism. In fact, the landscape is affirmed first in the Veneto dominated by the Paduan Aristotelianism, and then in Northern Europe along with the spread of Empiricism. Aristotelianism is already a form of Empiricism in that it focuses on the experience, which the Venetians realize, preferring the attention to color to Florentine design (connected to the idea). However, Empiricism takes a further step, it denies the Aristotelian idea of substance to limit itself to the only sensible impression (*veduta*/view) that is impressed on a mind that originally is, according to a Scholastic formula, a *tabula rasa* or in Locke's words a "blank slate". This means that the landscape is not a representation of houses, trees, hills, and woods that exist as separate things in themselves, but is simply a set of sensible impressions that are unified in the white space (*tabula rasa*) of the canvas and that are recognizable as things only a posteriori, when they can be. This allows the painter to give space to confused, indistinct and indeterminate paintings (Turner) too. In the same way, this is the premise for the spread of the *camera obscura* and the conception of painting as an optical representation. We have not to forget that the first cameras were built by artists.



Figure 8. Giorgione and Titian, Pastoral Concert (1509 ca)



Figure 9. Anton S. Pitloo, Bacoli (veduta, beginning of 19th century).

This approach to nature is parallel to the modern economic conception of the territory, which assimilates it to a simple but profitable land capital. In this case, the blank slate is no longer a starting condition, (the lands were previously occupied by the peasants), but a goal. The first step to this aim is represented by enclosures and then by a more systematic action of cancellation of human presence, known as “clearing of estates”. In this operation once again, the peasants are expelled from their lands and forced to go to the city, where they had not only a miserable life, but also they were hardly harassed, as it has been shown by Thomas More in *Utopia* and Karl Marx in the first book of *The Capital*.

Industry and Tourism

Heidegger in *The Question Concerning Technology* (1954), notes how, the advent of industrialization is a further step toward the erasure of the countryside and the exploitation of nature, as it is reduced to an extractive resource. This also corresponds to the de-aestheticization of the territory that becomes shabby, insignificant and un-worldly, something made even more dramatic by pollution. The industrial city itself, from meeting place, becomes a machine of production and consumption. So, to escape this de-aestheticization and find “humanly” appreciable landscapes, which look like paintings (picturesque), people need to go far in less capitalist or pre-capitalist countries like Italy or even pre-modern countries like the Oriental ones (exoticism). Tourism, in fact, was born with the Grand Tour that was the journey that the North Europeans, like Goethe, Byron, Turner, Corot, took in Italy from the late seventeenth century (when it was still an apprenticeship trip) to the mid-nineteenth century (when instead became trip for aesthetic appreciation).



Figure 10. Antonio Fontanesi, Aprile (1872 - 1873)

Globalization and Post-City

In the meantime, tourism has become global, but even the industrialization and the debasement of the countryside has suffered the same fate. It becomes increasingly difficult to find a place “other”, and, in the same time, the peasants are globally dislocated by brutal modernization practices, which sometimes create more problems than those they solve (Vandana Shiva), and by new large-scale enclosure practices, known as land grabbing. This reduction of the countryside to a mere exploitable fund (Bestand) also corresponds to the deconstruction of the unity of the city, which no longer has a center or borders. The city ceases to be a microcosm and turns into an urban texture equipped with some services that also tend to be in turn increasingly deterritorialized.

Neighborhood stores were replaced by shopping centers and today even these are in crisis because they are being replaced by online shopping. More and more services pass from the territory to the internet, depleting the real space. The public space has been deconstructed (with the lack of places for socialization) to be replaced by places for consumption such as the international chains of cafes and restaurants, where it is necessary to pay only to share the presence of others. The so-called “smart cities” only accelerate this process, because they do not consider the anthropological and symbolic aspects that characterize human existence. The post-city is, therefore, an urban reality devoid of identity and social spaces. A discontinuous texture of buildings and streets, with areas in decomposition, places in abandonment, being in this sense disorientated and deterritorialized. At the edge of this urban texture, there is no longer the country, because it fades into equally anonymous industrial areas that have the same characteristics of texturization and discontinuity even when there are agricultural industries. The innermost areas are also impoverished, due to the migration toward the urban textures, where people can find services and work even at the cost of an inhuman life. So, the countryside suffers the umpteenth phenomenon of dislocation and decline. All this situation is basically post-human.



Figure 11. Porto Torres, industrial area

It becomes increasingly difficult to escape from this anonymous space without ending up in another anonymous space. The touristic space immediately becomes a pre-packaged experience and the tourist passes through them as through the windows of a shopping mall. Today all this experience is not unified but in the eye of the visitors who are often distracted and ignorant, because they do not even know what they want to see, and who are overwhelmed by the insignificance of their experiences. This shows a situation of individualism, narcissism and social fragmentation similar to that which preceded the barbarian invasions. In fact, who would sacrifice himself today to defend someone who has always thought of himself? We just have to flee to the countryside, before the barbarians arrive. But in order to go there, we have to reinvent the

countryside and, reinventing the countryside does not mean just buying a field. It means rediscovering the anthropic role of “culture” and thus the symbolic meaning of the countryside. Because the countryside is that place of nature where there is death, but where there is also the promise of rebirth.

Roberto TERROSI, Kyoto, May 20th

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Images

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