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Oltre il Pensiero Meridiano - What is Called Meridian Thinking?

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It is widely known what Friedrich Nietzsche thought about his books, and for one in
particular, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*: they were for “everyone and nobody.” While
pondering on Franco Cassano’s *Il pensiero meridiano* I caught myself thinking “Who is
the targeted reader of this book?” Obviously, it is a rhetorical question; and yet, once
opened the book, we have to “believe the Author,” take him seriously, and follow his
reasoning as long as we read and further. Cassano claims that, among other reasons, his
decision to write his work has come out as an act of rebellion, “ribellione alle sue [del
sud] rappresentazioni nella cultura dominante” (v). To ward off these wrong and
allegedly stereotypical representations of South, he puts forward some remedies. Some of
these remedies are: firstly, A double movement that unfolds as “scissione e mediazione,”
through which he intends “scardinare la concezione del tempo” and the “trasformazione
del rapporto con i luoghi” (ix). The double movement should undermine the dominant
culture and endorse (in two of the various meanings that such a verb implies, namely
support and sanction) the autonomy of South from the mainstream culture and its implicit
hierarchization. He goes further on adding remedy number two: there is a need to
“smilitarizzare le identità” in order to re-balance the current unbalanced entity that he
calls modernity, and the equilibrium can be re-established resorting to another hard-to-
pinpoint term as Misura. It is well-known where this term comes from, and what it
evokes: “Nomos is the measure by which the land in a particular order is divided and
situated; it is also the form of political, social, and religious order determined by this
Thus, Measure, misura, takes us directly to the vexed questions of law, violence, distribution, and occupation of land, according to the ancient Greeks Carl Schmitt was referring to in the paragraph I just quoted. As one can see, a very broad perspective seems to open up at this point, so much that one feels almost ready to agree with Cassano and to share his bemusement (if I may define it so) when, in his preface to the 2005 edition of *Il pensiero meridiano* he states that “Se un’obiezione si può fare oggi a quella prospettiva è forse il suo titanismo, un volontarismo che spinge a sottovalutare la sproporzione esistente tra l’ambizione del progetto e le forze capaci di portarlo avanti.”

I will deal with his self-defined “titanismo” later on; now, I would like to better frame Cassano’s remedies to correct modernity I have been enlisting thus far: they seem to be mostly cultural responses to what he names Dismisura, such as A) bring back the “abitudine alla discussione” very much in the Socratic/Platonic way, or B) slow down people’s pace to counter the full speed of “turbocapitalismo” of nowadays; finally, C) fill the domain of law with renovated *Nomos* in order to reset the unbalance.

Hence, as the not-so-slow pace of this, and each and every Conference imposes, this is roughly the summary of *Il pensiero meridiano’s* *pars construens*, or, at least, what I have perceived so: first, the pursuit of human relationships similar to the old Mediterranean/Southern habit, along with second, the call for a cultural melting pot (as a result of the effort to “tradurre le culture una nell’altra,” as Cassano maintains) and third, a slower, pre-modern economy that accounts for the new/old social system, old here meaning original as well as original was l’”omologia strutturale tra la configurazione geografica della Grecia […] e la sua cultura.” (21) This summary intends to describe what Cassano concisely labeled “gesto di decostruzione simbolica,” so that I can rephrase
the question I posed at the very beginning of my talk: for whom the *meridian thinking* bell tolls? Second question: is it really its alleged titanismo the main shortcoming of *Il pensiero meridiano*? Hopefully, someone will take on these questions and provide us with his/her opinion.

