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GOOD PRACTICES IN GEOGRAPHY  
READING *CARTOGRAFLA CRITICA* BY EMANUELA CASTI

As a premise, an appropriate overview of the facts: the editors of the *Bulletin of the Italian Geographic Society* have asked me for a review. Gladly, I accept. Incidentally, I had already read the book, and then - I told myself - it would not be a task that would take much time. After working continuously, one month on and I am still here writing and reviewing. Agreed, I have been particularly slow, but a month for a review is not justifiable, especially so in times when the measure of the researcher is the quantity of publications released, in times of 'publish or perish'. So why so long for a simple review of an already read book? Allow me to explain: a review should limit itself to presenting a work, with a critical eye, but always focusing on its contents. It is therefore limited to the perimeter established by the work itself. If, on the other hand, it largely overreaches this perimeter, it develops reflections predominantly on the method itself, and leaves the contents in second place, and then becomes something else. Conclusion of the story: I took a month instead of a few days, and the editors of the *Bulletin* believe that the result, originally conceived as a review, had clearly changed shape, taking on the form of an article to head a debate. Such is their kindness.

What follows then, is not a presentation of the contents of a book, but in the aspects which characterise its approach. The heuristic value of the work has, in fact, suggested a method of reflection on the attitudes that should characterise serious research in Geography. Good practices, to use a term borrowed from business jargon, or rather 'best practices', given that the utilisation of the English term now seems unavoidable, that is, righteous practices not an end in themselves, but capable of providing important methodological guidance. In other words, practices whose function is to create, implicitly and perhaps somewhat unconsciously, a pattern of behaviour. The more practices are recommended, the more abundant those opposing bad practices are, of which a presence is not lacking, but only - a little hypocritically - a name (*worst practice* is not in vogue).

*Recognition of the ethical value of the research.* From the full conferred status of social actor to the figure of a scholar comes the ethical value of his or her work, which must take into account the collective expectations placed upon it by intellectuals. In the specific discipline of Emanuela Casti, the consideration of the results of cartographic production as a socially relevant matter automatically

invests it with an ethical responsibility, visible in the recourse to methodology of research/actions and in the choice of sensitive issues, such as that of the landscape or topical issues such as in local participatory planning. In the context of the research interests of the scholar these choices are applied to the development of colonial cartography, useful in revealing the mechanisms of appropriation of other places, and that participative element, that introduces novel ways of connecting to the community.

Ethical qualms are also measured in the formal attention to the production of a scholar's work. In *Cartografia critica*, the level is high. The presence of a glossary, an index of authors and images and brief summaries at the head of each chapter are signs of consideration toward the reader. Non obligatory insertions that respond to the necessity of the lesser experienced and demonstrate attention towards a student audience. It is they, after all, who should be the receivers of the greater part of the publications of university professors. Ethical concerns, we should remind ourselves, come before commercial interest.

*Openness to new intellectual proposas.* The advent in recent years of new scientific paradigms has revolutionised the landscape of the social sciences. In a perhaps chaotic way, without a clear common perspective or even shared models or labour practices, the many resulting guidelines – significantly called “post this” and “post that” – were reflected in enervating and enriching geographical thought. Cartographic studies too, while for decades reluctant to accept new analytic perspectives, were not spared. The idea of Emanuela Casti accepts some of the most suggestive proposals: the spatial relationship of Michel Lussault, the topological meter and the technique of anamorphosis in the conceptualisations of Jacques Levy, the *chora/topos* opposition of Giorgio Mangani. An intellectual debt to them is recognised, however the adoption is not passive but critical and adapted to a personal, intellectual journey driven by semiotic interests. The choice is the fruit of careful selection. Since it is worth pointing out to those who do not frequent the field of cartographic studies that there is much else in the field today: the advent of non representational theory has affected the field, producing a multifaceted, interdisciplinary field that has rediscovered the phenomenological dimension. The extent of change is such that it could not have been far from the thinking of Emanuela Casti, and her attraction towards participatory cartography is testament to this. But the scholar has not put herself behind the latest intellectual fashion, has not violated her ideas but rather has progressively refined them. In short, the analytical perspective of departure has remained unchanged. New trends have had a stimulating, but not distracting effect.

*Ambition.* *Cartografia critica* is a book for many but not for all. Like every book of Emanuela Casti. Requirements: Willingness to follow a challenging, yet compelling, argument, and a desire to further oneself along seldom trod paths of geographical research. We live in a time of epochal change that generates great questions. The reflection of Emanuel Casti stems from a need to investigate the sense of spatiality in the contemporary world, the effects of that space-time compression that lies at the basis of globalising dynamics and that has forced us to rethink the categories currently employed to interpret society. Having noted the performative capacity of cartographic representations, namely their ability to construct a reality and induce coherent actions with such construction, the most urgent question is: how does one represent the new spatiality of globalisation? It is evidently not a technical matter, but purely epistemological.

