

Readings/Rereadings

La speranza progettuale. Ambiente e società
by Tomás Maldonado. A Rereading

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Written by Maldonado in 1969, *La speranza progettuale* was begun with the intention of formulating a systematic book on the [...] state of methodological research in the field of environmental design and planning. An endeavor, however, that appeared almost immediately unfeasible to its author due to the crisis of the very idea of design that pervaded the society of those years. Indeed, the years of youth protests are those in which Maldonado's work should be contextualized, hence the change of perspective proposed in his reflections with which he sought to distance himself from a prevailing nihilistic vision of the future. It is in this way that the writing of the essay, from the first idea of systematic discussion, became an opportunity for the intellectual Maldonado to take a stand in response to a contestation that he found arid, in that it lacked any formulation of rational alternatives. A stance that was felt to be urgent and necessary because "the true exercise of critical consciousness is always inseparable from the will to search for a coherent and articulate planning alternative to the convulsion of our times" [p. 16] [1] – as the author wrote in the foreword to the first edition of 1970.

This alternative was already being identified in those years in a new form of



Fig. 1. Cover of the first edition. Einaudi, "Nuovo Politecnico Einaudi" series, 1970.

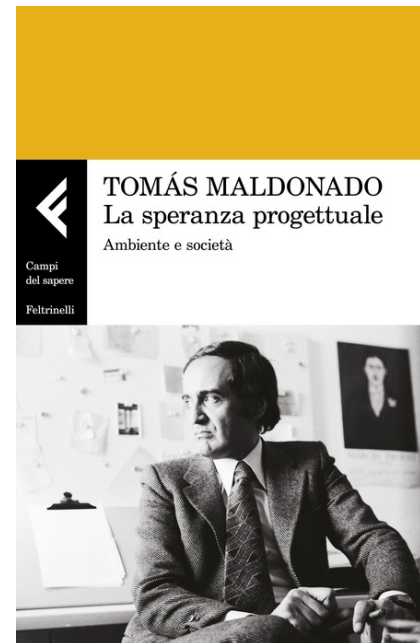


Fig. 2. Cover of the most recent edition. Feltrinelli, "Campi del Sapere" series, 2022.

Fig. 3. Tomás Maldonado while teaching at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm.



planning for addressing the environment, a natural environment compromised by that 'human ecological subsystem' [2] capable of provoking "substantial –that is, irreversible– disturbances in the equilibrium of other subsystems" [p. 35]. According to Maldonado, it is not just a matter of saving the natural environment but of saving the human environment as well, that is, our own existence undermined by an alienation resulting from the labored efforts we make to 'live, coexist and survive' in the physical and sociocultural surroundings we ourselves have created and with which we continue to interfere without caring about the consequences.

When one considers that it was precisely in 1969 that the first environmental movements came into being –in the wake of environmental disasters such as the Union Oil spill off the coast of California– prompting the first Earth Day in the United States held on April 22, 1970, one can understand how Maldonado's reflections come across as historically circumstantial yet are still today relevant and at times prophetic. In his reflections –which at times take on the tone of social criticism– those 'time bombs' going off today were already being recognized in the environmental situation of those years. Maldonado saw an ongoing state of 'explosive congestion' of people and, proportionally, also "of objects, resources, infrastructures, equipment, processes, messages, cognitions, etc." [p. 87]. A state of things and people that threatened to turn into a 'catastrophe of the gravest consequences' in the span of a very short time. A threat felt as "real, current, everywhere verifiable" [p. 87], but above all unavoidable, if society were to continue to develop in its 'chaotic spontaneity', with no plan that would take

into account in advance the possible consequences of choices and actions. The threat that was being envisaged by ecological scholars, and felt by Maldonado, was that of an 'irreversible disruption of ecological balance' due to an uncontrolled proliferation of discards, residues and dross. An increase in the 'population of waste', 'pollutants' and 'artificial erosion factors' that would have marked the destiny "of every form of human life on the face of the earth perhaps as early as the second half of the next century" [p. 87]. The huge island of plastic debris in the Pacific – known as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch (GPGP)– was probably beginning to take shape in those years, only to be spotted for the first time in 1997.

It should be mentioned that this importance of the design act in the preservation of human existence, within an environmental ecosystem threatened by human activity itself, had already been the central theme of a collection of writings by Richard J. Neutra published in a first edition in 1954 by Oxford University Press (New York) and later in a second edition, precisely in 1969 [3]. Although the title of Maldonado's book seems to echo Neutra's *Survival through Design*, the latter never appears among the many citations present in *La speranza progettuale*. Whether this is the result of an oversight or a deliberate omission is unknown.

Faced with the bleak outlook described in the essay, which he shared with the environmentalist and anti-militarist youth of the 1960s, Maldonado did not feel, however, that he could also share their nihilist response of total rejection of all 'concrete projections'. Such a rejection would have entailed, in fact, a renunciation of the fulfillment of our very being, "of our doing and our desiring" [p. 41] since it is precisely through con-

crete projections that is, 'what we are, do and want to do' – that we shape the human environment itself.

His hopes were thus directed toward a revolution conducted through a kind of designing able to bring together 'technological imagination' and 'sociological imagination'. That is to say, 'technological courage' and 'social and political courage'. Designing "that seeks to open up a horizon of action that is articulated, coherent and socially responsible for the human environment and its destiny" [p. 84]. Designing guided by innovative yet responsible behavior; understood as an 'act of management' aiming "to keep the risk under control and measure its consequences" [p. 106].

