

Insufficiencies of a bottom-up approach at the time of fake news. Parco del Locarnese refusal example¹

Limiti degli approcci bottom-up in tempi di fake news: il rifiuto del Parco del Locarnese

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Abstract: This paper analyses the public debate that led to the 2018 vote of refusal of the Locarnese National Park, Switzerland. Discursive analysis allows to highlight an important difference between the way of understanding reality by detractors and supporters of the project. This discursive asynchrony and a lack of trust in the institutions rendered the public debate sterile. This calls for a rethinking of the formally bottom-up approach mobilised by the institutions, at the same time encouraging more participation in

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planning decisions but also greater education about urban reality. The paper concludes that institutions cannot promote the creation and acceptance of bottom-up territorial projects without addressing the challenges posed by fake news.

Keywords: protected areas; bottom-up processes; fake news; consensus; Parco del Locarnese; Switzerland

Riassunto: Questo articolo analizza il dibattito pubblico che ha portato al rifiuto del Parco Nazionale del Locarnese (Svizzera) nella votazione del 2018. L'analisi discorsiva permette di sottolineare una sostanziale differenza nel modo di comprendere la realtà tra sostenitori e oppositori del progetto. Questa asincronia discorsiva e una diffusa mancanza di fiducia nelle istituzioni hanno reso il dibattito pubblico sterile. Tutto ciò impone un ripensamento dei processi bottom-up mobilitati dalle istituzioni, insistendo sulla necessità sia di una maggior partecipazione nelle decisioni di pianificazione territoriale che di una miglior educazione alla realtà urbana contemporanea. L'articolo sottolinea come le istituzioni non possano promuovere la creazione e accettazione di processi territoriali bottom-up senza affrontare le sfide poste dalle fake news.

Parole chiave: Aree protette; processi bottom-up; fake news; consenso; Parco del Locarnese; Svizzera

1. Introduction

This paper aims to discuss the difficulty of having a constructive outcome for a bottom-up democratic process in a society increasingly influenced by fake news and discursive asynchrony. For doing so, it engages the debate

on the processes of constitution of protected areas (PAs) following an interdisciplinary perspective concerned by the links between society and PAs³. Particularly, it aims to understand the reasons behind the failure of a National Park project in Ticino, Switzerland. In doing so, it contributes to a better understanding of the limitations of institutional bottom-up territorial processes.

The challenges posed by globalisation have shown the limits of purely top-down approaches⁴. Contemporary spatial planning thereby encourages bottom-up processes⁵. However, the institutional application of this new perspective is showing various shortcomings⁶. This paper aims to address some of these limitations.

2. Theoretical framework

This work engages with two theoretical corpora: debates on the constitution of PAs and debates on the limits of representative democracy linked to the appearance of fake news and discursive asynchrony.

PAs are complex elements requiring different levels of governance⁷, with the local level playing a central role – especially in nature management⁸. Given their complexity, PAs are often the result of the actions of different actors

3 HAMMER *et al.*, 2012.

4 CRESCENZI; RODRÍGUEZ-POSE, 2011; PIKE; RODRÍGUEZ-POSE; TOMANEY, 2017.

5 GOVERNA; SALONE, 2004; MITLIN, 2004; NOVARINA; ZEPF, 2009; PETRIDOU; IOANNIDES, 2012.

6 MENDES, 2016; PAL, 2006; TULUMELLO; COTELLA; OTHENGRAFEN, 2020.

7 MAUERHOFER, 2011.

8 HAYES, 2006.

with distinct objectives and expectations⁹. In a world where competition between urban poles is increasingly intense¹⁰, for public authorities the constitution of PAs takes on a dual value¹¹: as a key player in environmental policies¹² but also as an economic and touristic propellant¹³ – what has been called the PAs neoliberal turn¹⁴.

PAs stem from a mix of top-down and bottom-up processes¹⁵. Purely technocratic solutions are often inadequate as they do not enjoy the support of the local population, resulting in tensions between different aspirations¹⁶. Thus, there is a growing consensus among scholars on the need to implement inclusive and participatory bottom-up processes¹⁷. Developing bottom-up processes is, however, more complex than it may seem, as the cases of French parks show¹⁸.

