

## Marco Poloni: The Analogue Dam

### Transcript of voice over

On the morning of April 9, 2010, I took a trip from Palermo to the unfinished dam of Blufi, in the National Park of the Madonie, near the gravity centre of the Island, and actually near the geographical centre of the entire Mediterranean. I drove eastward along the north coast on highway 19, the Palermo-Catania, for about 50 kilometers, then followed it southward for another 50 kilometers as it wound up into the mountains. Then I took the Statale 120 eastward, a secondary road that leads to Blufi, a village about 900 meters above sea level. The rest of the day was spent searching for a point of access to the dam, which is located in an isolated valley carved by the river Imera. The two bridges used by the construction companies, a temporary bridge upstream of the dam's face and a portable steel bridge downstream, had collapsed under a flood. All the roads that circumvented the artificial lake had either collapsed due to landslides or were covered with large heaps of mud. Winter had been tough. The only possible path to the dam was to cross the river upstream of the site. By then the day was gone, leaving me with the impression that I was trying to enter some forbidden zone. I resolved to have dinner and sleep at a neighboring town with a hotel. The next day, April 10, I bought some thick rope and a long wooden plank at a local store, aiming to build a temporary bridge. Crossing the river was easy, and after half an hour walking downstream on the bottom of the artificial lake, I reached the first skeletal remains of the work.

It was strange to walk on ground that should have been submerged. It infused the site with a vibe of unpredictability. I imagined, although it would have been impossible, that a sudden flood wave would wipe me out, along with everything that was around me. The ground was wet and pitted, and scattered with technical junk. Steel rods, spare parts for excavators, and sections of pipes were slowly sinking into water and mud.

The expanse and the silence of the site were oppressive. The stillness opened a kind of temporal gate in my mind. I felt like an alien scavenger from the future or from the past, entering into an anomalous zone through a time warp, a zone barren and mired with refuse left by some extinct civilization. I felt I had stepped into a time machine.

The first structure that I came across was located well upstream of the dam's face. It was about the size of a large bunker. It housed the entrance to a long horizontal tunnel. This was the mouth of the reservoir's bottom intake tunnel, through which water was to be carried downstream.

Walking downstream, I reached the water intake tower. Its height indicated that I was walking at about 30

meters below water level. The tower would have housed the controls for opening and closing the valves that regulated the flow of water released through the bottom intake tunnel.

Walking further downstream, I reached the water surface on the river right embankment. There lay a titanic skeleton of concrete, flat and exposed to the sky, about one kilometer long. There was a vast basin connected to a chute, followed by an extensive curved channel. This structure wasn't the dam, but a lateral spillway. The spillway, a side-channel located at river right was there to provide flood control downstream. It bypassed the dam's wall to discharge the excess of flood water that could not be released through the outlet valve. This was a critical element of the dam. A sudden flood wave, caused for instance by a landslide or an earthquake, and potentially more powerful than a tsunami, would simply have wiped out the dam, resulting in devastation downstream.

The actual wall of the dam, a massive pyramidal earthwork that would have blocked off the valley in a straight line spanning perpendicularly to the river, was never erected. The presence of the spillway made the absent dam a ghost in the barren landscape, an Aztec pyramid that wasn't there. The earthwork, 710 meters span, 71 meters high, was to be built with loose, so to speak soft materials instead of concrete, in order to morph with small mutations of the site's unstable geology. Try to picture a seismosaurus, an exceptionally large dinosaur. It was possibly the longest lizard that ever lived. Stack up 24'000 dead seismosaurus in a giant pyramid. That's the mass that was missing.

The spillway chute was about 250 meters long. It ended in a face with two square eyes and a round mouth. The eyes were the outlets of the surface discharge channel. The mouth was the outlet of the bottom intake tunnel, whose inlet was the bunker I had seen earlier upstream.

Quite unusually, the spillway chute was closed by a lid of concrete, possibly to give it more resistance against seismic shifts in land. The lid was coated with asphalt. The spillway side walls were roughly finished, badly sutured and already eroded, their skin peeling off. Poor-quality concrete was used here. On one side of the chute, bees had carved a large nest in the concrete. It seemed that the insects – in a kind of reverse entropy – were metamorphosing the armored cement into the liquid material it once was.

Next came the stilling basin with its multiple rows of baffle piers. It was an energy dissipator, a device to avoid excessive acceleration of the water flow and prevent the damage that could occur from a high discharge velocity. The baffle blocks resembled World War II anti-tank blocks. They were nestled in cracked mudflats like many miniature bunkers. It was easy to imagine that these small monoliths would dissolve one day into mud.

Downstream, beyond the stilling basin's end sill, was the curved channel, a strip of concrete long like five

soccer fields, vast enough to land a large vessel from outer space. It was covered all over with a thick layer of cracked mudflat. It opened abruptly into the Sicilian expanse.

The dam of Blufi is possibly the most illustrious corpse of public architecture in Sicily. It is part of the legacy of the poorly managed national Fordist project for the South that took place since the 50's, and of the nepotistic and parasitic corruption in which Sicilian institutions are still soaking today.