It seems evident how, in Maldonado's words, this warning was addressed not only to civil society –with a view to ecological preservation– but also to the political representatives that in those years were responsible for the disastrous initiative of the Vietnam War, a phantom that appears time and again throughout the essay and in the subsequent revisions that followed in its reprints. The Vietnam War is evoked by calling into question one of its main proponents within the J. F. Kennedy administration, that is, Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense, who in the name of rationality used mathematical models and quantitative methods of operations research to conduct his disastrous international policy.

Maldonado here finds a way to criticize those who think they find infallibility in supposedly scientific methods, in the most 'exhaustive and extensive quantitative surveys of data', warning us against those who make rationality prevail over broader goals and values. When the California government thought of turning to 'systems engineers' borrowed from aerospace re-

search to solve the problems of traffic and air pollution caused by automobiles, their models identified commuting employees alone as the crux of the problem, proposing a radical solution: that of moving workers away from their 'collective workplaces' and having them work at their homes, each transformed into a kind of 'home office', equipped with technological devices useful for remotely performing all those tasks that involved 'information processing and management'. It is here that Maldonado's work becomes topical once again, at a time in history when, in light of our experience with the isolation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the idea of fostering remote work and teaching has come back into vogue and at times even in enthusiastic tones. In his essay, Maldonado calls this solution a 'sociological aberration' because it is the bearer of a deurbanization that brings with it a far more serious problem, that of the desocialization of humans, that of a society that would be emptied of 'any tangible concreteness'. Providing a portrait of a living condition in which we have no difficulty recognizing ourselves today, Maldonado wrote in the footnote: "The worker [...] is condemned to suffocating isolation. It is an isolation 'en famille', this is true, but it is still isolation. His real relationships with other men are reduced to a minimum. The television screen, which used to exist only as a function of entertainment, now appears, as monitor, as a function of work. The world of others is no longer at arm's length, but now only within reach of the television screen" [p. 115]. And though in times still far removed from the spread of Internet and social media, Maldonado seems to warn us, "Mass man, we all know, is manipulable; but isolated man is ever more so" [p. 115],

opening with this warning what would become one of his contemporary concerns, the manipulation of the virtually connected masses, addressed in *Critica della ragione informatica* (1997). In professing his rejection of that 'nihilism in design' seen as the outcome of the encounter between cultural nihilism and political nihilism, Maldonado, in the field of urban planning, found in Robert Venturi and Denis Scott Brown, with their study of Las Vegas –published first as an article in *Architectural Forum* (March 1968) and only later in book form (1972)– his scapegoats. While, on the one hand, he who was to become the editor of *Casabella* from 1977 to 1981 shared with Vittorio Gregotti the idea of the need for a desire preceding the design act, on the other hand, he also found unacceptable Robert Venturi's 'exercises in conformist gymnastics', where it seemed that an analy-

sis of the existing did not lead to a reforming action. Sharing with Kenneth Frampton (with whom he had been in close contact during his teaching days at Princeton University) a politicized, Marxist position inspired by the writings of Herbert Marcuse (*Eros and Civilization*, 1955), Maldonado believed he saw in Venturi and Scott Brown naïve apologists for a commercial aesthetics resulting from the capitalist social system. Not showing, in this case, enough foresight as to recognize in *Learning from Las Vegas* the innovative charge that would be at the origin of contemporary architectural theory, Maldonado only saw an approach derived from the art of reading the exclusively visual aspects of the city. A gratuitous exaltation of the visual ambiguity in which arbitrariness stood as an alternative to utopia and seemed to reject any efficient action within the framework of that

'praxiology', borrowed from Tadeusz Kotarbinsky [4], that Maldonado hoped to associate with the design act. In the foreword to the 1992 edition, the author acknowledged the change that had occurred in the social, political and cultural context from that which had originally accompanied his reflections and the waning of the urgency to defend design and planning. On the other hand, he still considered the environmental problem, in which he continued to see 'the issue of all issues', as central to our society. What Maldonado still seems to want to say today to the young environmentalist generation is that environmentalist awareness alone is not enough, just as, alone, that contestation for its own sake that has always sought to oppose servility toward the 'system' without realizing the impossibility of eluding any system, is not enough.

Notes

[1] All citations refer (with page references) to the most recent edition of the essay (Feltrinelli, 'Campi del Sapere' series, 2022), which fully reproduces its updated version published in 1992 in the series 'Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi'. The essay was already published in Italian when it first came out in the 'Nuovo Politecnico Einaudi' series in 1970. In 1971 a new updated edition came out with more extensive notes with which Maldona-

do intended to fill some gaps he had found in the first edition.

[2] Single quotation marks are used in this text to report expressions and terminologies used by Maldonado himself.

[3] Richard J. Neutra, *Survival Through Design*, Oxford University Press, New York 1953, 1969. The

first Italian edition dates back to 1956 (Edizioni di Comunità).

[4] Praxiology as a "general theory of efficient action" is taken up by Maldonado from the essay by T. Kotarbiński, *Praxiology - An Introduction to the Sciences of Efficient Action*, Pergamon Press, Oxford 1965 (original title *Traktat o dobrej robocie*, 1955; 3rd ed. 1965).

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