This is where it is important to introduce the debate about the limits of representative democracy. First of all, it is worth pointing out that democracy, representing plurality of opinions, is based on the clash of different visions. There is no democracy without multiplicity of political positions. Thus, this regime is based on the arbitrage of tensions between different perspectives in order not to degenerate into civil

9 MICHEL, 2017; MOSE; WEIXLBAUMER, 2006.

10 HARVEY, 2008, 2010, 2011; LEFEBVRE, 2001.

11 BERESFORD; PHILLIPS, 2000.

12 BRUNER *et al.*, 2001.

13 BOSETTI; LOCATELLI, 2006; GOODWIN, 2002.

14 BÜSCHER; ARSEL, 2012a, b.

15 FRASER *et al.*, 2006; GAYMER *et al.*, 2014; JONES, 2012.

16 BAY-LARSEN *et al.*, 2006.

17 HIWASAKI, 2005; OESTREICHER *et al.*, 2009; WEIXLBAUMER *et al.*, 2015.

18 DEPRAZ; LASLAZ, 2017.

war. Each group tries to influence the rest of society in order to gain more power¹⁹. E.g. a PA project is a way of territorially applying a certain idea of society, of the relationship between humans and nature, of the functional relations between city and countryside – i.e. it reflects a set of values, a vision of society, justice²⁰ and nature.

Secondly, it is worth noting that there are some phenomena for which the discursive tensions between opposing perspectives are accentuated. The more tensions become intense, the more political positions become irreconcilable, the less constructive arbitration of the conflict is possible, and the more democracy falls into crisis²¹. Indeed, justice arise from constructive discussion and mediation²². That is why voting (in which a majority simply imposes itself on a minority) is a necessary but not sufficient factor to have a functioning democracy²³. As aggressiveness increases, constructive discussion is jeopardised.

The phenomenon of fake news – despite the lack of a clear definition²⁴ – lies at the heart of this problem. They can be seen as factors that radicalise the discursive positions – e.g. the overcoming of political fair play in the public debate²⁵. Fake news stems “as wildfires” from the creation of echo chambers²⁶ – where “an echo chamber’s members share beliefs which include reasons to distrust

19 ERREJÓN, 2011; ERREJÓN; MOUFFE, 2016; GRAMSCI, 1971; MOUFFE, 2005, 2013.

20 CHAN; SATTERFIELD, 2013.

21 MOUFFE, 2005, 2013.

22 HAMPSHIRE, 2018.

23 PALLANTE, 2020; SCHMITT, 2018, 2020.

24 LAZER *et al.*, 2018; TANDOC; LIM; LING, 2018.

25 ALLCOTT; GENTZKOW, 2017.

26 TÖRNBERG, 2018.

those outside the echo chamber”²⁷. Thus, fake news creates completely different understandings of reality. In so doing, they foster the creation of perspectives that are incapable of constructively discussing together. Where the understanding of reality is too distinct, the very basis for arbitrating the conflict is lacking: it is a case of discursive asynchrony²⁸. This is particularly important because it puts in check the ability of democratic institutions to function, making attempts to build bottom-up processes vain.

This paper will show how in such a context it is not easy to find political arbitrage, and therefore bottom-up processes risk turning into deep social divides for the communities involved. To further develop this argument, I ask the following questions: can the analysis of the public debate show the limits of institutional actions? Are there any ways to improve such actions? Understanding the reasons for popular rejection is vital to help to better organize bottom-up territorial processes.

3. Study Area and timeline

Parco Nazionale del Locarnese (Mosogno village is located at 46° 11' N, 8° 38' E) was a proposal to be the second National Park in Switzerland (Figure 1).

27 NGUYEN, 2018, p. 2.

28 COMETTA, 2020.

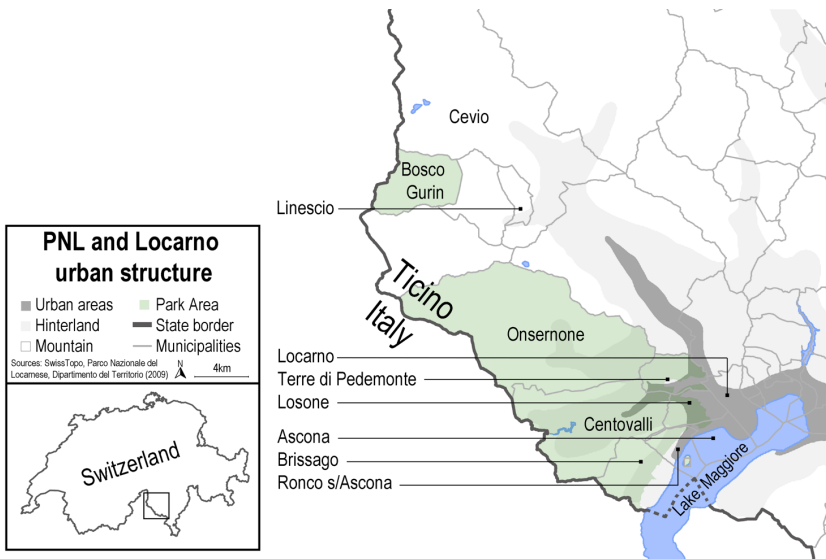


Figure 1. Parco Nazionale del Locarnese²⁹.

