

Rational City

(Part I)

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Abstract: Can Giuseppe Pagano's city, in which, with little effort, we could imagine being realized many of the architectural ideas of the young Italian rationalists who came from the Gruppo 7 and the MIAR, be called the *Rational City* (if with some audacity)? As in fact *Rational Architecture* was what everyone called what was presented in the Prima Esposizione (First Exhibition) of 1928 in the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome and the subsequent one in 1931, also held in Rome, in the Galleria Bardi. The problem arises, therefore, of clarifying the meaning, first of all, that those young people intended to attribute to the adjective Rational – and its derived noun Rationalism.

Key words: Rational City, Rational Architecture, Gruppo 7.

Premise

1) These notes arise from a question seemingly long since answered. Or perhaps, not even (or no longer) to be posed. But I am fortunate, at my age, to be able to participate comfortably, only as an observer, in some well-aimed critical elaborations on modern Italian architecture which young people of undoubted worth try to formulate their PhD thesis, the inaugural stone of their academic dream. They are a joyful and difficult age which I also remember having been and was for me an age of broad, endless discussions among us youth, struggling with a discipline (or an art?), which we had begun to really know only at the university. Some in our group, as often happens, had come to architecture having become passionate about some other art, learning painting or modeling clay or even chipping at stone in the first burst of adolescent creative passion, well before enrolling at university. But no one would have really been able to try architecture except through scholastic drawings copying photographs and some bold sketches of the imagination, with no notion

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of perspective and statics, very little of history, and extremely little of criticism. Yet we were there, in a school that, with its strongly conservative attitude – especially in the freshman years – spurred our reaction to read magazines and books, very old or up to date, still practically forbidden – in any case, not recommended – in a passionate attempt to rebuild by ourselves, by reading and discussing, the birth of modern architecture, especially Italian architecture. Competing among ourselves, with the passionate young people's propensity to favor critical creativity over philology, we applied in turns – or together – daring brushstrokes of thoughts imperfectly learned onto the large canvas over which we were struggling. And as we studied it and discussed it, the uncertain image that seemed to take shape on that canvas seemed evermore heroically imbued with contradictions and with politics, with beauty and drama, with faith and error, so much so that present in architecture and in the city appeared to be a dull *entr'acte*, which undeservedly filled the proscenium of history. So in each one of us – each so different – a common feeling was formed: that of having to contribute in some way so that, finally, the curtain could open again on real life; the one in which architecture was once again the vanguard – struggle and hope – of a better world. Our world. We read a lot and discussed a lot; in the ordeal, from the words of the best we learned the need to study more to return to the most ironclad comparison in order to formulate unusual critical and unprecedented interpretations in the competition, so that we could become, for once, victorious. They were years of 'crazy and desperate' self-training. To those who were not part of our group, we certainly must have looked like an unfriendly and closed presumptuous elite. And we were; at the same time absolutely inelegant, competitive, presumptuous, selective. But some were really chic, some truly good. Not me. However, each of us owes a lot to those years. To me of that time has remained, indeed, the nostalgia of our interminable discussions on the architecture of the first Italian modernity, while – I realize now – in my memories the traces of our endless investigations are still intact; itineraries that seem ready to reopen the paths of the discussion if I but step onto them. So, when Ilaria Bernardi, Italian architect and PhD student at the University of Madrid (now already brilliantly graduated), a few months ago wanted to have me read the draft of her PhD thesis entitled: *Il Gruppo 7 nella formazione dell'architettura razionalista italiana* (Group 7 in the formation of Italian rationalist architecture), the games of past days seemed truly to come back to me. And I, who am certainly not a critic nor a historian, succeeded in attracting Giorgio

