

## ***Under the Messina Bridge: Conflict, Governance and Participation***

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Governmental decisions to build any kind of infrastructure inevitably seem to trigger social conflict between the Public Administration and the local civil society. These conflicts could be considered a crisis of political legitimacy and the analysis of these social struggles might help to understand the issues of the ‘governance’ and the ‘participation’ in contemporary society. The Bridge over the Strait of Messina seems to represent a characteristic case on the Italian way of governance and its difficulties to meet local interests and social legitimacy about infrastructural policies. Using some of Habermas’ key-concepts, we analyse the counter-arguments and the strategies employed by local social movements against the Bridge. The study of the dynamics of the social conflict around the Bridge suggest how the widespread social opposition that has stopped its construction has been a social reaction to the closure of the negotiations, making it impossible for the local social actors to have a say in this project. It is argued that engaging local actors through a collaborative participation on the policy agenda is conditional to avoiding hard social conflict. Also, a reformulation of Italian legislation seems to be necessary in order to achieve this goal.

**Keywords:** Civil Society, governance, participation, social movements.

### **Introduction**

In this article we present the results of an exploratory research regarding the Messina Bridge project, linking Sicily to Calabria in Southern Italy.<sup>1</sup> Using key-concepts in the Habermasian framework, we attempt to offer an explanation of the dynamics of the social conflict around the Bridge project and to identify how and when participation of the local actors in infrastructural projects can help to avoid disruptive social conflict over Government policies and to produce more democratic policy decisions.

Often governmental decisions to build infrastructures seem to inevitably trigger conflict between the public administration and the local society, especially when grassroots participation is limited. From this viewpoint, these conflicts could be seen as a crisis of political legitimacy, and their analysis may help to understand the issue of *governance* and *participation* (Pardo and Prato 2011). Although these conflicts may delay the realization of the planned infrastructures, sometimes they lead to positive changes in the initial plans. This seems to happen because diverse *reasons* emerge from the social conflicts and literally invade the space of the policy. In short, social local movements can create an advocacy coalition that offers in the public sphere an effective alternative, infrastructural solution to the proposed governmental projects.

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<sup>1</sup> What follows is the result of a joint effort. However paragraphs 1, 2, 3 were written by Ivano Scotti, while paragraphs 4 and 5 were written by Enrico Sacco. The conclusion was written jointly. This article is an updated version of a study carried out as part of a research project coordinated by Patrizio Di Nicola (Sapienza, University of Rome). Some results of that research were published in Fontana and Sacco (2011). We wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for *Urbanities* for their valuable comments, which helped to improve the manuscript. We are also grateful to Italo Pardo for the opportunity to present our research at the International Interdisciplinary Conference on ‘Issues of Legitimacy: Entrepreneurial Culture, Corporate Responsibility and Urban Development’ that was held in Naples, Italy, between 10 and 14 September 2012 and to Paola De Vivo for her encouragement through the process of writing this article.

The events regarding the Strait of Messina Bridge seem to make an exemplary case in the Italian social-political context. In spite of the fact that the Bridge was presented as a crucial element in the context of a general modernization plan of Italy and became part of a more complex road network envisaged by the EU (the Corridor 1 Berlin-Palermo), the lack of social participation in the decision-making process and the ambiguous behaviour of some local administrations triggered local actors' opposition. As a result, the Bridge is only on paper, the legitimacy of the Bridge is in doubt and the realization of the project appears far from becoming a reality.

In short, well beyond the realization of the infrastructure, we have attempted to study the effects of a unilateral governmental decision on a territory that tries to generate its own autonomous socio-economic development, on which the presence of the Bridge could have a frustrating effect. We have investigated the viewpoint of the local movement born with the aim of contrasting the Bridge project, the 'Rete No Ponte' (literally, 'Network No Bridge'; from now on, RNP). We used qualitative methods, particularly the construction of case-studies. The collection of the empirical material was organized in two main ways: in-depth interviews with ten important members of the RNP movement, and the analysis of the information given in the main national and local newspapers over the last five years. Useful material has also been collected through participation in some demonstrations against the Bridge organized in Messina between July and August 2010. The study of legislative framework (national and local) and of socio-political literature on this issue also has provided a useful database.

The first section of the discussion that follows explains the theoretical framework adopted and the key-concepts used in this research. The second section offers a short story of the Bridge. The sections from third to fifth focus on an analysis of the case study. The concluding section summarizes our findings.

### **Social Movements and Conflicts: A Framework**

Recently, an interesting study has analysed the complex issue of the legitimacy of governance (Pardo and Prato 2011), showing how in a democracy the authority of rulers must be recognized on *moral* and *legal* grounds because the democratic process is based on a fundamental accord between the rulers and the will of the people. Consequently, social conflict about policies can be seen as an expression of a failed connection between these two aspects. It also leads us to reconsider citizenship as a 'relationship concept', for the way in which governance is experienced by different social groups tends to reflect the existence of different categories of citizens. From this viewpoint it is clear that social conflict can be considered as a redefinition and a renegotiation of political power and of the legitimacy of State actions in any context where public decision-making disregards local interests.