The inception and initial study phase of the Blufi dam dates back to the end of the 60's, when a project for a dam in the National Park of the Madonie was elaborated by the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno, or CasMez.

CasMez was a special government agency established in 1950 by the then Christian Democratic government. It was aimed at fueling the economic development of the poorer, southern regions of Italy by massively financing their industry and infrastructure.

The Blufi dam was designed to distribute water to Caltanissetta, Enna and Agrigento. The dam project was shelved until the end of the 80's, when, through the initiative of the regional government, an invitation to tender was opened by EAS, Ente Acquedotti Siciliani, the State agency responsible for the construction and maintenance of aqueducts in Sicily, on behalf of Agensud, the agency that in the meantime had replaced CasMez. The project was awarded to a cartel of four construction companies through a deceitful measure of exception known as “accelerated procedure of public tender.” The concealed aim of this measure was to elude regulations and procedures that were meant to protect strategic, complex works of public architecture from Mafia infiltrations.

Construction began in 1989 amid strong opposition from environmental protection associations, who foresaw the devastating environmental impact of the dam. These groups voiced valid concerns about the risks of seismic instability of the artificial lake's embankments, which constituted a serious hazard for the safety of communities downstream of the dam.

Construction came to a stop in 1996 because of an intricately played out mafia story. By then the hydraulic works had been completed but the dam was still to be erected. The limestone needed to form a watertight stratum over the dam was to be extracted from a quarry located nearby. The quarry belonged to the cousin of a man whom the Mafia had assassinated in 1948, and who became a local hero. The local Mafia had an obvious stake in the dam and was determined to get hold of the quarry, but was unable to persuade the owner to sell it. Since it would not look good to kill again, the only way for the Mafia to wrest contracts from the quarry owner was to find a stratagem to close his site so that the limestone could be supplied from quarries under its control. The Mafia managed to lobby the regional government into issuing an environmental bond bill to protect the area around the dissident quarry, rendering extraction from it illegal and ceasing its operation. It succeeded in closing the dissident quarry, thereby blocking the construction, and directing attention to the Mafia's quarries. These were located about 70 kilometers from the dam.

Because of the distance however, transportation costs would have increased tremendously. The regional government and the Ministry for Public Works found it difficult to justify this expense, particularly because many knew that this was a Mafia ploy. Ironically, they returned to the only financially feasible option: to extract the limestone from the decommissioned quarry, but this now violated the environmental bond bill. It was therefore necessary to proceed in exception to this bill. However, none of the five consecutive Presidents of the Region managed to unblock the situation, possibly out of fear of acting against the Mafia's interests. As such, construction did not resume. The Mafia lost the project, and so did the construction cartel. A harsh dispute ensued between the construction companies and EAS and the region, each side holding the other accountable for the suspension of the works and asking for financial compensation. Not until a few years later, and quite peculiarly, was the financial argument settled.

By 2000, the project to complete the dam had regained political momentum. In 2001 the Ministry for the Environment, Land and Sea issued a positive judgment about the environmental soundness of the dam's reservoir, provided that a comprehensive study be undertaken by the construction companies as a preliminary condition to obtain the clearances to proceed. The study was not carried out.

In May 2002, the centre-right president of the Sicilian region and newly appointed Commissioner for Water Emergency Cuffaro announced with due ceremony that construction of the dam would resume. That never happened. Italian magistrates were already investigating allegations of corruption behind the “accelerated procedure” in the construction the dam, as well as its peculiar financial settlement.

In June 2002, the carabinieri showed up at EAS and took copies of the Blufi dam documentation. It emerged that the management agency and the Region had settled the financial issue with the cartel through secret proceedings by offering it a large compensation payment, and instead of re-opening a public invitation to tender, had tasked the cartel with finishing the work. The cartel operated with new company names but was essentially the same set-up resulting from a number of reincorporations following *tangentopoli*, the scandal of the kickbacks.

Soon after the documents surfaced, Cuffaro cancelled the contract with the cartel, stating that it was “untrustworthy.” His decision was apparently motivated by the numerous critiques voiced about the procedures followed to settle the financial contention with the cartel, and for propagating the old dam project in non-conformity to the prescriptions contained in the 2001 judgment of environmental impact. Four years later, in 2006, the Interministerial Committee for Economic Planning, acknowledging the failed restart of the works, cut the funds earmarked for finishing the dam and skeletonized it for good. In January 2008, Cuffaro was found guilty of having helped the Mafia and was given a five-year prison sentence.

The shadowy story of the Blufi dam is a case in point of the mismanagement of national public funds, and is

symptomatic of a number of Sicilian infrastructural pathologies. Contrary to the accepted idea of Sicilian nature as arid and foreboding, there is water in abundance. Rainfall yields almost triple the island's agricultural, industrial and domestic requirements. Yet islanders live with a chronic scarcity of water.