Ciucci to play the part of the most talented of those times, as he is today. Above all others. I'm truly grateful. And I also schemed to call into the game Antonino Saggio, of whom the passionate 'Terragni' is known to us all, to represent the link between Ilaria's generation and mine, introducing into the debate the sense of modern communication, informal, intuitive, certainly refined by the customary to the most spectacular spectacle of digital instruments, brilliant in his speech that is almost journalistic in the anxiety of being well understood by young people today. The conversation encounters on the topic were few for me, maybe few even given the topic. But the taste for dissertation, of the critical hazard for those who, like me, not a critic, once rekindled is difficult to extinguish. So today I can not resist the temptation to resume – with myself – the new conversation starting from a question that emerged in those very recent talks and which – as I said at the beginning – has long since been exhausted, perhaps it is not even a real question, but simply an excuse. So, just like those our ancient conversations, crazy and desperate, this monologue of mine will be a coming and going between ideas and texts and facts of history as only those affected by “passionate incompetence”² – like me now and us all in those times – can afford to propose. But due to my shortness of breath we will go slowly. In stages, of which the text published here is but the first.

Reason

2) One question: can the modern city proposed by young Lombard architects under the guidance or enthusiastic protection of Giuseppe Pagano really be said, the *Città Razionale* (rational city)? Let me clarify: the projects of Milano verde (1938) and of the Horizontal City (1940) where, with little effort and somewhat superficially, we could imagine the architectural ideas of the young Italian rationalists who founded the Group 7 a few years earlier to be realized on an urban scale considered the continuation of that idea of *Architettura Razionale* (*Rational Architecture*) that the young people of that avant-garde group presented in the First Exhibition of 1928 in the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome (and then, in 1931, in the new Galleria Bardi in Rome)? To answer the question, therefore, we ought to first clarify the meaning that these young innovators intended to attribute to the adjective Rational – and its derived noun: Rationalism. A problem that I do not think is

2. *Appassionata incompetenza* is the title of one of the last, if not the last, book edited by Massimo Bontempelli, which I had the privilege of receiving directly from his own hands in 1949, in my teen years.

easily solvable in these few paragraphs, since one of the reasons for the choice of that adjective – *rational* – to signify the new architecture, I believe, was precisely in the communicative power of polysemic nature, as linguists would say, that it acquired once applied to the world of architecture; where it could draw upon itself different interpretations, each with its own and varied roots – from philosophy, history, to the history of architecture. But a second and related reason for the choice of that adjective would undoubtedly have been its ability to transmit, easily, to a large audience, the idea of some geometric clarity of architectural thought and of the forms chosen to make it real. Finally, in the first half of the twentieth century in a country such Italy, which sought its modernity with ardor and error, that term so full of nuances must also seem the most suitable to mean the wish to adhere, in the project, the social *reason* of the mass city and the economic *reason* of modern industrial production of architecture and its apparatus. Untangling such a rich and elusive skein is certainly a matter for the historical and critical illustrious of modern architecture, already well versed and who will continue, I am sure, without questioning, I believe, the agreed and shared conviction that that adjective, *rational*, used to signify the architecture of modernity, both an all-Italian creation and referring to Italian architecture. Which also justifies the not uncommon uncertainties in its use by those young Italian architects when they intended to compare their thinking more closely with that of international modernist currents. Less probed, however, it seems to me, has been the assessment of how much, in the choice of that adjective of great identity value, played the exalted cultural controversy, between German civilization and Franco-Latin civilization that accompanied the First World War since the beginning and indeed, for Italy – late in entering the war – began prior to our initial entry into the war. Equally little interest, it seems to me, until today, is there in reconstructed the historical reasons for which a young and apparently accidental alliance between young “irridentist” architects – that is, born Austrian subjects – and some extraordinary students of the School of Architecture in Milan the movement was born, though full of contradictions, but brief and bright that gave modern Italian architecture the name of Rational Architecture. In other words, perhaps rashly, I think it is more appropriate to the limited ambition of these lines to briefly point out to readers the political significance that that magnetic attribute, *Rational*, had acquired in Italy and Europe in the years ravaged by the First World War, ending ten years before the First Exhibition of Rational Architecture. And soon afterwards recall, in

a few paragraphs, the special reasons that made it indispensable for that group of young architects to bring their architecture under the name of Rational Architecture, open, according to their ancient and irrepressible cultural traditions, to the broad European horizon; in particular Northern European.