Some anthropological studies have also analysed how environmental movements use discursive strategies in the social conflict as a kind of 'transactional' action (Tarrow and Petrona 2006, Torsello 2011). In other words, these works have shown how, in order to reach their goals, social movements manage to change their strategies according to the different political and social actors with which they interact. These studies look at environmentalism –

intended as a social movement aimed both at promoting the protection of the environment and at politicizing citizens' claims to such protection – as a project of political interaction which makes use of local and global resources to achieve the legitimacy of its actions (Torsello 2011). Moreover, as Mollica points out (2012), in order to understand better local political conflict it is important to take into account the role and dynamics of the communication process through which the political élites legitimize issues that carry symbolic and identity meanings.

We suggest that, in this debate, the theoretical framework of Habermas (1981, 1984) can contribute to an analysis of the conflicting dynamics of local opposition to infrastructural policies. In particular, this framework appears to be useful to our research on the actions of a local movement in the public sphere against a governmental decision, and the attendant dynamics of the process of negotiation and conflict. From this standpoint, as some scholars have noted (Bedrous 2009, Brulle 2000, Withworth 2000, Edwards 2009), social conflicts that arise from the actions of collective actors, the social movements, are seen as a form of self-organization of the civil society. They are free associations of people who have something in common – interests, values, living conditions and so on – and who act in the public sphere as agents of change. In a democracy they attempt to transform their 'private standpoint' regarding work conditions, standard of living, and so on, into 'shared public issues' (Staggenborg 2007). In order to achieve their goals, these movements need to obtain a broad consensus in the social context that produces a change in the political agenda and incorporates the demands raised in the *public sphere* (Habermas 1989, 1996). The 'public sphere' is the place where the private interests of the actors clash with the main social issues; the outcomes of this struggle redefine the norms that control the economic and bureaucratic system and produce changes in the collective viewpoint about the world. In an *ideal speech situation*, where everyone can freely state their views in the public sphere, the result of the social confrontation (or conflict) is a rational solution of the problems (Habermas 1993).

Nevertheless, as various authors have stressed (Calhoun 1992; Fraser 1990, 2003; Negt and Kluge 1993), the notion of public sphere needs to be rethought. To begin with, the public sphere is not a monolithic social space, for societies are marked by internal differentiation among social groups that have different social resources and interests; consequently, social differences among these groups determinate different public spheres. According to Lolive (1999), the mobilization of movements can generate an alternative viewpoint (from particular interests) and redefine the policies first of all because they generate their own position in the public sphere close to the movements and then because they attempt to redefine 'public interest' through the dynamics of social conflict. For these reasons, some *counter-public spheres* are observed to be in collaborative or conflicting relationships with each other over the definition of the common good.

However, to understand how and if movements can promote social change, we must consider three dimensions: the political opportunity structure, the resources mobilized and the cognitive *praxis*. The first is related to the openness/closeness of the political system to the movements and their claims (Kiesi et al. 1992). The second concerns the ability of the movements to link with other social objectives, their internal organizational structure and the

way in which they manage resources – money, citizens, experts and so on (Della Porta and Diani 2006). The third aspect refers to the identity, meaning and knowledge that movements represent and are capable of conveying and producing through the social struggle (Catherin 2000). Taken together, all these elements may explain the social dynamics of conflict and of its results.

In short, we can summarize our theoretical standpoint as follows:

1. Social conflict generated by the movements against infrastructural policies could be considered as a reaction to a unilateral top-down decision that is seen as disruptive in a specific context because its realization would deeply change the socio-cultural and environmental scenario;

2. The attitude of the political system to social movements must be evaluated considering which public sphere influences the decision-making process and what factors block their ability to influence political decisions by other actors;

3. In order to achieve their goals movements must expand their counter-public sphere of action by including social issues related to their main interests. This can increase their available resources and their strength to influence political decisions; at the same time, this increases the complexity of their internal organization.

In our view, this framework helps to analyse the rise of social conflict against infrastructural policies and to understand what a movement needs in order to influence these policies. However, as Schlosberg (1995) noted, only the analysis of the practices of the movements can help to understand how a critical framework can be useful in the social analysis and, thus, to understand better the relationship between cultural representation (discursive frame) and the organizational structure of the actions of social movements (their practices).

### **An ‘Unrealized Bridge’**

The Messina Bridge project is one of the major infrastructure works which the last Berlusconi Government considered part of a modernization plan for Italy. This colossal infrastructure – 3,300 meters long and 60 meters wide supported by two gigantic piers – should be completed by 2017 at the cost of 8.5 billion Euros. The Bridge would be part of the priority mobility projects of the EU, a section of the *European Corridor N. 1* which would link Palermo to Berlin.<sup>2</sup>

However, the idea of connecting Sicily with the mainland is not new. In 1969, two government-owned companies, ANAS and FS,<sup>3</sup> launched an international competition to stimulate bids on a project regarding the construction of a motorway and a railway on the Messina Strait. After three years, the law n. 1158/1971 granted authorization to build a link

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<sup>2</sup> See the EU COM (2007)135. However, in 2011 the EU Commission changed the initial project. Among the EU infrastructure priorities, the Corridor n. 1 will be replaced by the Corridor n. 5 ‘Helsinki-Valletta’ which excludes the Calabria and Sicily Regions.