The water infrastructure of the island is fragmented and ossified. Dams are unfinished, water pipes leak, and the distribution network can not undergo systemic repair because it isn't integrally plotted. Out of the 25 dams built by the Christian Democratic governments since the 50's, only 4 are working, at reduced capacity. The remaining 21 dams were never connected to municipal reservoirs, have never had a test run, or became a hazard because of their structural erosion. Water distribution pipes are in a dismal state, with leakage rates up to 50%. The water management system is extremely fragmented, with about 450 water distribution agencies that operate without coordination. The answer to the riddle of the water that's there and not there is the Mafia, with its infiltration of large State contracts for public works and its network of complicities at all levels of Sicilian public administration.

This state of things is an effect of the configurations of power produced by Italy's Unification in 1861, and after World War II by the national project for the modernization of the South. The traditional social structure in Sicily, constituted by peasants and landowners, had remained solidly embedded due to the island's remote geography, which made it difficult for the national government to enforce laws, and because of the historically constructed distrust of islanders towards the hegemony of the central government. It is in the interstices of this social structure that a wide range of activities had emerged, aimed at controlling land, livestock and water, and the flow of material and monetary transactions between rural and urban areas of the island. These activities involved a large number of middlemen, such as the *funtaneri*, the guardians of wells and springs.

The Mafia arose from these newly emerging social groups that organized and monopolized forms of nature that were essential to the island's economy. In time, the Mafia consolidated its territorial control of water for irrigation and domestic use and never released its grip on this source of power. With the national project managed by CasMez beginning in the 50's, thirst in Sicily attracted massive financial flows for the development of infrastructures. This offered opportunities for the Mafia to appropriate these funds through a viscous tangle of interests involving businessmen, administrators and politicians, thwarting legal entrepreneurship. As they say over here, "In Sicily we don't drink water, we eat it."

In order to keep this financial flow going it was necessary that dams never be completed nor operational, that pipes leak like strainers, and to maintain the idea that Sicilian nature was arid and menacing. In turn, the real shortage of water that these practices maintained was considered a demonstration of an intrinsic "natural" Sicilian water scarcity. In particular, since the early 80's, the concept of "Water Emergency" was devised in order to impose a phony permanent state of exception used to accelerate decision-making in order to elude

regulations and procedures for public tender or assessments of social and environmental impact. This is what happened with the dam of Blufi.

Gramsci, in an unfinished essay from 1926, brilliantly analyzed the Italian narrative of the South's marginality, known as the Italian "Southern Question," la "Questione meridionale." This was a persistent set of racist stereotypes about the South's economic underdevelopment, predicated on a perceived essential difference of the Southerner.

The Southerner was seen by Northerners as an "African Italian": naturally inept and engaged in clientelistic business and politics, patriarchal gender relationships, and forms of organized crime. Gramsci's diagnosis attributed instead the responsibility for the Question to the post-Unification conservative alliance between Northern industrial and Southern agrarian elites, which prevented any serious reform of land property in the South or the development of an industrial society, crystallizing instead traditional social structures. This form of alliance was replicated after World War II, in the tangle of interests between the new Christian Democrats and local Mafiosi born out of the project of modernization of the South.

Gramsci's analysis, which today is dated, was nevertheless very lucid, and biting. He proposed to define the South as "an area of extreme social disintegration." This formula applied not only to the peasants, who as a mass "were incapable of giving a unified expression to their aspirations and needs," but also to the intellectuals.

Sergio, the alienated bourgeois intellectual in Gutiérrez Alea's 1968 film "Memories of Underdevelopment" echoes Gramsci's phrase in his reflections on Cuba. In voice-over, he observes that "in underdevelopment nothing has continuity, everything is forgotten." [...] He says: "One of the things that really perplexes me about people is their incapacity to sustain a feeling, an idea without dispersion. [...] That is one of the signs of underdevelopment, the incapacity to connect things, to accumulate experiences and to develop. People waste their talents adapting to every new situation." Here in Sicily, the social reality is more tricky. Mafiosi and corrupt politicians demonstrate cunning talent at maintaining and reproducing their power and privilege, using an exquisite form of opportunism called "leopardism," which consists in adapting to every new situation by changing appearance and abstracting their language.

In the travel diary of a trip to his birthplace in Passaic, New Jersey, Robert Smithson described the industrial artifacts he passed, which he named monuments, as *ruins in reverse*, because they *rose* into ruins before they were built. In Sicily, this idea doesn't quite apply. Smithson's concept of time was modernist. It differentiated past and future in order to reconnect them. His idea of entropy unfolded in that continuum. Sicily seems to have never quite absorbed modernism. It is as if it jumped directly from pre-modern to post-modern times. In Sicilian dialect verbs don't have the future tense form. Any proposition about a future

action is constructed on the present tense, preceding the verb by an adverb of time, like the words “soon” or “tomorrow.” This linguistic singularity produces a continuous reduction of the future to the present tense, hence a perception of a here and now that voids the future. It follows that reality can never be different from what it was, and that ideas can't move the world. Therefore, human activity isn't aimed at shaping the future but at dissipating the energy of the present against the work of entropy, in a desperate yet insolent game with time to ensure that nothing ever changes. This island is a zero-time machine. Here, monuments don't become ruins-in-reverse, because they have no design to meet, no theory of obsolescence to reckon with, no future to be accountable to.