

Italy's Lacerated Landscape



Trees are destroyed along the old Italian roads. Before and after (100,000 trees cut down in two years)

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For some time past Italy has been facing charges in the court of international public opinion. The country that used to be called "the garden of Europe" and that for centuries was regarded as a standard of reference for the cultures of the world is gradually destroying the principal basis of its prestige and its greatest wealth—the integral quality of its ancient cities, the fascination of its landscape and the splendor of its natural beauty.

Not long ago an advertisement appeared in the windows of a London travel agency. It read: "Hurry up and visit Italy before the Italians destroy it." At the same time a German review devoted to urban development commented: "The most astonishing thing is the lack of any sense of tragedy among responsible Italians as they observe the devastation of one of the most beautiful countries in Europe." If employees of the Italian Tourist Ministry were required to keep an up-to-date account of foreign opinion, they would have their work cut out. For despite vigorous protests by some sections of the press and cultural organizations, and despite the intervention of UNESCO, which lodged a dramatic appeal with the Italian government in 1963, asking for an end to the destruction of Italy's unique historical, artistic and natural heritage, the deterioration continues.

The effects on the land of the postwar "economic miracle," and the building boom which followed it, are to be seen in the unbelievable confusion which threatens to sweep the "garden of Europe" completely away—fields,

mountains, forests, valleys, the shores of lakes and sea alike. It has been said that if the present rate of building continues, within a few decades the whole of Italy will be covered by a continuous, uniform and repellent crust, which will so wipe out any distinguishing characteristics that it will be impossible to know whether one is in a city or by the sea. The speed of the economic and social changes, and the overwhelming force of the phenomena which have resulted (the increased standard of living, mechanization, migration from the agricultural south to the industrial north, the need for new infrastructures, etc.) have taken the governing classes completely by surprise. Skeptical, incapable of seeing problems either comprehensively or from a long-term point of view, unversed in modern theories of urban development and social science, they have been unable to produce any kind of regulating system, so that private speculation has completely overwhelmed the public interest.

Without a Plan

The most glaring feature of all is the devastation of the traditional landscape and natural beauty. Italy is probably the only country in Europe which has so far failed to impose any kind of restraints during the 20-odd years of postwar development. There is no plan for a rational organization of the land in which the needs of development are coordinated with the protection of the landscape, natural features and soil. Such a plan is all the more necessary at the present time when the eruption of tourism (Italy's largest industry) demands increasingly large rec-

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reational areas and when facilities are also needed for the growing leisure of the working classes.

Some facts are worth considering. Italy is planning the most extensive network of highways in Europe, but her cities are among the worst off in the world for public parks and sports grounds. This shortage is so acute that enormous numbers of young people are physically deformed as a result of being forced to live in horrifying concentrations of cement and asphalt without a blade of grass, a park—without anywhere to walk. Disputes had been going on in Rome for a dozen years or more before the Via Appia Antica (the old Appian Way) was designated as a public park, but many more decades will have to be spent fighting every kind of opposition before this project is actually realized. Some so-called natural disasters are in fact due to the lack of town planning. The landslide at Agrigento in Sicily in July 1966 was the result of "urban massacre," as it was called by the ministerial commission inquiring into the illegalities to which the city had been subjected for years; the weight of skyscrapers and badly constructed buildings had long threatened to spread down to the famous Valley of Temples.

Blighted Beaches

Chaotic development and the license permitted to private speculators have also caused irreparable damage to the precious heritage of the Italian beaches. About half are now lost, so far as any rational use might be made of them for tourist purposes, because they are submerged beneath a cluttered congestion of buildings, more like the squalid outskirts of a town than holiday resorts. The same is true of winter and summer resorts in the mountains: a comparison between the Swiss town of Zermatt and what has happened at the foot of the Matterhorn on the Italian side is a sufficient example.