As for myself, I would set out dealing with the “question of the Meridian Thinking,” resorting to concepts I already used in this talk and a few new ones, hoping to shed some light on the issue. To begin with: Cassano, as we said earlier, is calling for a newly established Misura, and this also implies social, religious, and political changes according to the implementation of the *Nomos* that is the foundation and the architecture of the entire system, as the quotation from Schmitt’s *The Nomos of the Earth* I previously read goes. To call for a new *Nomos* is prodromic to strengthen Cassano’s idea that the Mediterranean Sea connects and somehow determines a common set of cultural and existential similarities, constantly evoked by a collective memory pervasively entrenched, among the states (hence, the *people*) on its shores, an authentic *genius loci*. Can we really say that such a thing as a *genius loci* is still live like ember under the Mediterranean fire? Although the *Meridian Thinking* is definitely a compelling answer to the current moment of political crisis, I deem that it needs to be refocused so that it will not miss its foremost target: the people who live on the Mediterranean Sea and want to continue to do so. Franco Piperno, in his book *Elogio dello spirito pubblico meridionale*, maintains that nowadays crisis “È una crisi di cittadini liberi […,] [una crisi della] passione civile e [della] capacità di progettare.” (29) […] “In questa crisi possono intervenire solo i soggetti collettivi che siano anche produttori di semantica, di simboli.” *(Elogio…*30) To ask the right questions, to zero in on the real problem, to use
intellectually cleaned words and ideas (as Mario Tronti would say), is crucial in this moment, in these years of crisis. Otherwise, the risk is to generate one more Romantic and Iconographic work (to quote Wystan Hugh Auden’s *The Enchafèd Flood*), which, in spite of its invaluable cultural merit, will not weaken the lethal political (or lack thereof) grip in which the meridian countries languish. The acknowledgement of the existing political and symbolic crisis, is the first step; and the second one is not to undertake the mission to heal the wound, because that mission cannot be accomplished. Says Massimo Cacciari in his *Geo-filosofia dell’Europa*: “La costituzione, il prodotto massimo dell’arte politica’, non mantiene in salute ciò che già è sano, ma permette di ‘curare’ (ha cura di) ciò che ha *perduto* la salute. […] ‘Sano’ era lo ‘stato’ in cui vivevano gli uomini quando il mondo era retto dal Dio […] Nel tempo in cui Dio siede al timone, tempo di un’arché felice […], non vi è posto né per il pólemos né per la stásis, per nessun tipo di guerra […]. Eirene domina perfetta. Ma non vi è polis!” (31-2) Accordingly, if Cacciari is right, this “aver cura di” is a never-ending process, and inevitably so, in the time when the gods are no longer steering the ship. The relationships between god and *polis* being mutually excluding, politics and conflict (or crisis, if you will) are here to stay as long as humankind endures, as long as the city of God does not materialize, if this verb accurately explains what will happen after the second (if it is the second…) come of God. Consequently, the second step that humankind can take, in my view, is to empower (or to awake) what Piperno calls “soggetti collettivi produttori di semantica.” He is calling for this engagement (and I am aware that the word I am using is not fashionable anymore, and worn out, and loaded) because he perceives “una sofferenza dello spirito pubblico del meridione, sofferenza di natura simbolico-intellettiva prima che etico-politica.” (24)
This diagnosis of a “sofferenza di natura simbolico-intellettiva,” coupled with Cassano’s call for a new Measure, paves the way for an unavoidable and not to be postponed alliance between what I will label “Romantic” and “Engaged” intellectuals, and my designations do not intend to qualify scholars on a quality scale, rather on their philosophical and aesthetical choices. In fact, I consider the relationships between aesthetical and political analysis as being enchained like in sequence: in the case at hand, for example, firstly the former detects and reacts against the above mentioned “sofferenza di natura simbolico-intellettiva,” (cleaning the stained words and ideas, and producing new ones) whereas the latter, secondly, exploits the aesthetical accomplishment as means for political ends so that it can change the course of history. In this last part of my paper I will propose examples of how the two distinct viewpoints can work together and develop a common design.

Thus far, our acquisitions have been: A) according to Cassano, I said earlier, we need to “scardinare la concezione del tempo” and to change our relationships with the venues (cities, Mediterranean Sea, etc…ix); in order to accomplish this task we need to resort to a new Measure (and, consequently, a new Nomos). B) According to Piperno, the Italian Southerners are experiencing a modern crisis essentially due to their condition of being free citizens (an unusual social and political status for them, until recently), condition that weakens their civil passion, and one in which only collective subjectivity (a suggestive concept that I cannot further deal with here) producing semantics should have the influential power to take heed of; Cacciari seems to agree with Piperno’s analysis, though is less proactive as for the remedy. Between the two propositions just enlisted, I believe there is a common ground, an overlapping area upon which a political-
economical Meridian/Mediterranean project can be built, once we have cleared our way from mystifying and misleading barriers.