3) Therefore, to begin with we must bear in mind that the young architects who organized that event – the First Italian Exhibition of Rational Architecture – like all young people of the fascist era, even if they had not directly participated in the war – being too young – were brought up in the reflection of powerful rhetoric and patriotic ideas, resounding in piazzas and newspapers, in families and, above all, in Italian schools and universities. The same occurred in Germany. On both sides of the war front, the intellectuals, *en masse*, had enthusiastically joined the war and had given themselves the task of helping to strengthen, with their writings and their actions, the consciousness of identity that would have allowed to keep, until the inevitable victory, their respective peoples in arms united, of whom they wanted to assume the role of conscious avant-gardes. Of course, the intellectuals turned above all – I would say exclusively – towards young people trained in high school and university, that is to those who could comprehend their eloquence and that would have been the commanders of the people in arms, waiting for them wives and girlfriends, almost equally well educated to resonate with high and sublime feelings, ideals even requiring personal and family sacrifice. The battle on the battlefields was, therefore, preceded and followed by a dense barrage of preparation and accompaniment by the batteries of the intellect that of such conflict intended to reveal its “true nature” as a clash between Kultur and Zivilization on to the German side, or between Barbarie and Civiltà – or rather between Irrationality and Reason – according to the Latin side.

4) The Great War had begun three months earlier when, in October 1914, Thomas Mann – who was then 39 and had already written *Tonio Kröger* and *Death in Venice* – published his first political paper *Gedanken im Kriege* in the Berlin magazine *Neue Rundschau*, published afterwards in Italian under the title *Pensieri di Guerra* (*Thoughts of War*, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, from whose edition I quote some passages), though I prefer to refer to a somewhat more literal translation: *Pensieri in guerra* (*Thoughts in War*), which adheres more to the German title and carries in Italian the sense of those thoughts

being, formulated during the war, of course, but also being themselves, thoughts in a war, mobilized against other thoughts: the opposing batteries of the intellect. Too well known is that text to justify even a summary: I need only recall for who has read it, the vehement contrast between Culture (Kultur) and Civilization (Zivilisation) with which Mann opens his peroration where Culture is the historical form of German identity as Civilization is, instead, of the French identity and, a result reflected in those societies that depend largely on the French culture, such as Italian society of those times. Culture (Kultur), he says, «is a certain spiritual organization of the world, be it all adventurous, scurrilous, savage, bloody, scary. Culture can understand the oracle, magic, pederasty, cannibalism, orgiastic cults, inquisition, autodafé, St. Vitus dance, witch trials, flowering of poisons and the most disparate atrocities». Civilization (Zivilization), he continues, «is instead reason, enlightenment, detente, restraint, composure, skepticism, clarification... spirit. Yes, the spirit is civil, it [author's italics]bourgeois; it is the sworn enemy of instincts, of passions, it is anti-demonic, anti-heroic and it is only an apparent contradiction when stating that it is anti-intellectual». In this passage there is an apparent contradiction in the meaning of the adjective *spiritual* used in the essay “spiritual organization of the world” to mean Culture and the noun *spirit* used to define the highest and cold synthesis of Civilization. The contradiction was also noted by Mann, who in fact, after talking about “spiritual organization of the world” introduces the noun “spirit” with three ellipsis dots. And then he clarifies: «To mistake what is spiritual, intellectualistic, sharp, even insightful with what is brilliant, is undoubtedly modern and without a doubt we all tend towards it. But it is nonetheless a mistake». He continues – author's italics –:» Art, *like all culture* – author's italics –, “is sublimation of the demonic. The discipline that governs it is more rigid than the laws dictated by civilization, *its deepest knowledge of the enlightenment* – author's italics –, its independence and irresponsibility freer from skepticism, its doctrine is not science, but rather sensuality and mystical, because sensuality is of mystical essence, just as everything that is nature». And therefore: «Art, in its intimacy, is far from being interested in progress and enlightenment, in the comfort of the social contract, in other words, to the civilization of humanity». It «is undoubtedly closer to passions and to nature than to reason and to the spirit [...] We have honored it by declaring it akin to religion and sexual love: and it may be placed along another elementary force of life that just now is shaking our continent and all our hearts: with