Almost a century after the founding of the Swiss National Park – covering only 170 km²³⁰ –, the environmental NGO ProNatura – following the Aichi Biodiversity Targets, which aimed to protect a minimum of 17% of terrestrial territory – proposed the creation of a second national park offering a prize of CHF 1 mio³¹. In Switzerland, however, there was no general park legislation, only specific legislation for the Swiss National Park. In 2004, 49 of the 50 mayors of the region of Locarno, potentially interested in taking part in the NGO competition, signed a petition for a new and broader National Parks law. Following pressure from Ticino politicians, the Swiss Ordinance on Parks of National Importance was passed in 2007, laying the legal foundations for the future establishment of a new generation Park.

29 Source: author.

30 KUPPER, 2014.

31 GIANONI; CARRARO, 2004.

The Locarnese project began to be developed in collaboration with the town councils and the executives of local civic associations owning the land involved. The original territory of the project was modified when the vast municipality of Cevio (151.3 km²) decided to leave the project in 2009. In 2012, the municipality of Linescio also abandoned the project in dispute with ProNatura, which had supported a referendum against the proliferation of second homes³². The inclusion of new municipalities allowed to keep the project alive, despite its territory now being formed by two separate areas. The latest version of the Park project (218 km²) affected 8 municipalities and 19'014 residents in 2017³³, 14'754 of whom lived in 3 municipalities of the suburban area of Locarno (Figure 2). The park followed IUCN II category, and had as its objective the economic development of the buffer zone - which delimited the majority (72%) of the territory involved. Nature protection would have been achieved with a number of restrictions in the central areas (bans on leaving the trails and activities such as fishing or hunting) and with a greater focus on eco-sustainability development in the buffer zones.

The new legal frame establishes that PA creation is subject to a popular vote in the municipalities involved³⁴. PNL was definitively sunk by popular vote on 10 June 2018. The results saw 6 out of 8 municipalities reject the project by a narrow majority - a total of 4279 votes against it and 4170 votes in favour of it, with a 63.9% participation.

32 LAREGIONE, 2012.

33 USTAT, 2018b.

34 MICHEL; BRUGGMAN, 2019.

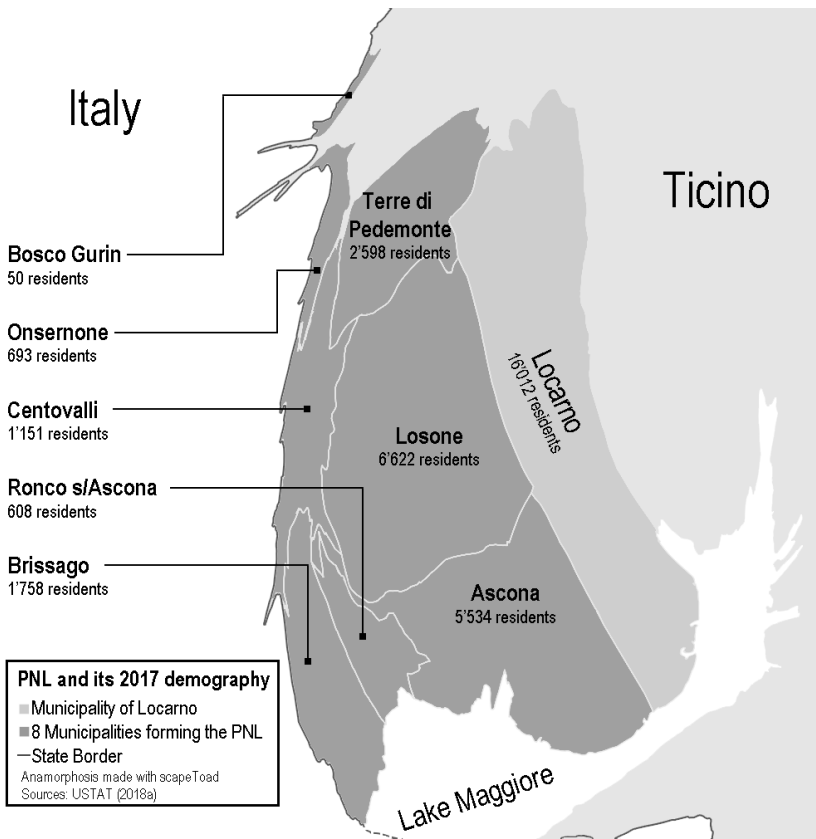


Figure 2. Anamorphosis of the Locarnese demography³⁵.