<sup>3</sup> ANAS is an Italian government-owned company responsible for the construction and maintenance of motorways and state highways. FS is a government-owned holding that manages infrastructure and services on the Italian rail network.

between Sicily and Calabria. In 1982, the ‘Stretto di Messina S.p.A.’ company was established, and was appointed by the Italian government to plan, build and manage the Bridge. IRI, a government-owned industrial holding, was the majority shareholder of the ‘Stretto di Messina S.p.A.’, while Regions accessed minor shares. From the start, the construction of the Bridge appeared to be a central Government top-down decision and what happened in the subsequent years is widely known (Angelini 2010, Bottari 2009, Marino 2010). Here, we want to address the social aspects related to this ‘unrealized Bridge’; therefore, as Mollica shows (2012), it is important to consider the long and turbulent history of public communication in relation to the potential socio-economic impact of the Bridge on the local communities. In particular, the institutional communication that has been generated to justify the infrastructure continues to influence the debate among the public on a facility that was imagined and discussed but never built. The social-political events connected to the Messina Bridge have produced extensive scientific and journalistic disputes. Several aspects have been explored (environmental, economic, normative, technological, and so on.) and some questions have been asked, such as: Why has it been decided to build this major infrastructure? What are the political reasons, the economic interests and the strategies behind this action? These questions have certainly raised great interest, but most studies have addressed only a few aspects of the problem, and in a fragmented way. From a sociological viewpoint there are still many questions to be answered; for instance: What institutional method was chosen in order to mitigate the potential conflict among the stakeholders? What are the spaces created to discuss the Bridge with local citizens? Finally, if there is no room for negotiation between public decision-makers and the civil local society, what are the outcomes of these choices? The study of these issues may offer insights that go beyond the case study and contribute to the broader debate on development paths and the underlying decision-making models (Baert, Koniordos, Procacci and Ruzza 2012).

To analyse the social and institutional elements that mark the history of ‘the Bridge’ means to expose the idea of development stemming from modernist thought (Berger 1974, Caillé 1988, Folliet 1950, Mumford 1934). In spite of widespread criticism, this model of governance in respect to development continues to be dominant among Italian political decision-makers. Therefore, the hypothesis from which we started our investigation was that the Messina Bridge embodies a development model that relies on systemic legitimization, meaning an imposition of political decision on local social life that would be legitimized only by the economic benefits calculated by the Government.

### **The Different Interests at Stake**

Recently, the significance of the Bridge has increased following two legislative events. First, the Berlusconi governments removed several political and financial stumbling blocks to the start of construction. Thus, an infrastructure that would connect Sicily to mainland Italy has been transformed from a utopian idea into a feasible project. In this context, the ‘Stretto di Messina S.p.A.’ was used as promoter in the negotiation processes regarding the planning and execution of the project, involving local Administrations and private actors, such as companies. The managing director of the ‘Stretto di Messina S.p.A.’ is the link between the

Government and the General Contractor for the construction of Bridge; he used his wide political and financial network in the organization of the call for tenders (2005), the stipulation of the agreement regulating the execution of the project and the management of the Bridge. However, discussion between public institutions and local citizens did not happen, nor was it contemplated.

The Infrastructure Plan of 2009, passed by the Centre-right government, re-launched both the ‘Legge Obiettivo’ (the target law) and the so-called ‘Major Strategic Public Works’. According to the law 443/2001, Major Strategic Public Works are ‘public and private infrastructures and settlements of high national interest to be realized for modernizing and developing the Nation’. In this context, the Bridge is cast as the symbol of a new modernization process led by the central government, a sort of redemption offered to the communities of Southern Italy, and as evidence of a far-sighted political class’ commitment to development. The following quote is exemplary: ‘The goal of the Messina Bridge is to increase significantly the provision of transportation, thus creating economic development and occupational growth not only for Sicily and Calabria, but for the whole Southern Italy and the Nation’ (Ministry for Infrastructures and Transportation, January 2010).

This rhetoric caused some of the first divisions among public opinion, and refreshed widespread discussion on the concept of modernization, which for many scholars is equivalent to the concept of destruction (see, for example, Pieroni 2000). On the other hand, the supporters of the infrastructure see the protests as a nuisance. These demonstrations are considered as the expression of an attitude that prevents economic growth, or rather as the will of a fierce and blind minority. In the words of Norberto Bobbio, this is why ‘It is impossible to create something new in Italy! When major public works are stopped for long periods of time Italy will not be able to advance at the same rate as other countries!’ (Bobbio 2006: 126).