which I mean war». A few lines later he exclaims, recalling the glories three months prior (July 1914): «War! What sense of purification, of liberation, of great hope pervaded us then! There, the poets spoke of this, only of this [...]. It was the war in itself which excited the poets, the war as a calamity, as a moral necessity. It was the unheard of, powerful and passionate tightening of the nation in the will of an extreme trial, a will, a radical resolve such as the history of the people had perhaps until then not known». So far a reader with a common background could say: not that distant from Marinetti, consonant with D'Annunzio and prefiguring all the fascisms, which, when said of Thomas Mann, whose books were burnt in bonfires lit by the Nazi university youth, may scandalize. But in 1914 this was the widespread sentiment on both sides of the Rhine and the Alps. However, Thomas Mann did not stop with the aesthetic and moral praise of the war; many on the other side would have, however, agreed. He uses the vitalistic, artistic, sensual and irrational conception of war to build upon it a permanent division of the world: here the genius, on the other side reason, here the German culture, there the corrupting, decadent French Rationality, though beautiful. He then turns to consider the figure of Frederick II of Prussia as that of the eponymous hero of united Germany, and wants to consider it just at the moment when he met and established his strong relationship with Voltaire: the comparison between the Genius and the Reason, the comparison between Germany and France. «Since I know those two – Mann says – they present themselves as the incarnation of the antithesis these lines are dealing with. Voltaire and the monarch: reason and demon, spirit and genius, arid clarity and hazy destiny, bourgeois morality and heroic duty; Voltaire and the sovereign; always and forever the first great bourgeois, the second the great soldier». And he continues, ultimately: «But since we have before us this antithesis in national symbols, in the French personage, still dominant, and the German monarch, whose spirit is now more than ever alive in all of us, this antithesis, this contrast acquires the same national significance and revealing importance for the psychology of the people». And in the final pages, with sarcasm, he exclaims: «this war is considered, indeed, a kind of forced civilization of Germany. In fact, they want to educate us [...] The question is this: they want to make us happy». But whosoever wants this, Mann explains, «believes in all seriousness that defeat can bring Germany to a revolution and be able to democratize it – and does not see that the political conformation of our civil liberty, already prepared, already well underway, can not be

accomplished except [...] after victory, Germany's victory that historical experience tells us is certain; does not see that our political adaptation will be carried out only on the basis of the laws of the German spirit, and not those of the radical Gallic spirit». And finally: «*Why first and foremost is German victory undeniable? Because history does not exist to crown ignorance and error with victory [...] whoever wants the Germanic species to disappear from the face of the earth in favor of the "humanité", of the "raison" [...] commits a sacrilege – author's italics*». Rationality and humanity as synonyms of ignorance and error. And again: if *raison* were to win it would be a sacrilege, the fracture of the fate which history itself is obliged to obey: the victory of Germany.

5) About eighty years earlier, Heinrich Heine, considered to be the greatest German poet after Goethe by Germanists, in his voluntary exile in Paris reflects on the revolution and writes for his German readers and his French guests. He was born shortly after the French Revolution of 1789, he missed by one year the one in 1830 (he moved to Paris in 1831) and witnessed the movements that shook France between 1830 and 1848, when he finally witnesses the Bonapartist revolution; all events that to him confirm the vitality of French revolutionary sentiments and the supremacy of France over all other nations – especially Germany – in the history of the emancipation of peoples. Heine is too complex a figure and too complex is his relationship with Germany – beloved and persecuting homeland – and with France – admired and liberal host of his intellectual and political exile – to be able to affirm that in his political writings one may find all and nothing else that Mann would have written in 1914. But the almost messianic expectation of the German revolution which will finally achieve the supremacy of German culture and nation over all others he expresses with visionary tones and vehemence that seem to anticipate the language of every other subsequent elaboration of the conflicting, profoundly ideological relationship between *Kultur* and *Zivilization* (terms, moreover, already used by Kant), to which Thomas Mann, with his thoughts in war, enthusiastically contributed. «Do not be restless, German republicans: the German revolution will neither be gentler nor milder simply because it was preceded by Kantian critique, Fichte's transcendental idealism and the philosophy of nature»,³ so Heine says to cheer up the always frustrated revolutionary Germans of the romantic age, now almost certain that the great