4. Methodology

130 newspaper articles and readers' letters published in the newspapers (from 01.01.2000 to 31.12.2018) were studied from *Corriere del Ticino* (CdT) and *laRegione* (IR) – the major newspapers in Ticino – using Atlas.Ti software (Figure 3). Analysis' codes were established in a problem-oriented way. A 52-page magazine by the *Associazione No al Parco del*

35 Source: author.

Locarnese has been analysed. Citations were translated into English. Data was collected and analysed in early 2020.

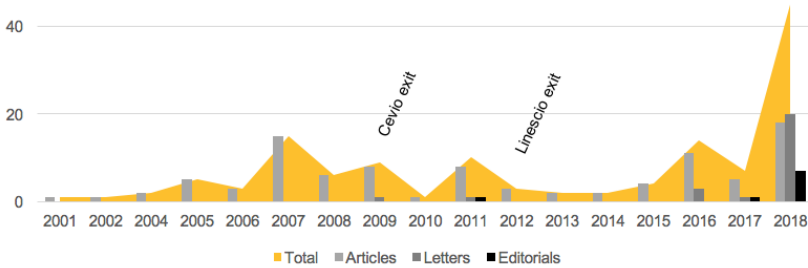


Figure 3. Number of newspaper entries analysed, based on year of publication³⁶.

Content analysis³⁷ with a critical approach³⁸ was mobilised as research perspective in order to understand the motivations that lead to the refusal of the Park proposal in the 2018 vote. This methodology ensures flexibility and adaptability to different case studies³⁹.

5. Results

The first important result is to show the evolution of the debate following the introduction of the arguments (Figure 4). As can be seen, the long process of constitution of the project was accompanied by several intense discussion phases, also corresponding to peaks in the amount of material published in the media (Figure 3). Readers' letters appear in important quantities only towards the end of the PA formation process. This suggests that the debate took place in a predominantly informal way – both in a presential form and on social media – and that newspapers only partially

36 Source: author.

37 MUCCHIELLI, 1996.

38 FOUCAULT, 2015; HAJER, 2003.

39 KOHLBACHER, 2006; WODAK; REISIGL, 2016.

captured that information. Although the establishment of a PA is a nationwide issue, the political debate concerned small local peripheral communities, which have their own forms of communication that are not necessarily of interest to the cantonal media. This shows one of the most important shortcomings of the material of this paper.

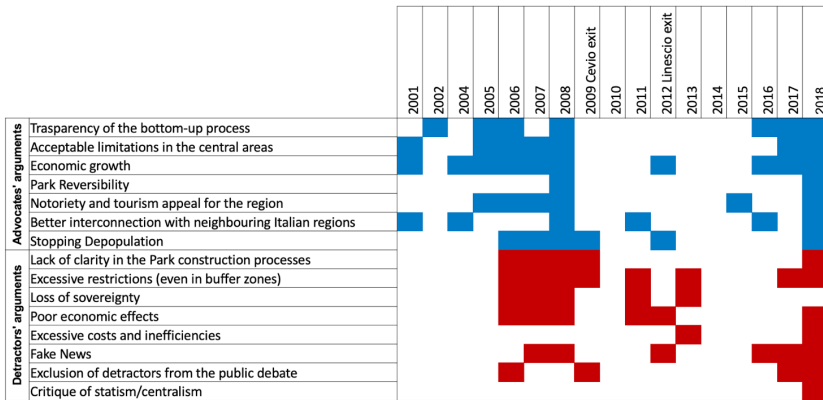


Figure 4. Arguments in the media debate⁴⁰.

Data analysis shows that the debate has created two factions: the supporters – which include the park’s promoters, representatives of local institutions (mayors and chiefs of civic assemblies) and private citizens – and the detractors of the park – composed by private citizens and some right-wing cantonal MP. First, we will analyse the arguments in favour of the project (Figure 5), then those against it (Figure 6).

