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The Messina Bridge:
Political Conflict Running Roughshod Over Local Issues[1]

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Drawing upon interviews and documentary information, this article investigates the means through which changes related to the biggest Italian construction project are communicated. I argue that people are aware of most political elements connected to the territorial debate, and that their receptivity is conditioned by the social environment. This is particularly true when political élites deliver messages aimed at legitimizing issues that carry symbolic meanings and identity concerns. Responses to the project of building a bridge across the Strait of Messina point to powerful strategies aimed at undermining alternative views. Political metaphors contribute to a situation in which political élites' interests run roughshod over the expectations of people. Whatever path the message may take, it manipulates the acquisition of knowledge and bogs people down.
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A Bridge of Boundaries

In this article I address complex issues raised by the Messina Bridge, which should connect Sicily with the European continent, intended as a political-territorial entity. The construction of the Messina Bridge is an essential part of Corridor One Berlin-Palermo, which is one of the priority of the TEN-T project [Trans-European Network Transport]. This Corridor follows the north-south European axis and, then, links central and eastern Europe. Its purpose is to shorten the gap between southern and northern regions, matching the objective of the 'political European framework of socio-economic cohesion;' where the bridge is part of a system connecting European countries over sea, road and rail.

The present discussion is based on fieldwork carried out in 2009-2010 in the city of Messina, where continuing political debate about the construction project try to influence people's views and, to a certain extent, identity. The bridge has radicalized political parties and public opinion because, if constructed, it would physically link the Isle of Sicily to mainland Italy. Furthermore, the debate has emphasized a long standing tension between national/supra-national and regional/sub-regional identities, as competing stereotypes attached to old regional/national memories and a new supra-national level have clashed. This tension has been expressed through symbolic means, while political meanings have relied on the use of metaphors. First, I shall outline the genealogies of planning. Then, I shall address the political debate in the context of regional/national/supra-national issues and the role played by myths and symbolism in this situation. Finally, I will argue that the tension among these

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various levels has brought out various contradictions which have, in turn, led to political distrust. In what follows I endorse Cohen's interpretation of the *boundary* as an essential element which 'encapsulates the identity of the community' and 'embodies [a] sense of discrimination' (Cohen 1989: 7-9).

Genealogies of Planning and Contemporary Politics

The first step toward building the Messina Bridge was taken in 1968 with a call for ideas by the National Autonomous Roads Corporation. The aim was to establish a connection between Sicily and mainland Italy. However, it took 24 years for the Company *Stretto di Messina* to develop (in 1992) the first draft project for a bridge with one span. In 1997, the Council for Public Works deemed the draft appropriate for development into a definitive plan. Four years later, the central government granted the Messina Bridge the status of 'strategic infrastructure.' In 2002, the company confirmed the choice of a bridge with one span of 3,300 meters (the longest in the world). The bridge could withstand earthquakes up to 7.1 on the Richter Scale (similar to that of 1908 that had destroyed Messina). In 2003, the central government appointed the *Stretto di Messina* 'Concessionary Company' for the construction, and the bridge was included in the list of EU projects which must be 'operational' by 2020. The projected cost, approved by the Interminesterial Committee for Economic Planning in 2003, was 4.6 billion Euros (reduced, in 2006, to 3.9 billion Euros). In 2004, the European Parliament approved the construction. In 2005, the Association of Companies Eurolink (led by Impregilo Co.) became the general contractor. In 2009, the first construction sites were opened. According to the web-site of the Company *Stretto di Messina*, the opening ceremony is scheduled for 1st January 2017. Regardless of the foregoing, the project was subsequently put on hold by the center-left second Prodi Government (2006–2008). It was later restored on the agenda by the center-right third Berlusconi Government (2008–2011). It was again put on hold by the incumbent Monti Government in late 2011.