In addition to the lack of any urban discipline in the public interest, there is the vandalism for which state enterprises are responsible. For example, ENI (National Hydrocarbon Corporation) is building industrial and petroleum installations on some of the most beautiful stretches of the coast, thus depriving them of their natural vocation of tourism. Examples are the "gulf of poets" near La Spezia in Liguria, beloved by Byron, and the enchanting Gargano peninsula along the Adriatic coast. Then there is ENEL (National Electricity Corporation), which drains water from the mountains, transforming rivers into stony tracts which are used as refuse dumps, thus killing off both animals and vegetation in the superb valleys. To give one instance only, this sequence of events is now taking place in the Val di Genova in Trento, the last example of unspoiled nature in the whole sweep of the Alps. As well as authorizing the construction of new highways, often faulty both technically and from the planning point of view, ANAS (the state agency in charge of roads) decided to cut down the trees lining the old roads throughout the country, and actually did destroy about 100,000 in two years before the Ministry of Public Works put an end to the massacre. This represented a serious assault on one of the characteristic features of the Italian scene, as well as making driving conditions dangerous and disagreeable.

Added to the planning confusion, the prevalence of private interests and the often arbitrary behavior of public enterprises, there is a lack of any genuine organic scheme

devoted to the conservation of nature and the maintenance of equilibria. In other countries this type of work is far advanced; its aim, as Julian Huxley once said, is to prevent man from becoming the "cancer of the universe."

Italy spends less on scientific research than any other modern country (only 0.64 percent of the gross national income), so that natural resources, preservation of the soil, methods of development, etc., are all neglected. Italy has the smallest percentage of national parkland and the smallest area of state forests of any country in Europe. In a century the population has more than doubled, but the woods and forests have not been increased proportionately. In the universities little attention is paid to ecology, the study of the relationship between living things and their environment. The botanical garden in Rome seems to exist on revenues from film companies that shoot mythological and biblical films there. Laws governing air and water pollution simply do not operate. Any one may hunt, and so the Italian countryside is becoming a desert; nearly one and a half million hunters kill 12 million wild creatures every year. Furthermore, contrary to the general trend of modern practice, we continue to reclaim marshes, thus eliminating the safety valves of our watercourses. Some technicians drain the land, others build dikes along the rivers, and others again deforest the mountainsides. The lack of coordinated plans and soil-conservation research causes erosion and landslides, and the fury of floodwaters sweeps away the dikes and restores the reclaimed land to marsh, spreading death and devastation. The floods to which Italy is subjected at fixed intervals are in large part caused by the lack of interest which the Italian people evince in their land; the most recent, in November 1966, threatened Venice, inundated Florence, and once again brought fear to the Po delta.

The bitter truth is that Italy is all too capable of creating optimal conditions for provoking these so-called "natural" catastrophes. That such disasters avenge the contempt which the Italian people show for nature and natural laws is amply demonstrated by Venice.

One of the most beautiful regions of Sardinia, a victim of rape in the guise of "improvements" to encourage tourism. A graceless network of roads precedes the building of hundreds of lots which disregard every rule of town planning



INTERPLAY/APRIL 1968

It is well known that Venice is sinking slowly into the sea at a rate of 10-12 centimeters per century. The city depends on tides, or rather on the periodic flooding of the Lagoon which carries away refuse from the rudimentary or non-existent sewers. The boundary of the Lagoon on the landward side consist of *barene*, that is, a vast number of tiny islands (or mud banks) surrounded by a maze of canals and covered with vegetation. These islands function like a sponge in that they slowly return the water which they absorb during the high tides and thus slow down the pace of ebbing tides. Among other things this helps to prevent the erosion of the foundations of the buildings and keeps the flood water in St. Mark's Square and other parts of the city within reasonable bounds. The *barene* are therefore a security which should be preserved at all costs. Instead, they are being reclaimed; in the region of Marghera, where a new industrial zone is springing up, in order to provide the necessary space and avoid using agricultural land on the mainland, a good 4,000 hectares (roughly, 9,800 acres) are being drained.