Officially, the building site for the biggest infrastructure connection in Europe is ready. By 2010, the first, smaller building sites had also been prepared, and in some areas big bores have been laid. In the meantime, local conflict seems to increase, which was particularly the case when, in 2001, the project was considered to be impossible to stop.<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the frictions are between all the public institutions and the local citizens. The dividing lines are pretty clear in these disputes. At the central government level, both the main Right and Left political parties have claimed, on several occasions, the strategic importance of the road and rail links. The EU, despite its fluctuating opinion, has supported the construction of the Bridge. At a national level, this project is seen as a good example of the view of development formulated by the Centre-right government. Even the Centre-left parties, though using different words, have not minimized the economic and social impact of the infrastructure. Moreover, the confederate trade unions are ‘in favour of the Bridge’ in view of its employment impact. Finally, both the trade unions and government groups are legitimized by a large part of the scientific economic debate.

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<sup>4</sup> In 2001, a few days before the elections won by Romano Prodi (Centre-left coalition), the contract was signed with ‘Impregilo & Co.’. Impregilo is an Italian-based company headquartered in Milan and the lead partner in the consortium for the Messina Bridge project.

The starting point of many analyses is that: '[Italy] is lagging when compared with other EU member states, because of the close relationship between the industrial system and the insufficient presence of industrial infrastructure; a further expansion of the gap between the two could lead to a loss of further competitiveness [...] in the case of infrastructure, the risk is that the presence of a strong anomaly (South Italy) within an already abnormal situation (our country) will make things worse, in this situation measures must be taken without further delay in order to reverse the trend' (Nuzzi 2007: 180).

The Regions involved – mostly Sicily – have supported the project together with the Municipalities of Messina and Reggio Calabria. Yet, at local level, opinions change frequently. During the demonstration 'No TAV – No Bridge' held in Messina on January 22<sup>nd</sup> 2006,<sup>5</sup> Rocco Cassone (the Centre-left Mayor of Villa San Giovanni) stated, 'From this day a virtual Bridge has been erected between Southern Italy and the Susa Valley against the building of structures which do not respond to real territorial needs' (*Repubblica*, January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2006). In 2005, also the newly elected Mayor of Messina expressed his fierce opposition. In spite of the opposition to the Bridge found among mayors, councilmen and town councils, the opponents have not managed to provoke an inter-institutional conflict strong enough to stop the attendant decision-making processes. This can be seen as testimony to the weakness that marks the lack of permanent institutional coordination among these small local administrations; it also suggests that, in this case, the key contrast is between public institutions at the central level on one side, and movements and citizen associations on the other.

It also seems clear that the weak support of local governments to the movement against the Bridge and the absence of a negotiating space, did not offer a favourable 'political opportunity structure' for the movement to put forward its position about the Bridge. This is a first level of analysis, which, as highlighted in our theoretical framework, is key to understand the context of action of the movement and its opportunities to affect Governmental decision. However, in the last few years, many early environmental movements are trying to reach a compromise with the Government. They have become complex organizations, engaged in a variety of environmental problems, and the need to protect legitimate functions within the political institutions has led to a substantial change in their opposition. Some activists of the RNP have repeatedly stressed this transformation. As an RNP activist put it, 'in the last few years we have noted a significant decrease in interest regarding the Bridge issue by WWF, Legambiente and Italia Nostra. This happened in concomitance with the election of the new Centre-right government [...] they do not invest in the opposition of the Bridge any more, they only arrange some meetings, conferences and very small events [...], compared with what had been sponsored in the past, such as the initiatives of scientific research and extensive local communication events.'

Today, the project of the Messina Bridge continues to pose unsolved problems and difficulties regarding its realization, such as international economic flows versus local needs,

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<sup>5</sup> 'No TAV' is a grassroots movement born in the 1990s in Susa Valley (Northern Italy) in order to oppose the construction of the Alpine tunnel for the high-speed rail network.

local citizens' expectations versus global competitive processes. It is also important to remember that some of the associations opposed to the Bridge are local groups specifically created to stop the project for specifically local reasons. To summarize chronologically, the key points in the conflict have been: 1) the negative effects of the infrastructure in terms of environmental impact; 2) the unsustainability of the Bridge from an engineering-related standpoint; 3) the uselessness of the infrastructure in terms of local economy and employment. To support these key points, the RNP network have organized large meetings and demonstrations in order to put forward their viewpoint and mobilize citizens on the issue. This movement proposes alternative reasons, also based on local experience, on all issues related to the Bridge. A RPN activist stated, 'There is no definitive estimate of the costs and benefits of the infrastructure [...] the seismic risks characterizing the area might cause a major disaster [moreover] the "Stretto di Messina S.p.A." must be closed, and the public money at the disposal of the Inter-ministerial Committee for Economic Programming must be spent on the real emergencies in Southern Italy [because] unless the whole southern mobility network is changed, the Messina Bridge will be a useless infrastructure, a white elephant!' Another activist said, 'We want proximity structures, small public works locally useful and not major public works that cause inconvenience. We want small roads and small Bridges which do not collapse because of floods or bad weather! We want the whole southern area, the whole of Sicily, to be secure; we just want many small things, which could lead to employment, as well as to a new sense of identity and growing awareness.'

