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Conflicts in a networked territory

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Territory appears to have become a critical issue in decisions regarding infrastructure. More and more protests accompany great and small works bringing to light a blatant short circuit in communication and political dialogue. All of a sudden, in our country at least, the idea of development, meant as an identification with the creation of public works, the general interest, increasing connections and flows and the consent by the locations concerned, is experiencing a crisis. The Nimby syndrome ('Not in my backyard' or near my house) has become a common expression and is widely used to label local conflicts and the role which they play in blocking actions deemed urgent and indispensable. Those who oppose the work are accused with hindering necessary investments to safeguard the general interest through infrastructure that improves connections to Europe, waste disposal, securing energy supplies and thus economic growth and wellbeing. All European countries have to deal with this problem. In the United States this phenomenon has been studied for decades since it is closely related with the changes in contemporary society and the relation between public and private interest. The territory has become the stage where tensions and questions are played out and channelled. A deeper understanding of the changes that concern the networks and the territory is becoming fundamental to provide insight into the ongoing conflicts and make sense of this phenomenon with a view to finding a possible way out. For many decades, building a motorway or the localisation of an industrial

centre or power plant was immediately associated to the positive idea of development. Times have changed, and so have the relationship between the community and its territory. Defending one's identity and quality has become a factor which unites us to defend ourselves from change. Today bridges, viaducts, junctions and ring roads are frowned upon more often than not since they are seen as congestion, pollution as well as detrimental to urban areas and landscapes. In some way the idea of infrastructure was once associated to the prospect of quantitative development. If we look inside these conflicts, we realise that the founding theme concerns the idea of participating in decisions and democracy in a scenario in which the fragmentation of power is clear, with the force of interest being at stake. The contrast between national and local standpoints, flows and places, is highlighted in the most heated and important conflicts concerning plants and infrastructure, suggesting a crisis of what was once perceived as public interest and is depicted as general interest depending on the perspective of the viewers. Underlying the protests is the desire to defend ourselves against an intrusion that may deeply alter our life-style and degrade our habitat. The communities that feel under fire inevitably tend to develop a catastrophic vision of the threat. Instead, the promoters of large works are inclined to ignore local protests since they claim that they are based on irrational fears and selfishness. Although this objection may contain some elements of truth, it does not consider the fact that behind the protests, which involve thousands of citizens, is a request to recognize the dignity of people and places. It is

necessary to understand this request, if public institutions want to communicate with these citizens. Exposing the real groundlessness and senselessness of the fears is just as important, since large works are often surrounded by a great deal of uncertainty. One of the most important changes occurred in the territory lies in a stronger perception of one's identity compared to the past, which leads to the rediscovery of values and resources, with the associated fear that changes may damage them. The clearest form is the growth in wealth and wellbeing in the territories that focus on quality as a development factor. A very different phenomenon concerns the less 'integral' areas, where widespread urbanization has led to not having to deal with situations where new infrastructure can travel 'free' from anthropological impediments. All these contexts share an unparalleled need for attention, where the consensus to alleviate traffic congestion is associated to a negative image of infrastructure. An initial response to the spread of the Nimby syndrome towards infrastructure may come from understanding how the keys to unlock the disputes are to be found right in the territories. Making early steps in the direction of dialogue to understand the reasons of concern and divulging widespread information on the project's objectives are basic elements for a transparent debate. All of this in a context that sees the territory as an ally in projects, through the expression of its requests, driving forces and interests, as well as a fundamental key for economic development. Transparency, widespread information and public debate which on the

project's objectives are the keys which may allow us to understand requests and willingness to changes in the territories, thus taking a step forward in the communication so to improve the works or choose a less expensive alternative with a lower impact. A second unavoidable question lies in the link between projects and the 'idea of a future' that they envisage. Politicians clearly have responsibilities concerning this point, as they are called to select the strategic works and propose a vision that goes beyond the individual project. For example by associating the projects to a strategy of reduction in congestion, pollution and road accidents, hence increasing alternatives and lifestyle. The relationship with the territory is also capable of proposing innovation with a willingness to discuss the changes and prospects that come with it. For example by assessing new infrastructural works in quantitative and qualitative terms: with the possibility of reducing congestion and accidents, improving the life of pedestrians through a more efficient integration with railway and underground stations, supplying services for the logistics of goods, contributing to limiting local pollution and CO2 emissions as laid down by the Kyoto Protocol. A third fundamental key to escape the Italian Nimby syndrome lies in the quality of the projects and works. Dialogue with the territory is unthinkable if attention and respect for values and concerns do not come into the equation, expressing a point of view that does not consider the territory as negligible for the networks but, is aware of the importance of the infrastructure for the landscape. In this direction, dialogue and technical and environmental

communication need to be increased rather than decreased. In a way that the projects describe the proposed objectives in a comprehensible manner, comparing project alternatives and the territories concerned, fully investigating the issues of geological concern to avoid water drainage, the excavation material to limit the opening of mines, ecological operations with environmental compensation and mitigation activities. The interaction with the territory makes sense when built upon mutual understanding by facing the most important issues of concern with detailed, up-to-date and transparent information. The communication requires clear roles to be defined. Who should take the decisions and pay the costs of functional and environmental integration? Clarity on the 'subjects' of discussion with the various factors involved is fundamental for a transparent dialogue. A context of this type facilitates the accountability of the various people involved with respect to the solutions and resources necessary to raise the architectural and environmental quality of any additional work. In short, there is the need for a discussion that does not jeopardize the function and sense of the work, once its strategic importance has been discussed and decided. It is fundamental that all the participants perceive the importance and dignity of the dialogue and real discussion, supported by the complete willingness to review the topic and change the solutions.