What will result from such an operation? Deprived of these safety valves, the Lagoon, which is an elastic and self-regulating body of water, will be transformed into a basin with rigid banks; floods and erosion will increase, while the digging of more and more wells for the increased population will hasten the sinking process. Even this is not enough. The largest oil installation in Italy is to be built by the edge of the Lagoon. A new canal permitting the passage of larger and larger tankers is being dug. The Lagoon is being turned into a sea of oil with the impending threat that Venice, and all that it represents for the civilized world, will be blown sky high with the first explosion of a tanker. All this is being done in spite of protests and warnings by the principal scientific organization in Italy, the National Council for Research. It is a concrete example of the way in which contempt for the laws of nature could lead to unimaginable disaster.

Destruction of National Parks

Other examples illustrate the seriousness of the situation. As has already been noted, Italy has the smallest percentage of land designated for national parks (only 0.58 percent as against 1.14 percent in Holland, 1.48 percent in Yugoslavia, 3.2 percent in Japan, 3.8 percent in England, 6 percent in Switzerland). More serious still, everything possible has been done in recent years to destroy even this meager patrimony, which amounts to four national parks. Roads have been built to "improve" the areas, facilities for skiing and hunting have been created, buildings of every kind have been put up. In fact, everything has been done except to promote the proper aims of a national park, that is to say, the conservation of nature, of the fauna and flora, as an incentive to the modern and civilized kind of tourism which consists of visiting and learning to appreciate unspoiled areas. The worst fate of all has befallen the National Park of the Abruzzo, once famous for its forests, chamois and bears. Speculative builders have put up entire villages that have aroused protests from IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources). Italy spends three to four hundred million lire on her national parks (the price of a good footballer) while the USA spends about 60 billion lire and the USSR is drawing up a plan for creating hundreds of thousands of acres of national

parkland; it is hardly necessary to mention what is being done in other countries such as France, Poland and Great Britain. We do not yet appreciate that the conservation of nature is imperative in modern civilization, and that it is the prime incentive of tourism. A good example of this fact is the model national park of the Lower Engadine in Switzerland, which attracts 100,000 to 150,000 visitors annually with all the attendant benefits to the local economy.

"Linear Cities"

In Italy, the same improvident treatment has been meted out to the precious inheritance of coastal beaches. Vast stretches of the shore have been closed off, and can only be reached by paying a lathsome toll. The coastline has been turned into a horrible, congested conglomeration of buildings which savagely destroy the continuity between the sea and the hinterland, and make beaches private that should be available to everyone. It has been calculated that out of more than 100 miles of coastline in western Liguria, less than one mile is public, and that in some localities the density of the crowds in summer is greater than that in central London. Or again, there is the type of unending "linear city" found in Tuscany, on the Adriatic, and currently growing up in Sardinia, where nearly 100 miles of coastline in the north and east are now in private hands, beginning with the Aga Kahn's company—in the hands, that is to say, of people who are interested in anything other than the complex social and economic problems raised by a rational tourist development plan. The situation is still more serious when compared to what is being done in other countries for the protection of the natural beauty of the seashore. "Enterprise Neptune" in Britain is designed to keep some 800 miles of coastline unspoiled. In France more than 100 miles of the Languedoc-Roussillon coast will be conserved for touristic uses. Coastal development is strictly controlled in Yugoslavia, a country whose growing tourist attractions should be carefully watched by Italy.

Another grave problem is the elimination of natural features in the cities. Foreign tourists, intent upon admiring ancient monuments which are often concentrated in a small area, do not realize what has happened. They do not appreciate the way in which we have managed to build enormous districts on the outskirts of our towns which are known as "murderers," and are a denial of the elementary norms of civilized living and modern town planning. They lack services, schools, open spaces, shopping centers, pedestrian facilities and even streets (traffic is worse in the new districts than in the old); they have no playing fields, parks, gardens or recreation grounds. They are districts mercifully unequalled in Europe; they are a national disgrace.