3. HEINE 1971 pp. 866-867.

German philosophical elaboration irremediably dimmed the necessary revolutionary will. And he casts, by contrast, the image of a German revolution guided terribly by the followers of the great philosophical schools. And then, the revolution of Germany broke out, «if the Kantian hand strikes strongly and unerringly, because his heart is not moved by traditional reverence; if the Fichtian courageously faces every danger, because it has no real existence; *the philosopher of nature will be terrible he will join the primeval powers of nature, can evoke the demonic forces of High Germanic pantheism, which awaken in him the bellicose ardor that we find in the ancient Germans, who fight neither to destroy nor to conquer but simply to fight* – author's italics».⁴ “Thought precedes action as lightning thunder”⁵ Heine had already affirmed elsewhere, almost an admonition addressed, that time, to his French hosts. Philosophy, almost by natural law, had to precede the revolution in Germany. And any historical delay depends on the fact that «the German thunder is in truth also German, not very agile and comes forward rolling rather slowly; but it will come, and when one day you hear a crash such has never occurred in the history of the world, then you will know; the German thunder will finally have reached its objective [...] the lions in the most remote desert of Africa will lower their tails and crawl into their royal caverns. A drama will be enacted in Germany, compared to which the French revolution will seem to be only a harmless idyll».⁶ And, as if stirred by an obscure premonition, at the end of the visionary exaltation he addressed the French directly, exhorting them, however, to treasure their classical culture and to await the armed Germanic catharsis under the protection of the armed goddess Athena, goddess of Wisdom. The goddess of Reason, we may say, born from the intellect of Zeus.⁷

6) «... I personally have an unlimited love and admiration for France. It is to this nation that, at least three fourths, I owe what I am if I am something. Its genius, its spirit of independence, its refining power, the

4. *Ibidem*.

5. HEINE 1972, p. 162.

6. *Ibidem*.

7. «Whatever happens in Germany [...] always keep ready, stand firm in your outposts, arms at ready [...]. Because you, in spite of your current romanticism, are classics born, you know Olympus well. Among the gods and the naked goddesses who therein delight with nectar and ambrosia you will see a divinity who, though surrounded by such joys and similar diversions, always wears armor, the helmet on her head and wields the lance. She is the goddess of wisdom” Da H. Heine: *Per la storia della religione e della filosofia in Germania* (1834) in “La Germania” di H. Heine, edited by Paolo Chiarini, Laterza 1972, pp. 315-316.

example of its courage in matters of art and spirit, have been as though providential. France was the most suitable and nutritious soil for my Italian seed. I adore France, and its auspicious or inauspicious fortune will always move my grateful heart».⁸ Ardengo Soffici, in the core of his essay *Per la guerra* (For War) – published in the magazine “Lacerba” precisely the same weeks in which Thomas Mann wrote his *Thoughts in War* – sums up, with evident emotion, the personal, cultural and patriotic reasons that led him, together with Giovanni Papini, to transform the journal that had been for over a year the most qualified instrument of communication and debate in Italian Futurism; a journal dedicated primarily to stirring Italian, intellectual and political opinion, the moral and cultural necessity of intervening in the war alongside France against the danger of German cultural prevalence. As the relationship between the Tuscan Futurists and the Marinette Futurists was wearing out, the journal steered abruptly and changed its scope more than style and direction. In August 1914 Giovanni Papini presented his famous essay *Il dovere dell'Italia* (Italy's Duty) with these words: «Lacerba will only be politics [...] we will resume our theoretical and artistic activity when all is said and done,» i.e. after Italy's entry into the war; or maybe at the end of the war. «Almost a year will go by from the Papinian declaration to the last issue of “Lacerba”, May 22, 1915, the day that general mobilization is called: in these months, dramatic and convulsive for domestic and international affairs, and for the conscience of politicians and Italian intellectuals, as well as for all sections of society in the country, “Lacerba” carries out an intense and passionate interventionist propaganda».⁹ The parallel with the participation of German intellectuals in war propaganda could not be more exact: “During the nine months of propaganda, the declarations of the two Lacerbians against Germany contrast, prophetically, the call to a collective defense in the Appeal to the world of culture (*Aufruf an die Kulturwelt*) of October 4, 1914 to which the greatest intellectuals of Germany adhered».¹⁰ War, therefore, as a rousing historical and moral necessity, of which some, Thomas Mann in particular, sing the sensual essence as a form of art; while the others, in particular Papini, with much less inspired and less personal tones, but more “teppa” (hooligan) – as he himself might have said – menacingly boast, like good futurists, the cathartic function of purification of the human race: «Finally the

