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Elena Bougleux, Nadia Breda

# *Managing Global Social Water.*

## *Ethnography of Emerging Practices in the Anthropocene*

March 22 has been declared by the United Nations the *International World Water Day*. Why celebrating a Water Day each year? which pressing needs, global changes, slow but steady adaptations and in/visible crisis are implied in the decision of introducing such a recurrence?

The issue of global water arises as a relevant global theme connecting urgent and systemic critical aspects of the present social and economic scenario. Practices, strategies and rituals related to water have been studied by anthropologists in depth; water appears as a natural resource, as a driver of development, as condition for health, as a juridical issue at the same time, and it is a key issue for studies of economy, agronomy, engineering, each discipline producing its own specific set of water-related knowledge. In our perspective all these specific and disciplinary declinations are entangled in a social-water continuum, that cannot be separated nor split into fragmented elements. Global Social Water unfolds as a unique multiple concept.

The theoretical framework of the Anthropocene we want to refer to calls for a new and emerging sensitivity that goes beyond the individual sets of knowledge/s developed so far by independent approaches (Gibson, Venkateswar 2015), and in this sense the Anthropocenic approach meets and amplifies our need and desire, as anthropologists, to create concrete occasion of dialogue. Embracing the framework of the Anthropocene means to endorse in a global responsibility endeavour, and emphasise the deep interconnections among actions performed by diverse actors at different scales. In this issue the challenge of the multidisciplinary dialogue consists exactly in the proximity of different sets of knowledge produced at different scales: local practices of appropriation, immediate exploitation of resources, long term data collection, discursive sustainability matters and fragile social values, all emerging in the Anthropocene as a unique hyper-object to be dealt with, through multiple perspectives (Morton 2015). In such framework the processes and the crises implicated with water appear as the most urgent ones, and requiring complex visions: water can no longer be understood

by unrelated actors, and no local insight on water can stand independently from a many-scale picture drawn within a global-social continuum.

Water itself owns multiple characters, being perceived from time to time as a fluid, pliant, adaptive element, and as a dangerous, lacking, uncontrollable force. Its shapeless matter creates material continuous connections, and water networks act as linking metaphors capable of connecting well beyond the visible and the intuitive. The authors contributing to this issue make solid reference to their ethnographic research, localizing their reflections on very specific water-related grounds: from Southern India rivers to the Anthroposophic Community in Italy, from Venice Lagoon to Agro Pontino, from the sea and its waterfronts to the water needed to make wine. At the same time, the authors project their visions into a wider cosmology of meanings, inscribe their discourses in the framework of the Anthropocene so that their outcomes can be shared and discussed according to diverse competences and disciplines.

Through these set of papers we have started a fruitful dialogue with climatologists, architects, marine biologists, botanists, economists and more, each bringing to our studies their specific contribution. The emerging vision mainly depicts the issue of water as a natural + social resource, where the natural and social dimensions remain always interconnected and interdepending, each requiring both a local and a large scale perspective, in a global and social approach.

The contribution by Rita Vianello enters into the ongoing discussion, spanning over decades, about a world-wide famous venue: Venice and its lagoon. Vianello has been studying the Venice lagoon and the subjects somehow related with it for a long time; in this paper she focuses on the impressive engineering infrastructure known as MOSE (*Modulo Sperimentale Elettromeccanico*), developed in the context of the debate on climate change, on the raise of the sea level and the submersion of coastal cities. She discusses the history of MOSE, namely a system of underwater dams intended to protect Venice from the recurring high

waters, as a highly criticized and very controversial project. The MOSE construction process has been marked by scandals and corruption episodes; inquiries and sentences have been taken to court well before the infrastructure was completed. Vianello investigates the impact of MOSE from “the point of view of the natives”, highlighting how ontologies, local knowledge and water practices referred to the lagoon environment are a fine and complex heritage owned by the fishermen, that hasn’t been taken into any account. The fishermen and all other lagoon dwellers have remained outside the decision process and their perspective on the need of care of the humid area, which is in fact protected by international laws, does never emerge. Their specific socialization and appropriation of the lagoon keeps unfolding, developing a relation of reciprocity between human, nonhuman and water, but the large scale project has never been confronted with these fragile tough skillful competences. On the contrary, the project was imposed without any mediation, generating an ongoing conflict that clearly shows what the Anthropocene should not be made of: fragmented sets of knowledge, top-down environmental planning, lack of solutions and mitigations of climate change impacts.

The paper by Paolo Gruppuso explores the environmental conflicts emerging in a humid environment located in central Italy, the area of Agro Pontino. As in many other cases of humid areas scattered across the globe, also in Agro Pontino a conflictual scenario emerges from the opposite conceptions of the landscape, from different perceptions of time and space shared by the subjects that inhabit or somehow use the place. Oppositions that eventually reproduce the classical dichotomy between some ‘global’ and ‘other and local’ ways of understanding the place. The anthropological analysis by Gruppuso describes in detail as the sinkholes, the marshes and the rivers flowing in the wetland are perceived as thoroughly different objects of knowledge by the actors producing that specific knowledge. This study recalls an ethnographic case of ‘perspectival anthropology’, *à la* Viveiros de Castro (Viveiros de Castro 2004), where the emergence of an evident multinaturalism can be observed: the local *sinkholes* are not the same *sinkholes* for environmentalists and geologists. The framework of the Anthropocene appears as a good theoretical framework where the two visions could interact with each other, in search for a creative synthesis. According to the anthropologist, such synthesis has to be searched in the social, historical and cultural dimensions of the humid areas. Exactly for this reason Gruppuso introduces in his paper the distinction between ‘wetland’ as humid areas, protected and scientifically interpreted,

ed, and ‘wet land’, pieces of land crossed by water identified by a historical and biographical path by the local subjects involved with them.