Italian cities have less in the way of public parks than anywhere else in Europe. The rule is two to three square meters per inhabitant as compared with eight in Paris, ten in Zurich, 11 in Moscow, 12 in Copenhagen, 25 in Greater London, 20 in Cologne, 20-30 in Amsterdam and 80 in Stockholm. Not only is green space being systematically destroyed within the cities, but with a typical kind of urban sadism public parks are being omitted from future planning. Not one single park has been made for the inhabitants of the new districts. Magnificent schemes such as the Wood in Amsterdam, the clever blending of open spaces and buildings in Britain's new towns, the sat-

elite cities of Stockholm, the suburban areas of Copenhagen, the "leisure centers" of Zürich, etc., are still forbidden dreams in Italy, if not fantasies from science fiction. The discomfort and psycho-physical usury to which families, mothers and young people are subjected is such that, according to statements made at a recent convention of pediatricians, sociologists and town planners in Milan, more than five million children of school age are affected by "paramorphism," that is, physical malformation. Five percent of them, or some 250,000, will be deformed for life.

This is the result of the politics of urban development that Italy has known so far. The generation born during the economic miracle and the building boom has become a generation of children unsteady on their feet, predisposed to rickets, physically and mentally impaired.

There is another more general conclusion to be drawn. Conservation of nature is not some kind of misguided utopianism; it is not an obstacle to "progress" as is maintained by those interested in the national rape of the land; it is a necessary condition of progress as well as being a victory that is essential for modern culture. A contempt for nature and natural laws is simply one aspect of a more general contempt for man and his needs. The destruction of nature (animals, woods, the pine trees of the coastal regions, national and city parks, marshland, etc.) leads directly to the destruction of man.

At last this is being appreciated in Italy. There are psychological reasons which make it difficult to awaken the conscience of vast numbers of people. As sociologists have explained, the rapid transition from a peasant to an urban society has led a section of the population to equate the destruction of nature with civilization; indiscriminate development with progress; polluted air, noise and congestion with good living; the right to build where and how one pleases with freedom. But if these aberrations can be understood at a certain social level (the age-old misery of peasant life in the south, for example, has tended to mean that the countryside is identified with underdevelopment, nature with a life of neglect and privation), they cannot be excused among the governing classes and informed public opinion. Italy's frivolous attitude toward these problems runs a risk of turning into suicide. Every Italian government wants to pass laws which will establish a few civilized rules for the use of the land. No government actually has the courage to pass those laws.

Save-Italy Movement

Recently, it is true, there are a few symptoms of a greater awareness. Some new, very modest, schemes for urban development have been adopted, a few plans have been drawn up for a rational tourist development of beaches in the south, an outline plan does at last exist, a parliamentary inquiry has been undertaken to ascertain the state of neglect into which the historical, artistic and natural heritage of Italy has fallen. New laws are being drawn up, though no one knows when they will operate. A few battles of public opinion have yielded good results: recently the magnificent forest of Capocotta has been wrenched from the speculators' hands. (This is the last great natural oasis on the sea near Rome.)

But vigilance cannot be relaxed nor denunciation silenced. An independent association known as "Italia Nostra" is doing good work. It was formed ten years ago with

the help of town planners and naturalists, and its members have been very active. The aim of the association is to combat vandalism, speculation and confusion; to protect Italy's great heritage by means of articles, plans, meetings and intervention with the authorities. A major exhibition has been organized and has been touring Italian cities for the past year; it has been an eye-opening experience for many. It is called "Save Italy!" and with more than 600 photographs illustrates the way in which the seeds of disaster have been tolerated up until now.

The exhibition has impressed leading foreign correspondents, and it is to be hoped that it will be taken abroad, because foreign disapproval can help to redress what is being done to Italy.

Even famous Alpine resorts have been reduced to a congested huddle of buildings. Cervina (top) at the foot of the Matterhorn

The coast of Liguria (bottom) has become a mountain of cement, destroying beaches and open spaces, preventing access to the sea, creating traffic jams, overcrowding and squalor