Modern cartography has conceived an idea of space whose figure was static. A fixed space for a representation focused on materiality, reduced to a collection of symbols. For some centuries it has diligently performed the task with which it has been entrusted within a hermeneutic perspective, taken from a world of a slow pace and reduced space, politically crushed by the weight of authority. But globalisation has revolutionised this world. What to do, then? Give up maps? Produce them, use them, study them? The solution appears convenient and widely practiced among geographers, but it is difficult to understand: if we have been saying, for decades, that territory is not merely a container of things (living and not) but the result of an uninterrupted process of a cultural order detector of relationships of sociality and power, and even more so its representations, which in this process are mirrors and motors at the same time. '*La carte est plus intéressante que le territoire*', Michel Houellebecq reminds us (2010, p.82).

Emanuela Casti takes on a challenge that leads her to formulate a proposal. As questionable and objectionable as one would wish for, but a proposal that is an attempt to breach the impasse. By which route? As is always the case, the subtitle of the book is more indicative than its title in order to reveal its contents, since it is not subject to the logic of commercial appeal. *From topos to chora* is not only a research perspective. It is an intellectual manifesto: cartography should be rethought to fully express the social and cultural values of the sites. On an analytical level this objective can be centered on valuing the spatial lattice perspective while on that technique recovering the aspects of three-dimensionality and interactivity, looking forward to treatment of multiscalarity and transcalarity.

In this way, *Cartografia critica* marks a significant milestone in the study of the field, because it establishes the definitive overcoming of the neo-positivist and ontological paradigm, still inexplicably alive in Italian geography despite the many anathemata received.

*Proactive attitude.* The natural consequence of ambition is the effort of innovation, and it has made many, and Emanuela Casti, in recent years, elevate the consideration of the map as an instrument of passive and innocuous representation to the basis of territorial transformations, that is able to guide the actions of territorial players by suggesting strategies and initiatives (she would express it saying that cartographic self-reference by the map makes powerful metamorphic device). In this attempt to induce a reconsideration of the value of the map, she is of course not alone: she rides the wake of Franco Farinelli (Farinelli, 1992), she collects the seeds planted by Giuseppe Dematteis (1985, ch.2 & 4), she finds herself in the company of (few) foreign scholars (Christian Jacob, 1992; Denis Wood, 1992). But within this daring patrol of avant-gardists Emanuela Casti has taken a road to provide real answers. She has not only contributed to the exposure of the distance between geographic and cartographic space, but has enormously expanded it with her original hermeneutic perspective of semiotic derivation. Likewise, in developing her proposal to ferry the map from *topos* to *chora* she has received stimuli (Mangani, 2007), obviously recognised, but then declined in a personal argument.

*Applied tension.* In the ideas of Emanuel Casti, innovation is all inclusive: it concerns theoretical reflections but also research of terrain, that is confronted with diverse contexts (from the African to the Bergamese) and with a plurality of scales of analysis (macro and microregional, urban). Such attention toward the empirical application offers scope for building relations with those who work in the field of applied science (for example planners and urban planners), and with those who are committed to a humanistic side (semioticians, anthropologists etc.).

This conception that amalgamates a sophisticated, theoretical reflection with a great wealth of experience in the field produces original outcomes, such as the SIGAP Strategy, research methodology for territorial policy, and it induces profound reflections on new technologies of communication. The network upsets the canon of the language of communication, pushing the map to a total, semantic reconfiguration.

Applied research has led to identifying WebGIS as the most appropriate technological platform to give substance to the proposal. It is the ideal tool to encourage participation by virtue of its specific predisposition for sharing and exchanging information online, it has also been tested regarding environmental protection projects conducted in Africa, but it is not hard to imagine possible applications in a variety of contexts. The prerequisite is to avoid giving in to the fascination with technology, computer exhibitionism, if you will. We must not lower our guard against issues that continue to be critical, in the cartography of today as that of yesterday, which concern the communication mechanisms of the map.

Considering technology in its own scientific investigations in fact goes far beyond its use, albeit brilliant, to the new potential it offers. It means developing a conscious and critical approach to the changes it faces in a new context of communication, as the producer of the map and the reader.

*Interdisciplinarity.* The effort of experimentation involves not only continuing challenges to traditional knowledge but also the necessity to look beyond its own specific field. Emanuela Casti goes looking for those interdisciplinary border spaces that, for an epistemologically weak subject like geography, are physiological, and strategic for geographers to explore.

It communicates easily with other skills, it draws from them and returns reflections enriched by sensitivity to spatial and territorial dimension that is exclusive to geography. Indeed interdisciplinarity practiced here is active and ambitious, not only adopting the good ideas of others but trying to export good ideas of geography, proposing and enhancing them through an intense exchange with experts of other fields of knowledge.