The RNP published several articles and comments on its official website regarding to the action strategies of the General Contractor 'Eurolink' and the 'Stretto di Messina S.p.A.' company.<sup>6</sup> They focus on the relationships, sometimes described as not transparent, between the many public actors involved in the infrastructure intervention (Regions, Ministries, Municipalities) and the companies to which the contract has been awarded. The activists want to highlight the 'bribery', 'special interests', and 'waste of public resources' tainting the 'Stretto di Messina S.p.A', its managing director, and the General Contractor. In the words of an activist, 'Through the project-financing some private interests come into play [...]. They will exploit the Bridge for many years regaining the money they have spent also thanks to public intervention. Usually, it states that they will obtain more than what they have invested and a part of their profits will go back to the State and the local authorities. But this is impossible, because the number of Bridge passages will be inferior in comparison to the forecast quantity. In this way the profit of private actors is connected to the waste of public funds.

As it has been recently underlined (Della Porta and Piazza 2008), an interesting aspect of the movement against the Bridge is that its members attempt to develop a discussion capable of countering the accusation of localism, shifting frequently from a local discourse to a global one. For them, these infrastructures are a danger to the common good. A RNP

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<sup>6</sup> The RNP's website carries the daily update of a virtual meeting place. Here, the movement publicises all its activities and collects articles about the economy and society of the Messina Strait. Obviously, particular attention is given to the political and administrative aspects connected to the construction of the Bridge.

activist's statement illustrates well this point. He said, 'We must not betray our goals, the level of close examination and the level of analysis that characterize our mission, for we might risk a regression or the NIMBY (Not-In-My-Backyard) syndrome. As far as ten years ago, we tried to spread the idea that the issue was not only the protection of the territory but, most importantly, a distorted idea of the development of an area. We reported on the uniqueness in the management of our public resources and we also tried to link the Bridge issue to the general political context' (See n. 10).

These positions go far beyond the debate on a single facility and engage important ethical issues concerning the idea of 'development'. Thus, the Bridge can be seen as a symbol of division between two different – and incompatible – development models in which growth is opposed to underdevelopment, consumption to saving and authority to participation (Pieroni and Ziparo 2012). These are contrasting orders of priorities in which the mutual encounter, the compromise or the acceptance of the others' point of view can be realistic hypotheses if there are substantial procedures allowing a dialogue between the government and the citizens on strategic decisions on development. These procedures become fundamental especially when it comes to legitimizing infrastructure choices which will have considerable impact on a territory for many years to come. These choices cannot be endorsed simply by issuing a governmental decree.

It is also interesting to note that this movement has made use of the opinions expressed by experts in several fields. Geologists, engineers, city planners, economists and social scientists have shared their knowledge with the movement, producing a higher awareness both in the movement itself and in its counter-public opinion (Pieroni 2012). Such 'alternative expertise' has given the movement a set of data, specialized studies and scientifically-oriented technical language which have proved useful in their understanding of very technical issues and in their standing when interacting with their counterparts. This demonstrates that the movement has skilfully mobilized both material and non-material resources. Specifically, it should be stressed that the conflict was based on *knowledge*, in support of different forms of legitimacy and that the movement tried to expand through counter-knowledge and experts the consensus on its position. However, it is not always easy for ordinary citizens to interpret conflicts based on scientific matters and, as in the case of the Bridge, this adds to the confusion on the implications of the dispute. Sometimes the scientific-based debate has confounded the issues related to the factual sustainability of the infrastructure with the potential negative social and cultural consequences of the Bridge. The media played a key role, as they broadcast the propaganda for and against the bridge. As pointed out by Mollica, 'Such seeds of propaganda have taken root easily in a well-watered ground, for public opinion had been made vulnerable by the offensives of official (or perceived as such) sources, including leading newspapers. Metaphors and strongarm tactics have been used in relation to all Messina Bridge-related issues. They have become a source of biased interpretations of events and a fertile ground for subtle political agendas, which has been continuously replenished by socio-economic narratives and their convenient interpretations' (2012: 65). And yet, this conflict has proved that a particular social group can manage a difficult issue. In the recent past, the most detailed critique has been generally

presented by scholars and intellectuals belonging to varied fields in the social sciences. In some cases, however, the argument was presented in highly philosophical terms.<sup>7</sup> It is easy to notice that some intellectuals discussed the Bridge while losing sight of the economic and social dynamics closer to the daily life and real needs of citizens. This reflects the fact that, although it has involved many lower-middle-class people, the opposition to the Bridge originated in the counter-public sphere of the local upper-middle-class.

Also because of the dramatic increase in the subjects participating in the current public debate, the institutional relationships have become intricate and for the majority of individual citizens the ‘discussion room’ appears to have become smaller. Due to the absence of institutional alternatives, citizens are forced to choose a collective subject that can give them a voice, technical knowledge and a political and intellectual platform, but there is the risk of poor communication between individual citizens and the various levels of representation of the local movements. In other words, there is no chance for a single, untagged individual or group without an organizational identity to express their opinions in the mainstream public sphere. This leads to a double exclusion. One is imposed from the top, in the form of the authoritarian strategy of the government. The other, results from social and cultural dynamics leading to the success of certain protest movements with a strong élitist factor. After all, the organized groups themselves have been involved in an artificial, indirect confrontation. A RNP activist graphically stated, ‘Any confrontation has always been indirect; for example, through newspapers. Many times a confrontation has started at a distance, through local newspapers, which is not useful with regard to the complexity of the issue. [...] The formal debate is absolutely inconclusive. We have tried to create opportunities for discussing the issue with the institutions and for participation opened to all, with no significant results. In the end, all that we have obtained as a movement was indirect communication, a scarcely fulfilling repetition of simple formulas devoid of reflection.’