Silvia Lelli’s contribution is quite centered in the topic of the present monographic issue, since it represents a successful example of original experimentation positioned on the intersection of Anthropocenic themes: climate changes, water (sea water, in her case), the consequences of human actions (humans as producers of polluting plastic quantities), and the search for creative solutions that mix science, art and anthropology. All this intersection takes place in a local and at the same time global setting: somewhere between the coast of Elba Island and the “Garbage States”, made of floating patches of rubbish over the five oceans of the planet.

Lelli’s contributions originates from her own practice of garbage collection, specifically picking plastic debris out of the sea. The peculiar status of the collected objects emerges sharply at the attention of the anthropologist: the plastic debris show evidence of their previous “social life” as commodities (Appadurai 1988) and at the same time they appear now just as useless waste. In both “lives” they maintained a dialogical inter-relation with water that changed and reshaped their form and meaning. Through these objects Lelli develops a deep investigation on the possible relational discourse between human and nonhuman, an intense discourse that inevitably flows into an artistic production made of the same collected debris. The practice of sea garbage collection and the artistic experimentation bring the anthropologist back to a critical reflection on the peculiar “social deaths” of socionatural artifacts, showing how many categories of knowledge need as well to be reshaped.

Linda Johnson-Bell discusses the entangled process that transforms water into wine, and the way such traditional and ancient process has been affected and profoundly challenged by climate change. Her paper deals with the delicate issue of the conflict between change and tradition with specific reference to wine taste, to alcoholic grade, to soil type and water salinity, balancing her discourse between very technical matters related to viticulture and the cultural material and immaterial implications that the production and consume of wine call into action. Johnson-Bell refers to a wide and heterogeneous literature to provide us with an account of the debate on the opportunities and risks of vines irrigation. On one side stands the recognizable print of grapes, tied to specific territories and regions and far from the concept of water-added processes; on the other stand the “new world” wine producers, ready to import and reproduce renowned wines in new environmental conditions, together with and



the pressure posed by climate change, that puts at severe risks the grapevines traditionally grown in their regions of origin. Multiple irrigation techniques are described, including the consequences on soil quality and plants resistance in a variety of world regions that span from France to California, from Southern Europe to Australia. Everywhere a lively – if not conflictual – debate emerge on whether is it worth while to invest in vineyards irrigation to obtain more diverse, expensive and ever-changing luxury goods.

Nadia Breda has focussed on a peculiar group of anthroposophic researchers who has activated a scientific-spiritual lab and new agricultural practices in order to face the emergencies posed by climate change. Breda investigates the forms of knowledge handled by the group, their representations, their practices, and the way the researchers make them interact, asking which contributions may arise from this interaction for the general framework of the Anthropocene, in its complex and multidisciplinary dimension. Breda investigates this case of a non-naturalistic ontology that appears as a spiritual-artistic-experimental unity, and that includes multiple variations. Anthroposophy appears therefore as a form of knowledge characterized by a high degree of complexity, capable of manipulating in symbolic and material ways the languages and the ecological practices situated on the borders between nature/culture, between human/non human. The ethnographic analysis developed by the author shows that the social group, inspired by anthroposophy, has been engaged for many years in discussions and exchanges with academy and with agronomic sciences, experimenting in its own labs and fields, aware of the need of new solutions in the management of water. Climate issues in fact affect water in the first place, so that water requires a particular care within the development of experimental qualitative methodologies: methodologies that the anthroposophers seem to be actually developing.

The paper by Elena Bougleux describes the ongoing conflictual opposition between the two bordering Indian states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, divided by the River Cauvery that marks the border between them for about one hundred kilometers. The management of the River Cauvery waters and the allocation of the scarce water resources that the two states have to share represents a historically controversial issue, but the controversy was highly worsened by the severe seasons of drought that struck India in 2016. The narratives on the reasons and on the responsibilities of water scarcity are deeply grounded and socially rooted in different water-scapes. The water consumes have been dramatically increasing in both states in the last decade, in Karnataka the main

reason being the unregulated development of urban and large metropolitan areas, whereas in Tamil Nadu the mainly agricultural economy relies entirely on the Cauvery River traditional and not too efficient irrigation systems. The paper explores how climate change provides a new framework within which to read a long lasting contraposition, casting a local issue in a global picture of crisis and interdependent causes typical of the Anthropocene scenario: the discourse on climate change actually highlights the contraposition between two different approaches to development strategies and to the economic management of lacking resources. The paper eventually discusses the theme of water property in a juridical perspective, comparing the Indian approach to water scarcity with similar scenarios occurring in other drought-hit world regions.

The comprehensive reading of the papers in the present issue reveals a deep interconnection between the shifts of meaning – from geological to social, from economic to artistic – and the shift of materiality that occurs when water materially crosses, transforms, floods, raises, sinks or lacks. Water performs as an anthropogenic powerful metaphor, linking heterogeneous layers and networking diffracted actors. The topics of these papers and the network they outline are inscribed within the research and activities of the *Laboratory on Anthropology and Anthropocene* (LAA, [Manifesto 2016](#)), set up at the University of Bergamo and the University of Florence, coordinated by Elena Bougleux and Nadia Breda.

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