One example is her study of cave maps in Val Camonica. Archaeologists and palaeontologists have struggled deeply to interpret the meaning of these signs, but in the absence of the fundamental capacity of spatial semiotics their efforts have not yet yielded satisfactory results. Here Emanuela Casti proposes novel interpretative perspectives, based on the plasticity of the rocky support, which she puts at the disposal of other scholarly communities. It is the attitude of those who want to compare and perhaps, deep down, feel the geographical environment to be rather restrained.

It is, therefore, an interdisciplinary drive that is intelligent, measured and does not seek to intervene indifferently in all fields, skipping here today and there tomorrow as if there were any area that were accessible and useful in the same way. The interdisciplinary aspect here is practiced with reason and coherence. A focused choice, in fact, that engages with those deemed more appropriate and practical. Those in the case of Emanuela Casti are the subjects of her departmental collocation, linguistics and communication.

It is not, therefore, a geography that develops in a plurality of directions, but which chooses one and carries through to the foundation. It does this until the development of an original geographical thought that bears fruit through the contribution of knowledge outside the discipline. This is the analysis of the semiotic field applied to the cartography that Emanuela Casti has developed.

*Attachment to a disciplinary tradition.* Interdisciplinarity, we have said, is not only aimed at bringing to geography the advances of other fields (which would imply a dangerous risk of exposure to colonisation), but also to export the results of geography.

The geographical reflection that takes place in areas of the contact of fault lines with other disciplinary plates constitutes an outpost for our field of study that is strategic for defending geography in the current seismotectonic trend in the academic world. It is even more true for those cases in which a geographic presence is meagre, similarly for the departments of linguistics and communication, such as that of Emanuela Casti. Being there, and showing that geography can also make a useful contribution to the knowledge of others, is tactically more relevant than “talking to other geographers”. It means keeping alive the links between our discipline and the rest of the academic world.

Then there is the peculiar question of cartographic studies, which is still customarily assigned to geographers but is increasingly gaining the attention of interested students of other disciplines. Here it becomes necessary – and also in this respect Emanuela Casti has made a decisive contribution – to reconnect two scientific traditions that have for centuries maintained an extreme relationship: either too close, practically coincident, or too distant, almost indifferent to one another. I refer precisely to that between geography and cartography. For centuries fused together, when the professional geographer and cartographer coincided, and today tend – dangerously – to diverge, with the production of maps remaining the field of technicians, and their use disdained by many geographers..

The explicit intent of Casti has been to put cartography back at the service of geography, causing it to recover its capacity to express not merely the materiality of geographical objects but their intimate social value. To this end, the new IT tools offer the cartographer an unmissable opportunity to regain the autonomy that has been wiped out in the centuries of state cartography.

The discussion on the map — so to speak — paperless, that is not by traditional hard copy but in digital format, is addressed by Casti, transcending its technical aspects. The message is extremely important: the technology of geographic information is not, should not be and cannot be, the unchallenged dominion of technicians. Communicative and social aspects find themselves in their dignity, and with them geographer find themselves in charge of cartography again in these times of technological fanaticism, legitimacy restored in their ancient role as exegete of the map. On condition, however, that Casti does not remain alone.

After all, when she writes that the term “map” used in everyday language simplifies and trivialises the problematic extent of the principal tool of geographical communication, Emanuela Casti defends spaces that the discipline would do well to claim with more strength and conviction. It seems to me that cartography still remains an area which is acknowledged with great authority by geographers rather than by other scholars. It is considered a distinctive character of their professionalism. Let us hope it can be much longer.

*Sense of role.* The most important and most difficult achievement for a teacher in bleak times for the university, with little money for research, lack of generation renewal, demoralisation of young people toward the opportunities offered by culture, is to transmit her knowledge. Not only to leave a trace in a publication every so often, but to sow seeds. Maybe even give life to a school.

*Cartografia critica* is certainly the result of a long and careful reflection, but is also, at the same time, a group effort. Indeed, here and there in the book traces appear that attest to the contribution of others, to which are ultimately dedicated a heartfelt final page; it deals with components of that school which in recent years has grown to form the Cartographic Diathesis Laboratory in Bergamo. Proudly female. Better.

This commendable, reproductive attitude testifies to the desire to work with youth, optimism and positivity, and provides a not irrelevant service to the geography of the future.

*Propensity to stimulate a critical debate.* The intention of this article was not to discuss the contents of a book, as much as reflection on questions of method, of approach to research, of interpretation of the role of geography and of geographers. *Cartografia critica* has provided an opportunity. But at the same time it has enabled my personal reflections towards the results to which the reasoning of Emanuela Casti leads, with which I at times agree and disagree.