Interestingly, the issues raised by the bridge have informed local electoral trends that have often subverted national electoral trends. The 2007 local elections took place in a situation marked by the center-left Prodi central government's strong opposition to the bridge. The center-right former Mayor of Reggio Calabria (the second largest city on the Strait, facing Messina) and a supporter of the bridge, obtained 70 per cent of the vote. Such an electoral result should be read bearing in mind that representatives from opposition parties in Sicily often took ambivalent positions on the project. For instance, the Democratic Party in

the Messina Provincial Assembly never opposed the construction, but was against it at a national level.[2] No only, however, has the debate over the bridge involved every political component; as we shall see, given the bridge's geographical location, the role of mafia has, inevitably, played a major role.

Those who oppose the construction argue that it would be an unjustified structure. The only reason for having the bridge, they maintain, is to give palliative responses to structural problems. Those in favour describe the bridge as the greatest construction project ever undertaken in Italy; it would be an important step in the completion of the southern transport system, while providing *legal* jobs as a way to oppose the mafia. However, the controversy is more complex than the immediate aims of the key players would suggest.

Before looking at such a complexity, we need to note that, looking at the strait as a locus where contested histories play a key role, visibility and legitimacy come to mind as means to express identity and collective needs; this points to the concept of *boundary* and its relation with isolation, the so-called '*sicilianismo*' (Sicilianism; what Sciascia [1961] called '*sicilitudine*' [insularity]) and its view of life as a form of resistance. This is important, considering that no urbanization model has been suggested to fill the gap between the demand for mobility and the inadequacy of the transport system in Messina (Campione 1988). Such a model would have helped to integrate the physical, political and cultural elements that come into play in this complex situation.

The debate touches upon the use of supra-national interests to by-pass a contradictory national level. Vulnerability has led to a lack of choices which combines with the threat of secessionist forces and Sicilians' entrenched distrust of the central power. The latter takes the form of a political symbolism that, in early 2007, was magnified in two well-known events, involving two leading Sicilian political figures who were in favor of the Messina Bridge.

The first episode took place on February 23 and involved the incumbent Sicilian Governor Lombardo, a supporter of the Bridge. Lobardo publicly remarked, 'If they give me the bridge I will even vote for Bin Laden.' His political group could be decisive as the Senate was to meet for a confidence vote to the Prodi Government. Their offer to support the Prodi Government was, however, rejected, and the government fell. The second episode took place on March 5, when then Sicilian Governor, Cuffaro stood against the central government's

2 Notably, in spite of the importance of the debate, I found only one survey on the topic. It included a sample of opinions collected in 2007 on the website of the Sicilian Region. According to this survey, 48 per cent saw the bridge as useful; 46 per cent thought it was useless; and 6 per cent considered it useful but not a priority.

opposition to the Messina Bridge. In a programme broadcast by a Sicilian TV network, Cuffaro sat next to a friend dressed in a fustian jacket and peaked cap, drinking wine; he ironically suggested that the only way to obtain the bridge was to declare war on the USA. At the end of the war, he went on to say, Americans would invade Sicily and, then, they would build the bridge. There was, however, an incognita, he feared; the USA could lose the war and then the victorious Italians would require the destruction of some American bridges.

What follows must, of course, be framed in the controversy marking the attempts to fill the gap between northern and southern Italy, implying that this whole issue precedes the current debate on the European Corridor One, which casts the bridge as an indispensable part of the effort to implement continuity between Palermo and Berlin.

Pasquinades

In symbiotic relationship, space and culture evoke identities. People are possessive about spaces. Their feelings can be activated through certain communications and are generally attached to territories to which they give various degrees of loyalty. In particular, this is observable when different cultures share, and claim rule over, a single space. As exemplified by the aforementioned episodes involving Lombardo and Cuffaro, such cases engender the need to express aspirations to material needs in public ways.

