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The Scanzano lesson

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The incident of Scanzano Jonico, in Italy's Basilicata region, has been something more than a lesson for those who handle the relationships between science and society. During November and December 2003 in this small southern Italian town a theory has been proven false. According to this theory, in the modern world, the best way to solve the problems put before society by science and technology would be for the experts to discuss them behind closed doors.

This theory does not apply to Italy alone. Indeed, like any theory, it has a universal tendency and works as a research method towards solutions to technoscientific problems worldwide.

The Scanzano incident proves that this theory is false. In a society of knowledge, that is a democratic and mass society, these problems cannot be solved by experts behind closed doors. Whatever the nature of the problem (to minimize a risk, to grasp an opportunity) the solution can be searched for only through a close relationship among experts, institutions and citizens. In other words, only through a process of (real) communication.

The "Scanzano Incident" can be easily summarized as follows. Last November a group of renown experts, appointed by the Italian government to find a solution for the technoscientific problem of "nuclear waste", recommended that all Italian radioactive waste be confined within a geological site 700 metres below the ground in the Scanzano

Jonico territory. The Italian government, trusting the experts' advice, passed a decree authorizing the creation of a nuclear waste dump in Scanzano.

Within the scope of the above theory, the process for finding a solution was happily concluded. The experts, in splendid isolation, coped with the problem. The institutions, with coherent readiness, adopted the solution and implemented it.

But...

But the population of Scanzano Jonico and of the entire region, relying on a widespread public support, rejected this decision and organized a strong and compact mass protest.

So strong and so compact was their protest that, after a couple of weeks, the Italian government withdrew the decree and rejected the experts' proposal. Italian radioactive waste will not be permanently hidden within the bowels of Scanzano. A new investigation must be started and a new decisional process launched to find a final resting place for radioactive waste produced in Italy. Furthermore, during the incident, the experts' advice was found to be scientifically debatable.

Of course, the Scanzano incident may be regarded as an example of a well known syndrome to those who work with environmental risks in a mass society: the so-called Nimby syndrome (Not In My Back Yard). However, this comparison - though partially true - does not provide helpful hints to the solution of technoscientific problems in a democratic society (including a remedy for the Nimby syndrome).

Whether we like it or not, whether it is an efficient method or not, the truth from Basilicata to Nevada (see the mass opposition at the nuclear dump of Yucca Mountain) is that there are no solutions to technoscientific problems without the autonomous and active participation in research of all sectors of a democratic mass society: experts, institutions and laymen. Even the best technical solutions risk failure if adopted by experts behind closed doors and meekly endorsed by political institutions.

The public wants to have a say in decisions that concern the general interest and does not like being passed over. Indeed, the power of citizens in a democratic society often enables them to stop authoritarian decisions, even those decisions which are technically unquestionable.

The incident of Scanzano Jonico proves that when technical decisions are made secretly, the reliability of scientific choices is not always guaranteed. Thus, even a population affected by the Nimby syndrome can contribute to producing a critical scientific evaluation and carrying out an effective – though possibly unorthodox - peer-review.

In conclusion, in democratic societies, the solution of social problems generated by technoscience must encompass the active participation of the general public.

An efficient decisional process, free from the dangerous quagmire of demagogy, requires the participation of all subjects and implies a transparent flow of communication among the subjects themselves. Citizens have a right to access unbiased and diversified information and to be listened to, both by the institutions and by the experts.

If the willingness to inform and to communicate is mutual and respectful of the various fields of competence, decisions will probably be wiser. On the contrary, choices made without a constant and democratic dialogue are simply unacceptable, as was the case with the Scanzano Jonico incident.

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