I understand the limitations of the topographic map compared with descriptions of contemporary reality and I am sincerely attracted to her proposed chorographic. The suggestion to do away with a cartography based on limits, and head towards that based on relations, which can then cross the limitations, seduces me. However, doubts remain with me about the effective application of the topological metric that Casti supports, and the hermeneutic capacities of anamorphosis that constitute the analytical tool. In particular, I take issue with the criteria for setting up what she refers to as the 'background map' (i.e. the map drawing) and judging the distance, that this metric evidently constitutes the fundamental connective. On this aspect, the author focuses on explaining that 'there are different algorithms to make the surface of the background map proportional to a quantitative variable' (p.277). Therein lies the problem: the algorithms can resolve problems when it comes to quantitative information. But how much of reality is represented and understood by relying on numbers? Judging by quantitative tendencies of some disciplines, such as economics, much. I believe, in reality however, little.

Even if we blindly believe in the reliability of the recorded data (and there are many – but really – the immigrants in Italy?), are we sure that the category we use is analytically significant (the concept of immigrant that I adopt in my research coincides with that of the Ministry of the Interior and with statistics)? Once again: how representative are figures arranged by administrative units (is it helpful to

know from official statistics that Milan has fewer than half of the inhabitants of Rome?). Worse lies at the global level in the context of a globalised world (the GDP of states still makes sense?). Anamorphosis, in short, that deforms the topographical design to impose one based on statistical phenomena, does not convince me, because it cannot fully satisfy the need to move away from a quantitative mapping based on measurement to a qualitative one based on discourse.

There is also a second aspect that seems problematic to me. As much as I praise the meritorious attempt to overcome the topographical criteria for identifying escape routes, which allow emancipation from it with the intention of recovering the values expressed by territory, I fear that this attempt may risk seriously damaging one of the most successful characteristics of cartographic language: universality. That is, as we all know, more presumed than real, however, in the public mind appearance counts, and in the mind of the public geodetic/topographical cartography is considered to be a highly standardised scientific facility, founded on formalised and rigorous protocols. This reputation has generated an almost unconditional confidence towards the tool. An undeserved confidence, as we have said many times, but it worked.

Now, though, if we dismantle this conviction which undermines the trust of the reader, can we control and manage the consequences? With an element of recklessness I use an example one of the flagships of Emanuela Casti: participatory cartography. I confess that I am fascinated. How could I not be in front of a group of individuals, mostly completely devoid of geocartographic skills, that in a short time with few resources can produce representations of their territory from which, finally, shine through the cultural values and social sense of that place? The collective product, public purpose, content and original forms, and even independence from official power (academic, political, economic etc. that for centuries has breathed down the necks of those who produced maps). Here, materialised, is the dream of every critical cartographer. But I wonder whether the adoption of practices that stimulate and lever the spontaneity and informal participation does not run the risk in the long run of being paid with the loss of that vernacular value that has made the fortune of cartography by ensuring a universal readability. The price of self-reference of the local environment may be revealed to be too costly.

Between a model tending toward approval (the topographical) and one of self-management (the participative) the thought submitted is a reflection on the subject-object relationship. It is not too versed to us to manifest incompetence in front of the chief objective of philosophical research, but I allow myself a brief consideration with respect to the history of cartography. The age of rationalist cartography, that wanted the subject weak and the object strong, is gone, but are we not perhaps too quickly heading in the opposite direction, with the subject too strong and the object gradually evaporating to nothingness? A world where everything is a sign and reality can no longer have its own

cartography? And if you ever were to have, to be entitled to still deal with cartography, would geographers be able to acquire the necessary skills in the field of cognitive studies?

One of the most successful undertakings in the geography of recent times has been the celebration of past texts. *Geographies that made history* is the title of some events that have brought together influential geographers to discuss books that marked a historic period in the study of their discipline. Marked for better or for worse, naturally. At the time of writing news has arrived of a meeting dedicated to the eighties of the twentieth century. I wish long life to the initiative. So long to arrive to the second decade of the twenty-first century to discuss the *Cartografia critica* of Emanuela Casti.

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*Abstract* - Inspired by the recent book of Emanuela Casti, the article develops some methodological reflections on the attitudes that should characterise the approach of a serious research in geography. From the ethical value of the work of a researcher to the perception of their role, come identified some best practices that provide important methodological guidance. In the margins it critically analyses the proposals contained in the book, aimed at overcoming the rationalist approach and founding one post-topographic, able to express cultural values and the social sense of place.

The article concludes with a reflection on the requirement for the universal legibility of the map, and on the relationship between the subject and object of representation, that current trends are rapidly transforming. This last theme covers both the ethical and epistemological dimension of geographical research.

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