The conflict has become an informal but definite space, where the most influential stakeholders (in terms of the quality and the quantity of resources which can be activated) operate in a framework devoid of rules. This absence of rules and places dedicated to interaction between the parties leads to the production of a discourse marked by ideological tones. The absence of places for interaction between politicians and civil society seems to have a huge impact on the organizational strategy adopted by the no-Bridge movements. It is interesting to note, for example, the constant search for ‘impressive’ communication strategies, the on-going search for striking slogans, and so on. When the institutional dialogue is blocked, when the indifference of the institutions and of the contracting companies continues to stand, when national and local newspapers do not provide space for discussion and the managing director of the ‘Stretto di Messina S.p.A.’ erects communication barriers between himself and the local civil society, citizens’ movements look for alternative paths.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The case of Osvaldo Pieroni is emblematic. He is a sociologist and a member of the Committee ‘Between Scilla and Cariddi’, which was established in 1998, following the approval of the general project. Pieroni has made high sociological-philosophical arguments against the Bridge.

<sup>8</sup> The Ministry for Infrastructure and Transportation did not foster any form of dialogue in the territories discussed here. Information about the infrastructure was fragmentary and of scarce

They try to adapt to the situation and use every possible opportunity to shout out their views, which might explain why the current protests look like a ‘show’. Movements search for opportunities to create an image and get ready to collect and concentrate in a single action the existing malcontent. The activists of RNP have climbed up electric transmission towers, have printed postcards depicting the Messina Bridge between the arms of the *Mafia* and of the *N’drangheta*<sup>9</sup> and have produced calendars depicting the natural beauties of the Strait of Messina. These actions are taken by people who do not have any alternative democratic space for discussion of the information in their possession. The views of those who have lost their trust in the traditional mechanism of a pluralist democracy are exemplified by an RNP activist, who said ‘The Messina Bridge is an issue of extreme importance affecting the whole of Italy. The allocated resources are enormous, and it affects one of the most beautiful regions in the world. This is why a movement was born from the bottom, in a place where there is a subculture, where democratic spaces do not exist, where only spaces guided by the worst policy exist; and yet the movement has managed to do things like these [...] but is not given the room that it deserves. That is incredible! We should have been on the front pages of all major newspapers.’

The absence of a dialogue between institutions and local actors could be also explained considering the expertise of some significant individuals in this conflictual context. The case under study is emblematic. On the one hand, the chairman of the ‘Strait of Messina S.p.A.’ merely performed the role of mediator between the Government and private companies. He had high-profile managerial skills, important relationships with national representative of Centre-right parties and was a board member in some important Italian institutions (banks, the industrial association and so on). However, he did not have the necessary ability to manage local conciliation procedures. His strategy of confrontation with local actors was marked by his formal defence of the prerogatives and the responsibilities assigned to him by the Government. On the other hand, the chairman of Eurolink established relationships especially with local public actors (Town Councils, Provinces, Regions and Universities) in order to organize the construction work and collect new information on the social context. Also this chairman had top managerial skills but he, too, did not show any ability or competence to mediate between different types of local interest.<sup>10</sup>

### **Consensus and Ambiguity about the Bridge**

Recently, despite the fact that members of the RNP are prepared to do anything to stop the building activities, their actions seem to have encountered difficulties that are hampering the

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diffusion. Moreover, both the company ‘Stretto di Messina S.p.A.’ and ‘Eurolink’ (the General Contractor), communicated poorly with the local populations. Consequently, the latter tend to see the decisions taken at national level as ‘imposed from the top’, and the multilevel governance system as a system growing more complex and unclear.

<sup>9</sup> These are two major criminal organizations in Italy. The *N’drangheta* is mainly based in the Calabria Region.

<sup>10</sup> On the relationship between the outcomes of public policy and individual competences, see Cerase (2010) and De Vivo (2012).

movement's activism against the Bridge. In addition to the support of the governmental actors and the business world, the issue of the Bridge project seems to have reached a consensus among important sectors of the Sicilian and Calabrian populations. Compared with the recent past, many more citizens now foresee the possibility of getting a job through the opening of the first building sites and the awarding of building contracts. It is not coincidental that some of the movement's recent actions have been opposed and openly criticized by the local population. These difficulties appear harder to overcome for the movement, which generates conflict in Southern Italian society between who is 'for' and who is 'against' the Bridge. The new and unexpected inconveniences that these events have caused for the movement demonstrate its inability to connect to the lower middle strata of the population, which have a tendency to be in favour of the Bridge.