“Il problema non è quello del *post*, ma quello dell’*oltre*.” (Tronti 1992, 27) This is the very first line with which the philosopher Tronti set out his essay “L’utopia urgente,” written in 1992, that is a few years before Cassano’s work *Il pensiero meridiano* was published. I would like to draw your attention on these three words: the overused *post*, *oltre*, and, above all, *utopia*. They all turn around, as to their axis, to a very important year: the 1989. Criticizing what many historians agreed upon (Eric Hobsbawm being the most known), Tronti looks back to the so-called Short Twentieth Century, the one that runs from 1914 to 1989. However, he does not look at that span of time in order to signify the end of an era, as the historians did; contrarily, he claims: “Questa chiusura anticipata del secolo, decisa per decreto, è sospetta, culturalmente, politicamente. Il «passato che passa» è funzionale al «cattivo nuovo». È il passato che non passa il solo a costringerci alla critica di tutto ciò che è.” (80) It is precisely this “passato che non passa” that calls, I think, for the enforcement and implementation of Meridian thinking, which would signify a step beyond, oltre, towards what Tronti labeled an “utopia urgente.” Now that we have the unit of time (il passato che non passa), the actor (i soggetti collettivi produttori di semantica) and the title of the play (l’utopia urgente), all we need is to find the theatre where to perform it. Once again, I will resort to Piperno for help. He says: “La città è quel luogo speciale, topologicamente singolare, dove si manifesta la potenza dell’intelletto comune nella produzione di parole, sentimenti, leggi che esteriorizzano, per così dire, le qualità specifiche del luogo, il *genius loci*.” 89-90 […] “la città non è solo memoria nel senso della cosa che ricordiamo, ma è anche
memoria nel senso di capacità collettiva di ricordare, d’esercitare il ricordo come facoltà pubblica.” (95) The acknowledgement of the city as the main setting in which a Meridian way of thinking politics should stage (as opposed to larger but hardly homogeneous regions), bypasses the naive endeavour to unify the local diversity that the Mediterranean Sea both shelters and displays before the eyes of those who travel its shores. At the same time, it nearly dissolves the distance between the imagined community and the existing one. Like spiders spin cobwebs out of their heads, so human beings build cities, and the stuff they are made is as much concrete as intangible, and it is the same stuff as we are made on, as the bedazzled emperor of Cathay discovered, in Italo Calvino’s Le città invisibili: “Solo nei resoconti di Marco Polo, Kublai Kan riusciva a discernere, attraverso le muraglie e le torri destinate a crollare [how shockingly suggestive this sentence a few weeks after the fifth anniversary of 9/11], la filigrana d’un disegno così sottile da sfuggire al morso delle termiti.” […] “Potrei dirti di quanti gradini sono le vie fatte a scale, di che sesto gli archi dei porticati […] Non di questo è fatta la città, ma di relazioni tra le misure del suo spazio e gli avvenimenti del suo passato […] gli strappi delle reti da pesca e i tre vecchi che seduti sul molo a rammendare le reti si raccontano per la centesima volta la storia della cannoniera dell’usurpatore, che si dice fosse un figlio adulterino della regina, abbandonato in fasce lì sul molo. […] Ma la città non dice il suo passato, lo contiene come le linee d’una mano, scritto negli spigoli delle vie […]” (Calvino, 361, 365; Meridiani, vol. II) The Meridian Thinking needs to question the current city system, it needs to challenge the political plan (or lack thereof) lay down by local institutions, first and foremost because, as Tronti claims, “La fine della politica dei moderni non è la fine della politica, e non è il ritorno alla politica degli antichi. È l’occasione di quel
discontinuum nella politica che la situazione data non offre ma che la chance rivoluzionaria può imporre.” (La politica al tramonto, “Tesi su Benjamin,” xii, 205). To implement what he calls utopia urgente, I believe we need to put an end to this modern centralized and centralizing politics that is nothing but a barrier to the local cultural and traditional history, embodied by the stories that the old fishermen tell each other over and over again in Calvino’s work. These fishermen are also some of those soggetti collettivi Piperno mentions, and not the less important ones: their stories are the genius loci stories, the past that the city does not speak but “contiene come le linee d’una mano, scritto negli spigoli delle vie.” If Karl Kraus, and Walter Benjamin, are right, Origin is the goal; and Piperno reminds us that “ritornare all’origine, come ha già spiegato Toni Negri, non vuol dire ritornare indietro nel tempo; significa, piuttosto e più semplicemente, ricominciare.”