40 Source: author.

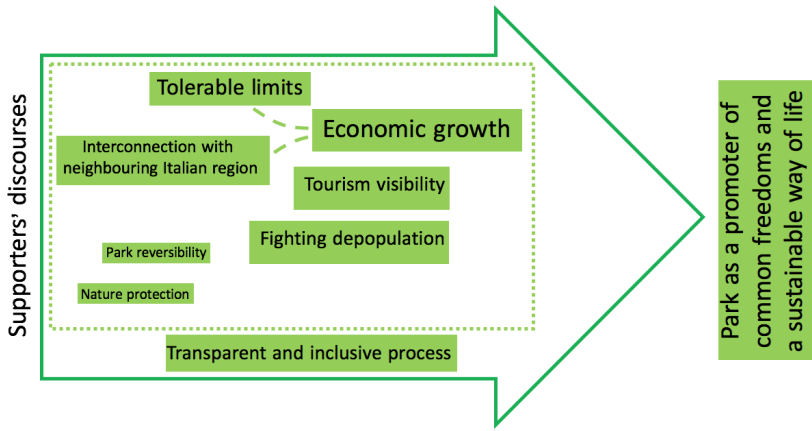


Figure 5. Supporters' arguments⁴¹.

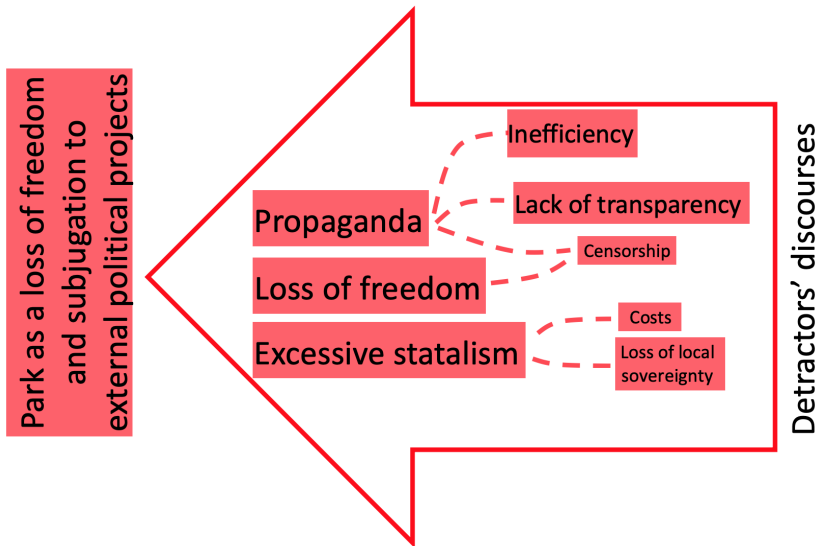


Figure 6. Detractors' arguments⁴².

The key argument in support of the Park is economic growth. Claudio Suter, president of the Locarno and Valle Maggia region, stated that “the Park should be seen as *the*

41 Source: author.

42 Source: author.

project of projects precisely because it can act as a locomotive for a whole series of initiatives and opportunities”⁴³. The Park will foster growth because it will ensure that the valleys acquire notoriety and tourism appeal. According to the mayor of Losone, “a Park attracts tourists, and from the experience of the Swiss National Park [in Graubünden] we know that every visitor who stays overnight in the region spends around 180 francs a day”⁴⁴. The possibility of boosting and reinforcing the economic structure, especially through tourist fame, is a key factor for supporters. A stronger economy generates jobs, which in turn means that local municipalities have more resources. Thus, economic growth promotes local autonomy and strengthens municipalities.

The second main argument in favour of the project is also related to growth: curbing depopulation. Job creation was seen as a focal point. “To date there are already 5 people living in Onsernone thanks to the Park. For an urban reality they are few, for our reality they are many”⁴⁵ said the mayor of Onsernone and vice-president of the Park. Indeed, the depopulation of the peripheral valleys is a major concern for the municipalities in those areas. E.g. the villages that compose the municipality of Onsernone have gone from a population of 2821 people in 1900 to 693 in 2017⁴⁶. This process is followed by the loss of primary services such as post offices, banks and shops and the loss of municipal investment capacity. Also, the Park’s funding would make it possible to develop cross-border projects with neighbouring Italian regions, strengthening the economic fabric of the valleys.

43 LAREGIONE, 2007.

44 BIANDA, 2018.

45 TERRIBILINI, 2018.

46 USTAT, 2018a, b.

According to the supporters of the project, the price for these positive aspects is to agree to create central areas – in already barely frequented zones – in which to further limit human activity. Given the expected benefits, limitations are seen as a completely acceptable “marginal loss of freedom”⁴⁷.