Lombardo's proposal to vote for Prodi was obviously unrealistic, for he knew that the Prodi government would never support the Messina Bridge. Thus, he was apparently ready to do something inconceivable; that is, to vote for Bin Laden. Cuffaro used identifiable means (dialect, dress code and behaviour) in an act that, though lacking legitimacy, was meant to attract attention; in the process, paradoxically strengthening Sicilian stereotypes. In addition to Lombardo's over-exaggerated statement, Cuffaro's piece brought to mind Erasmus' expedient of telling the truth through paradoxes that encapsulate such truth. As Cohen (1989: 70) suggested, following social change, the boundary weakens and 'people resort increasingly to symbolic behaviour to reconstitute the boundary', which would appear to be what Cuffaro and Lombardo did by magnifying the conflict over the Messina Bridge.

Nevertheless, *buildings* are elements upon which life is built (Rossi 1990). A country may be a landscape but any change in that landscape must not disrupt the given order. In this case, as the new event (the bridge) may disrupt such a given order; it must be appropriately negotiated.

The Spatial Role of Communication

According to Gourou (1948), civilization develops through the exploitation of nature and the ability to organize space; culture is the result of adaptation. The question arises, however, as to the ways in which culture preserves its space, especially in the face of tragic memories and mistrust of the élites.[3] When culture plays a role in the development of space, then such development can take the form of transformation. As Beals and Hoijer (1965) put it, transformation may follow symbolic paths. To change an insular reality, to re-draw the Messina Strait vista, is to accept a loss of communal identity through trajectories that do not allow mediation. In this case, the modification of a fixed historiography and a permanent topography disrupts the existing order, arguably marked by the absence of a bridge over the strait.

Material structures may, however, become a means to strengthen weak identities. That this may well apply to the impact of the bridge on the never-settled debate on the incorporation of Sicily into Italy, brings out the problem of the means by which messages of unequal treatment are transmitted, particularly where a new 'political centre' may not carry a univocal symbolism. Here, key symbols are connected with a psysical entity (the bridge) and are associated with the land and its people. The new place of power is intended to strengthen the central political body, especially as it is identified as a provider of economic continuity between disconnected parts of that body. Remotti et al. (1989) argue that if culture involves the need of identity, material 'places of power' play a critical role especially when the physical environment is charged with cultural values. In this sense, the bridge becomes a place of power, beyond (urban) barriers or (pre-emptive) boundaries.

However, the symbolic has, of course, its limitations. Material structures may appear independent from the local will but, as Crespi (1985) warned, material constructions that become landmarks of social identity cannot be removed unless significant (including symbolic) de-constructions take place. As a synergic container of meanings, the Messina Bridge is a case in point. Its problematic meanings and ramifications must be contextualized in broader terms, beyond inter-regional dynamics, taking into account the important role played by stereotypes, cultural factors, memory and fear. Moraci (2012) identifies the 1908

3 This is a key issue; above all, in southern Italy (see Pardo 2001).

earthquake as an event that reduced the time required to regenerate the city of Messina. However, as physical reconstruction was not accompanied by social re-construction, the whole process generated a mistrust that fed a self-referential approach leading to a persistent rejection of various projects.

A connection also exists between spatial forms and fantasies. Through imagination, culture defines its material expressions. The ways in which cities are described inform the ways in which they are constructed, implying what Westwood and Williams (1994) called 'structures of imagination.' For their part, borders define identities, which are more strongly felt by those living within such borders and who are in greater need of reassurance in times of perceived changes. In the case that we are examining, metaphors play a central role in people's attitudes towards the bridge. As described by La Cecla (1988), places become mediators between new (material) presences and permanent (historical) ones. Metaphors on the bridge exemplify well this point.

Strait of Myths

In the case of the bridge, fear and memory play major roles; particularly as they are cemented by the evolution of myths which are continuously linked to changing actors and realities in order to suit modern actors and realities. Their formulation has found expression in a self-propagating literature. Apart from the rhetoric still associated with the earthquake that destroyed Messina and the surrounding area on 28 December 1908, three myths are worthy of mention which relate to the geological instability of Sicily and to the local identity. These myths encapsulate local people's fears and concerns about the construction of the bridge. All three raise interesting issues.