As it emerges from their interviews, the historical opponents of the Bridge continue to show their disapproval, claiming that the business interests of a few people – harshly criticized in the period 2002-2006 – are once again disguised by the promise of economic growth for the chronically underdeveloped local areas. At this point of the conflict, one observes that 'the promise of work' becomes a new source of legitimization and consensus in the territories around the Strait. Questions about local consensus and its social implications arise inside the movement; in the words of an activist, 'The opening of the first construction sites has certainly influenced the opinion of many citizens. Some have started thinking that the realization of the Bridge might be an economic opportunity to be taken advantage of. I am not only referring to the construction sites directly related to the Bridge, but to all supplementary infrastructures. [...] I am talking about the small sites involving small local enterprises. This is an industry which achieves consensus. Many people have started thinking that the Bridge will generate employment, which is important in an area characterized by economic and employment difficulties.'

This change in ordinary people's views has led the movement to intensify its actions in the local communities in order to try to connect to the local actors. The support of the population – or of its important sections – is a crucial element for any protest movement. In this sense, from a sociological perspective, it is interesting to see the current confrontation between the representatives of the movement and the more 'disadvantaged' citizens. As a RNP activist reported to us, 'I am referring to citizens who are almost illiterate but hold an opinion on this issue. They tell me: "I see and totally understand what you (the movement) want to do. I am from Messina and I know that the Bridge cannot be built there; but let's be very clear: I am a manual labourer and, in one year, I have been unemployed for 250 days. If a construction site is opened, even only to dig a hole, and I am hired, what should I do?"'

Our informants in the movement claim that the central government has managed to achieve a broad consensus by giving erroneous information on the real economic and employment benefits connected to the building of the Bridge. For example, 4,500 workers would be expected to be involved in the construction process of the Bridge; but, the movement's activists say, the fact has been omitted that the skills required are absent in the

Sicilian and Calabrian labour market.<sup>11</sup> However, the Bridge appears to be the only possible way to address the local chronic economic crisis; the only action capable of generating employment opportunities, of rapidly revitalizing the economy and of attracting large investment. Furthermore, in South Italy there is a trade-off going on between the hope for a better future (economic development) and a short-term choice to survive (for example, the acceptance of potential environmental problems). As the movement's veterans claim, the representatives of the local governments are the most zealous tools in this process. As a RNP veteran put it, 'They explain the problem with the right degree of linguistic parsimony. They say, "to reject the Bridge means to lose the only available opportunity to curb the economic crisis." [...] This is a situation in which the fundamental needs of the citizens come into play, and this is why the issues connected to the Bridge are numerous and complex.'

In the absence of open procedures of decision-making, it seems that a compromise has been established between consensus and personal satisfaction, instead of between consensus and improvement of quality of life and future well-being. Now many people claim that the Bridge will be, at least, an element for an economic recovery, and it does not matter if such recovery is temporary and ends when the last stone is laid. Thus, the long-term effects of a major transportation work are being treated as minor. This is far from the transparency and participation method formally employed in many parts of Northern Europe. What is happening in Southern Italy reminds us of the kind of well-known unequal exchange in the so-called developing countries of Africa and Latin America, where the classical dilemma of the relationship between the benefits of economic growth and the distribution of environmental and social costs is simply hidden (De Vivo 2005). The institutional rhetoric claims that the major public works (bridges, dams, power stations, and so on) give support to economies and societies characterized by extreme conditions of poverty. The implicit message is that even if the positive consequences connected to the infrastructure in the near or far future are scarce, its main mission is to revive, at whatever cost, a territory at risk of social disintegration.

Many activists have recently started questioning their past action strategies. Once the possibility of delaying the construction of the Bridge is accepted (occupying the building sites, blocking motorways), the obligation to produce a quick change of ideas and political proposals becomes necessary. Some state that the movement is outdated because the previous reasons and social conditions have disappeared and new modes of action should be studied in order to use the accumulated experience for a new and effective awareness campaign. Today, the issue regarding the problem of the Bridge has changed. If at the beginning the protest was labelled 'the protest of NO', from 2008 things began to change. On December 19<sup>th</sup> 2009, the movement organized a more proactive political proposal, asking for a new use of the funds for the Messina Bridge. The support is considerable: 10,000 demonstrators signed the movement's proposal in one of the most famous squares of Messina. This considerable shift from a reactive to a proactive movement was illustrated by a RNP activist, who said, 'We

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<sup>11</sup> Recently, the RNP stated: 'the sites for geognostic surveys have employed 5 people from Messina out of 125 workers. Moreover, the potential construction of the Bridge has already caused the loss of more than 1,000 jobs in the navigation industry'.

denounce a system of interests which is not concerned with the future of Sicily and does not operate according to a long-term perspective. We want to find a planning dimension linked to the existence of the territories, to their quality of life and to the real needs of the citizens. We want a planning process capable of including the environmental, economic, social, and cultural dimension of the intervention. The movement cannot lessen itself to a simple scheme of opposition. The main issue is the search for an analysis that can involve all the people, and I am not referring only to Sicily but to all of Southern Italy.'