The arguments of the detractors are much less placid. For them, the PA seems a useless project: nature is already flourishing in the peripheral regions and there is a general disaffection with rules and laws. “We have far too much of a surplus of nature in the mountain regions, and we have even more regulations to manage it or to establish human activities there”⁴⁸ stated a right-wing populist cantonal MP. The rules imposed by the Park are perceived as excessive. The intervention of the State – both in the regulation of the Park and in its financing – is seen as cumbersome and inefficient⁴⁹. This challenges the pride of the inhabitants of the valleys: “it seems that nothing can be done here without external help”⁵⁰.

Detractors show a complete lack of confidence in the management of the project and in the political perspective of its promoters. This unfolds as a denial of the project’s promises. For them, economic development forecasts seem too vague to be realistic. They say that public funding is spent according to partisan criteria and favouritism – it is presented as an attempt to buy support for the project⁵¹. For them, the tourism impact of the Park will enrich the urban areas around Locarno that have sufficient infrastructure, and not the peripheral valleys that will suffer the most severe

47 PISSOGLIO, 2018.

48 FERRARI, 2018.

49 FERRARI, 2018.

50 MORDASINI, 2018.

51 ANP, 2018, p. 45.

regulations⁵². There is a great mistrust of a project that is depicted as a “consensus-seeking machine”⁵³. Media and local authorities are seen as partisan referees, censoring the opinions of detractors⁵⁴. Local authorities’ – both mayors and heads of civic associations – agreement with the project is interpreted as the consequence of bribery, private interests and ignorance⁵⁵. The participation of schools in science education projects on biodiversity is perceived as an act of political propaganda⁵⁶.

More interestingly, the distrust of detractors does not stop at the local scale, but instead includes policies at a larger scale. For them the Park responds to a wider and shadier policy of rewilderness of the Alpine areas in stark contrast to the interests of its inhabitants. “Although the promoters continue to preach the opposite, the truth is that this project is financed by the Confederation because it embodies political and strategic interests”⁵⁷ which will be detrimental to the needs of peripheral communities. Following the dynamics of echo chambers that favour the creation of conspiracy theories, the detractors argue that Switzerland is willing to abandon the Alpine areas on their own, allowing the proliferation of large predators and the uncontrolled development of nature in order to comply with the Kyoto agreements on the reduction of CO² emissions⁵⁸. Detractors stated that “we must protect ourselves from those who use us as bargaining chips and think they can sell our territory and our freedom in order

52 ANP, 2018, p. 47.

53 CDT, 2008.

54 CDT, 2018.

55 ANP, 2018, p. 10-12, 49.

56 CATENAZZI, 2017.

57 PEDRONI, 2018.

58 CHIESA, 2018.

to comply with international agreements that nobody asked for”⁵⁹. Thus, the key finding is that, despite their inaccuracy or groundlessness, these arguments allow to frame the opposition to the Park as the defence of a local way of life against an external invasion. For detractors, the objectives of “powerful environmentalist associations, as well as world economic development organisations, are clear: to remove humans from nature under the pretext of protecting it”⁶⁰.

6. Discussion

The discussion will be twofold: first we will have a wider look at the Ticino contest to try to explain the results, then we will expand the discussion theoretically to try to identify possible solutions.

The fact that echo chambers are at work among the park’s detractors points to a fundamental issue: political debate cannot take place with openness and rationality⁶¹. The ways of understanding reality are far too different and preclude any dialogue. This is the fundamental point from which to start the analysis of the results and eventually criticise the work of canton’s institutions. The circumstance that a belief on a continental-scale ecological conspiracy is deemed plausible by part of the population is at stake. It highlights that canton’s institutions (backing the project for developmental reasons) and part of the population (fearing it) do not see reality in the same way, and thus speak “two different languages”, or on “two different discursive planes”. Given the radical diversity of perspectives, I argue that any

59 ANP, 2018, p. 4.

60 ANP, 2018, p. 4.

61 NGUYEN, 2018.

attempt at rational discussion will necessarily fail – this is what from a post-Marxist point of view is a clear case of crisis of the canton as an hegemonic actor⁶². In a normal hegemonic situation, it is in fact conceivable that the institutions – thanks to their legitimacy and authority – convince the population of the goodness of their projects⁶³. My hypothesis is that, when a small group of citizens persuades an important part of the population to reject an institutional project, what is at stake is not only the project itself, but rather a general malaise with the state. The refusal of this very project, thus, “has a much broader significance, including a symbolic conflict over the legitimacy of power sharing”⁶⁴.