The first myth, involving 'memory', has developed around the legend of Colapesce. Colapesce was a 'fish-man' who knew the Strait and it sea better than anyone else. His fame eventually reached Frederick II, who asked him to find out what lay beneath Sicily. Colapesce discovered that the Isle was supported by three pillars resting on the magma of the Volcano Etna. One day, Colapesce disappeared and it is said he became one of the pillars, replacing one of the original three which had become unstable. The second myth about 'fear' is linked to the legend of the monsters Scylla and Charybdis. Scylla lived on a rock close to Reggio Calabria on mainland Italy; she had 12 feet and six heads and barked like a dog making the crossing of the strait dangerous. Charybdis lived not far from Messina; she swallowed and then spat out the waters of the Strait three times a day. The third myth stems from the

summertime optical illusion that makes it possible to see the wonder of Sicily appearing reflected in the sea from the peninsular coast of the Strait. This phenomenon is called *Fata* [Fairy] *Morgana*. Occasionally, images of people walking in Messina may be seen from Reggio Calabria, from a distance of 3 km. According to a local legend, Barbarian invaders arrived at the Strait but were unable to cross because they did not have boats. Suddenly, a beautiful woman appeared to them and offered Sicily to their king, making it appear very close. When the king jumped into the sea, the spell was broken and he drowned.

Bipartisan Failure Management

We must now take into account another Italian trend; that is, the subordination of government to political parties' interests. This has slowly changed the representative system into a system of '*partitocrazia*' [party-ocracy] (Prato 1993), which, in turn, has led people to distrust traditional parties (Pardo 1993). In this context, Prato (1993, 2000) also implicitly refers to '*Consociativismo*,' a 'consociational choice' emptied of positive power-sharing meanings; a disregarded form, that is, of political coalition. Regardless of whether inter-party agreements are real, it is believed that all parties share responsibility.

In the case of the bridge, it was, for instance, due to an amendment proposed by a leftist Sicilian member of Parliament that 40 billion Italian lira (20 billion euro) payable to the Company *Stretto di Messina* was included for the first time in the 1991 central government budget (Financial Law). '*Consociativismo*', understood as 'Political Responsibility' (agreement beyond ideological lines on national interests), over the Messina Bridge united most parties, trade unions, economic and cultural forces, the local Catholic Church and local universities. Environmental groups and the Radical Left were notable exceptions.

At city level, technical reports prepared by the Planning Bureau of the Municipality of Messina on the impact of the bridge have been ignored even by the City Council of Messina itself. Local parties were in conflict with corresponding national level representatives. Such contradiction tallied with discourses about the static (under-developed, parasitic) Italian south as opposed to a dynamic (industrial, productive) north. This led to what my informants call 'bipartisan failure management,' encapsulated by the long standing Southern Question debate. Here a predominant role is played by unfinished works and by the various scandals that have involved most politicians at both local and national levels.

The Shape of Failure

The South-Italian railway system is collapsing. South-Italian ports are in crisis. It took 30 years for the Sicilian Highway Messina-Palermo to be completed. The continental Highway Salerno-Reggio Calabria is in poor condition. In Messina, many people still live in the barracks that were set up in the aftermath of the 1908 earthquake, while the city continues to export manpower. The combined reality of such failures graphically clashes with the 'dream' of the Messina Bridge, where (real or symbolic) constructions are inseparable from (real or symbolic) ideas of reconstruction. The fear about projects left unfinished is more relevant than ever, raising pregnant questions on the rhetorical vision of Italian Unity.