This change in the strategies of the activists can be also explained through the observation of the transformations in the relationships among the few actors that have openly criticized the Bridge in the past. The RNP received the most significant political support from the Radical Left. However, in the last few years the political influence of the Radical Left has been extensively reduced. On the other hand, the Democratic Party (the main Italian Centre-left party) shows little interest in radical forms of commitment and continues to maintain a 'soft' position regarding the infrastructure. As we said earlier, it is also important to remember that the amount of symbolic, economic, scientific and organizational resources held by the movement has been drastically reduced, and that the representatives of the local authorities show an indifferent attitude. Therefore, all the alliances which allowed the dissidents to express their views in an effective way have broken down.

Another issue which has been discussed many times concerns the inefficient use of the natural resources. The movement's appeals continue to portray the Strait of Messina as a common good that cannot be evaluated from an economic perspective. As we have explained, the movement tends to analyse the issue of the Bridge not only from an environmental point of view, but as part of a complex socioeconomic, infrastructure and financial framework. For example, the landslide of Giampilieri, near Messina, which caused the death of 37 people, has had a huge impact on the re-thinking of the motivations for the protest. In 2010, RNP argued that the funds for the Bridge should be used to secure the Sicilian territories from hydrogeological instability. This was the main theme of two demonstrations that took place in Messina on August 28<sup>th</sup> and October 2<sup>nd</sup> 2010. The general message that the organizers attempted to convey was that public funds for the Bridge were capital taken away from crucial services (such as health, education, and so on) and public works. This vision was defended in many articles published by the activists in 2011 and 2012. These recent actions have contributed to the construction of a new identity of the movement, and they seem to represent a new cognitive praxis which is changing the distribution of political power in Messina, as in 2013 a well-known exponent of the RNP movement became Mayor of Messina. His electoral strategy focused on ideas and results achieved by the protest movement; so, at the moment, a part of the RNP has become a government actor. Finally, we now know that the Bridge will not be built. In March of 2013 the government led by Mario Monti decided to terminate the contract with Eurolink (the General Contractor), an act that ended a long period of political tensions and social conflict in the area and that indirectly seems to support the thesis that before designing an infrastructure it is important to build a widely shared social legitimacy around the project.

### **A Short Conclusion**

To conclude, we would like to stress two aspects that have surfaced in our study. First, the case of the Messina Bridge can be seen as the result of an instrumental reasoning (central government and corporate interests) in support of a modernist idea of development. Contrary to that, the social reactions that we have studied represent an alternative born in the local communities. As our theoretical framework suggests, this social movement established advocacy coalitions and tried to engage other social actors in the counter-public sphere in order to increase its resources (people, knowledge, money) for opposing actions. The RNP proposed a different way to manage nature and the territories; however, the political scenario in which they operated did not offer opportunities for them to influence the decision-making process. Moreover, it seems clear that pressure on the local communities was compounded by a rhetoric that offered an easy way to address what in this context is an urgent need: local employment. Because of the impossibility of influencing the decision-making process into a different development path, or because it was incapable of managing the against-the-Bridge coalition and offer an extensive and attractive development perspective, the social movement seemed destined to lose importance. However, the conflict regarding the Bridge continued in a different way. In short, the RNP managed to change its catchwords and expand its influence in the social context; also, an important part of the movement decided to enter the institutionalized political arena. This strategy has contributed to delaying the realization the Bridge and, given the decision of the Monti Government, to bring to an end the social opposition.

Of course, this case study has stressed the lack of participation by the Italian governance in infrastructural policies, which leads us to the second aspect that we want to underline; that is, the Italian regulations regarding ‘great infrastructures’. In 2009, the Italian government adopted a special plan for the construction of great infrastructures linked to the previous ‘Legge Obiettivo’ (literally, ‘Target Law’). This law defines a list of specific public works (such as national roads, Bridges, energy plants, and so on) that are considered to be of crucial importance for the development and the competitiveness of the country. In order to promote the execution of these important works, this law establishes a special authorization path, outside of the law regulating public contracts and procurements. In spite of the fact that each of these infrastructures potentially involves many different stakeholders, this law does not provide a specific form of involvement of those potentially affected and, in contradiction with EU recommendations on public participation, it does not include any mandatory debates. On the contrary, the legislation has cut down both the time for decision-making and the mandatory assessment of the environmental impact of big facilities. It is not a coincidence that the Ministry for Infrastructures and Transportation has played a leading role in this story, while the Regional authorities have only submitted proposals without being capable of exercising any right of veto over the government’s decisions.

The analysis that we have offered has, once again, revealed that the actors potentially interested in a specific policy can be different from, and more numerous than, those identified ex-ante. Some of them may emerge during the governance process and, in lacking a legitimate

place in the policy arena to safeguard their interests, they may disrupt considerably the progress of the governance process itself. The case study that we have discussed brings to light the complex web of social movements, regulatory framework and the environment and suggests that reinforcing participatory space in the decision-making process could be important in order not only to prevent or reduce social conflict but also to strengthen the democratic process by allowing a positive evolution of social organization in terms of cooperative action.

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