It is important to stress that the new cantonal territorial policy⁶⁵ is revolutionising the situation of peripheral territories. While up to that point, they had been helped by funding and equalisation policies⁶⁶, the new approach, grounded on the neoliberal hope⁶⁷ of increasing the canton’s economic competitiveness, was taking away aid from peripheral areas and asking them to transform themselves into tourist hubs through the creation of national parks – following the neoliberal PAs approach⁶⁸. This transformation of the role of peripheral territories has created various tensions⁶⁹. In order not to appear too coercive, the cantonal Territory Department (TD) therefore decided that the National Park projects should be completely bottom-up,

62 MOUFFE, 2013.

63 GRAMSCI, 1971; LEARS, 1985.

64 DEPRAZ; LASLAZ, 2017, p. 46.

65 RCT, 2009.

66 DIENER *et al.*, 2006; RCT, 1990.

67 RANCI, 2017.

68 BÜSCHER; ARSEL, 2012a, b.

69 COMETTA, 2019; MARCACCI, 2013; PILOTTI, 2013.

avoiding taking an open position and limiting interventions in the public debate to explain or clarify its position. This left the promoters and the local authorities alone to defend the project. This scenario would have been sufficient for a rational debate – the local authorities had enough information to describe the regulation of the park to the population. But the detractors started from a vision of reality completely distinct from that of the authorities, as they argued that the park was part of European and global policies that were contrary to the interests of the local alpine population.

There are some explanations for the lack of media action by the TD. First, the Canton of Ticino has a history of fragmentation of power, inefficiency of central authorities and parochialism⁷⁰, which may explain the canton's reticence to discuss local dossiers. A second important element is that for over twenty years the party in charge of the TD has been the League of Ticino People, a right-wing populist movement lacking a clear territorial project. The fracture within the League between (mainly urban) supporters and (mainly rural) detractors of the parks – already observed in the case of the Parc Adula⁷¹ – has perhaps led to a prudent approach by Claudio Zali, the cantonal minister of the territory. Already his predecessor, also a League member, Marco Borradori expressly wrote – responding to a motion against the PNL by some important cantonal MPs of his party – that the DT does not intend to propose or impose the creation of a Park⁷², thus taking a clearly neutral approach. The role of the DT, and more generally of the canton, is therefore contradictory – at the same time supporting and not supporting the project.

70 CESCHI; GHIRINGHELLI, 1998; TOPPI, 1998.

71 FOLETTI, 2016; FRASCHINA, 2016.

72 BORRADORI, 2009.

Here is where we must extend the discussion about the failure of this bottom-up process to a more general level. If we imagine a purely rational debate, in which the two parties are willing to recognise each other and speak a mutually understandable language, it is clear that arbitration of the dispute is possible. This arbitration will result in a solution to the problem which, if sufficiently inclusive, will integrate some of the reasons of both sides⁷³. However, if the two sides speak two “languages” that are incomprehensible to each other – i.e., an example of discursive asynchrony⁷⁴ – it will be difficult to find an inclusive solution. This applies to the PNL case. The detractors, discrediting the local authorities as corrupt and incompetent and talking about a larger-scale environmental conspiracy-policy for framing the project, were not interested in discussing its technical details. Local authorities and promoters, on the other hand, were entitled and willing to discuss concrete details of the park regulation, in order to adapt them to the needs of residents. The two sides therefore approached the debate with completely different expectations and strategies. Those in favour wanting to talk about the park, those against it wanting to talk more generally about the life situation in the Alpine valleys. It seems clear that, in such a situation, local authorities and promoters did not have the means to respond adequately to criticism from detractors – as it was not directed only toward specific Park regulation.

The results of this paper show a clear discursive split between those in favour and those against the project. This split needs a wider theoretical discussion. In continuation we will try to suggest some possible avenues of research. Given the fiasco of the project, we can conclude that a

73 MOUFFE, 2013.

74 COMETTA, 2020.

formally bottom-up process is not a sufficient condition to transform the territory according to the will of the citizens. Highlighting the limits of this approach and proposing possible alternatives is therefore necessary to favour a better practice of bottom-up territorial processes.