The debate on the bridge has turned the whole project into a paradox that mirrors many other south-Italian paradoxes: the Messina Bridge, it is argued, could well become an oasis in a desert of unfinished works, thus useless. This widespread view feeds local people's distrust of the political élite. As a school teacher in a Messina Lyceum put it, 'the Bridge is a speculation, a big cheat! Another attempt to do big things to get money! There is nothing positive in it.' Another informant, a publisher based in Messina, said, 'the Bridge is useless in terms of facilitating the crossing of trucks or for tourism. It will be overtaken by new means of transport. A German family, say, must taste '*sicilianità*' [Sicilianity] and the '*insularità*' [insularity] of a land detached from the continent.'

In this cultural tension lies the crisis of a not-yet-fully accomplished Italian democratic society facing the challenges posed by an unreliable, vulnerable system. In Sicily, such a weakness strengthens the mafia, which overshadows everything. By its nature, the mafia cannot be separated from public works. The mafia and corrupt politicians are seen as the beneficiaries of a windfall of public money. This lack of confidence in the fundamentals of governance marks the attitude of the informants (including local businessmen and politicians) who oppose the Messina Bridge.

On the one hand, those in favour of the construction emphasize the 'damaging' actions of the (politically motivated) opponents; accordingly, opposing the construction of the bridge becomes an unforgivable, a-historical choice. On the other hand, those against the construction say that those in favour are naïve to believe that the project is justified simply by the needs of development. Supporters and opponents consistently mobilize in order to justify the good or the evil that the bridge would bring about. One consequence has been that these opposing views used the mafia to suit their arguments, representing it to be for or against the

bridge. 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. Fascinating arguments affering to these agendas have become daily bread on every northeastern Sicilian table.

After all, limited participation causes collective integration to fail. Collective participation requires inhabitants to feel a sense of belonging to the city. The link between urban communities and the politics of space is therefore fundamental. In the absence of this link, a sense of 'territorial anguish,' a loss of belonging to a place arises (Ledrut 1968). Decisive attitudes might well be driven by the ability of inhabitants to organize their environment, as a reference point with which people can interact (La Cecla 1988). However, the obvious question arises, will such an ambiguous, value-charged construction project create a community 'boundary marker'?

Conclusion

The ethnography that I have discussed has illustrated the debate over the Messina Bridge and the way in which local communities are undermined by overarching contradictions. I have examind key aspects of a frustratingly conflictual political rhetoric surrounding the construction project that has appeared to ignore local needs. On a broader level, a message meant to reassure electoral constituencies has undermined coping with people's real needs. As on a local level, people learn what they learn only in fragments, the bridge has become a symbol of contradictory legacies soaked in a metaphorical catharsis (that is, the bridge as a means to prevent or help the mafia). This invites important reflections.

First, as Schneider and Schneider pointed out, Sicily has historically been an 'appendance of a larger integrated system.' (1976: 19). With reference to European programming, as Moraci (2012) argues, Messina suffers from what she called a 'cumulative inconsistence' of choices; though, here, such inconsistence is less manifest than in western Sicily, it still plays an important role. However, even if the city appears disconnected from larger political agenda it is nonetheless likely to play a leading role in southern Mediterranean policy. Second, the ability of both national and Sicilian political systems to recreate

themselves collides with Sicilians' sense of isolation. Although, as we have seen, this is not always a geographical or symbolic matter, it becomes damaging for the entire nation, exposing the flank to dangerous speculation, including that of a mafia ready to take advantage of the distortions in the system. Third, northeastern Sicily has demonstrated its ability to regenerate after the 1908 tragedy. Arguably, then, a city capable of rebirth after the most devastating European earthquake of the 20th century should not fear a bridge.

It would, however, be unforgivable to conclude without mentioning the failure of the Sicilian élites to impement what the Sicilian Constitution provides for Sicilians; that is, a greater autonomy from mainland Italy. Despite decades of bipartisan political sophistry, the consequences of such a failure — including those exemplified by this case material — are obvious to all; no matter indeed whether such a failure has resulted from sheer inability, collusion with supra-regional powers, wicked parochial choices or managerial incompetence, or from various combinations of the above.

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