First, I suggest that it is better to prevent the creation of echo chambers and discursive asynchrony in advance, instead of trying to cure the problem afterwards. Once these phenomena appear, in fact, they prevent the normal functioning of democratic institutions and the conception of bottom-up projects. Hence, before starting a bottom-up territorial planning project, it is important to verify that there are no echo chambers that could seriously hinder its functioning. A constructive public discussion is essential for a healthy democratic debate. I suggest that it is important to orient political governance towards deliberative models, where respectful discussion is a central element⁷⁵. Indeed, power sharing promotes mutual respect and increases the chances of fairer confrontations⁷⁶. To achieve it, it is important to train the population for this task. A series of measures must be taken to make the life situation of the population less confrontational, so as to make it more capable of overcoming emotional barriers and building conflict arbitrages. That is, it is necessary to have policies that restore the constructiveness of public debate⁷⁷. E.g., a state cannot expect that the social and territorial transformation that involves the creation of a Park can be easily discussed by a community that experiences its daily life as under threat. "If the Park project remains an isolated example of a bottom-up approach within the broader top-down territorial policy, it will be rejected not so much

75 BÄCHTIGER *et al.*, 2005.

76 LINDER, 2010.

77 NAPOLI, 2018; STEWART, 1993.

for its content as for what it represents”⁷⁸. I argue that unless the community (especially if peripheral) really feels in charge of its future – and therefore does not see PA projects as an external imposition – it will be almost impossible to develop bottom-up constructive processes. The idea is simple: if the institutions manage to show themselves to be close to the interests of the people involved (especially minorities), their territorial proposals will no longer be framed in a we-their division but will be discussed in a more constructive way. Institutions must show solidarity with the communities affected by their projects. For these communities to be able to trust the institutions, and initiate a constructive bottom-up process, they must feel that if this trust is betrayed, their survival is not endangered⁷⁹.

Ideally, a better public education on social, political, environmental and urban issues is also necessary to make every person understand the complexity of the contemporary world, the challenges imposed by globalisation and climate change. Without such education, it is illusory to think that policies of social transformation are going to be accepted without conflict – without someone resorting to the reactionary power of emotions. The new education must contribute to a culture in which inclusive conflict arbitration becomes an integral part of everyday life and public debate⁸⁰. The role of education appears to be fundamental to foster innovation⁸¹. I postulate that, in the case of PNL, the absence of these accompanying measures – allowing the presence of fake news and echo chambers – was one of the main causes of the failure of the project.

78 COMETTA, 2020, p. 9.

79 SCHMITT, 2012, p. 142.

80 GOLEMAN; BOYATZIS; MCKEE, 2013.

81 VARSAKELIS, 2006.

The importance of strengthening education about deliberative processes for the whole population is fundamental. Indeed, a bottom-up process cannot be confused with the simple lack of intervention by the institutions, just as one cannot believe that it is enough to adopt a bottom-up process in a concrete and isolated case to make this governance model legitimate. For bottom-up approach to (substantially and not only formally) work, prior intervention is needed to eliminate any echo chambers and to palliate any issues that would distort the debate. If this is true for Switzerland, which already enjoys a very participatory democratic system and good public education, it will apply even more so in other contexts where the population has fewer opportunities to politically express itself. This paper can therefore substantially contribute to the creation of new PAs, bringing the awareness that the focus cannot only be on the concrete project of a Park, as it is necessary to first resolve a number of democratic issues in order to ensure the quality and rationality of the bottom-up debate. Developing PAs starting from bottom-up processes is indeed a praiseworthy initiative, but it is doomed to failure if we do not understand that a good public debate, open and participatory, needs a population without echo chambers.

7. Conclusion

PNL is not an isolated case of failure to establish new PAs in the Alps. Parc Adula has also shown a similar situation⁸² – two opposing groups that have failed to find an arbitrate solution to their disagreements. In this paper I have proposed an analysis of this failure following the appearance of fake news and echo chambers. The main idea of the paper

82 MICHEL; BRUGGMAN, 2019.

is that the creation of echo chambers is favoured by a social malaise that creates distrust in institutions and their projects. This, in turn, makes an open and rational public debate virtually impossible. Supporters see the park as a concrete and clear regulation on land management. Detractors, on the other hand, perceive it more as a symbol of a series of hostile policies, and are therefore unwilling to engage in mediation and compromise to change the actual regulation. As long as part of the population, influenced by these echo chambers and distrust of the institutions, is unable to return to a situation of “normality”, constructive debate – e.g., the discussion on the concrete points of the regulations of future PAs – remains a chimera.

Hence, my point is that a state must resolve these situations of democratic crisis before starting a process of bottom-up territorial governance. It is necessary to provide the conditions for the population to discuss this project in a constructive and, if possible, rational form – i.e., to remove echo chambers before the project even begins.

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