8. SOFFICI 1914.

9. PEDROCCHI D'AURIA 1982, pp. 5-43.

10. DE PAULIS-DALEMBERT 2015.

day of wrath has come after the long twilights of fear. Finally they are paying the souls' tithe for the cleansing of the earth. It's about time for a hot bath of black blood after so much dampness and lukewarmness of mother's milk and fraternal tears. We needed a beautiful hosing of blood for the droughts of August [...] The war is a Malthusian operation [...] removing an infinity of men who lived because they were born; who ate to live, who worked to eat and cursed work without the courage to refuse life. Among the many thousands of carrion embraced in death and no different other than the color of their clothes, how many will be, I won't say mourned, but remembered?»;¹¹ is how, in 1914, the future very Christian convert, Giovanni Papini, exploded. So far, in the exaltation of the war as a devastating catastrophe for the perfection of mankind, intellectuals on both sides seem to walk along same path, though each in his own style. And, almost surprisingly, both parties accept the assignment of roles; on one side is *Kultur* – Germany – on the other *Zivilization* – France and its cultural satellites; we have seen it already with Thomas Mann and in higher, more painful and prophetic terms with Heine. The divergence, the opposition between the two parties is clear and dramatic the moment it must be defined, through the comparative evaluation of the two categories (*Kultur* and *Zivilization*) the negative identity of the enemy to be fought and bent, if not physically and morally destroyed. Naturally, in a correct historical vision, as M. P. De Paulis-Dalembert,¹² reminds us, «the terms *Zivilisation* et *Kultur* are not unambiguous, but also may lead to opposite meanings». In an article of August 1915, Croce writes that in the nineteenth (and early twentieth) century «'culture' [meant] the theoretical aspects of the spirit, art, philosophy, science; but for 'civilization' almost the opposite of what is today called civilization [...]; civilization was [...] the 'generous barbarism', the faith in what is beyond the individual, the sacrifice of the individual for the state and the homeland, the religious concept that is the ethics of life».¹³ But, as Mario Isnenghi explains, «the demonization of the enemy, necessary for the mobilization of national energies, leads to exasperation of differences and the denial of elements of civilization common to all belligerents».¹⁴ Therefore, in the words of Thomas Mann, you sense the decision to drastically abandon the concepts of *Kultur* and *Zivilization* as indispensable terms of the creative dialectic, between

11. PAPINI 1914.

12. DE PAULIS-DALEMBERT, *ibidem*, p. 99.

13. CROCE 1915.

14. ISNENGHI-ROCHAT 2000, p. 28.

Dionysian spirit and Apollonian spirit, which in the Nietzschean vision must tend to a higher harmonious composition. Mann overcomes any hesitation and sides with the absolute victory of the Dionysian spirit – if we are to continue with Nietzschean definitions – in which he sees the original German spirit, intoxicated with instinctive life, since the Apollonian spirit, the ratio that gives order and meaning to life, relentlessly prevailing in history, has meant the decadence of the Western world, now openly an enemy of Germany. On the other hand, in Ardengo Soffici's emotional declaration of war – "... I personally have a love and boundless admiration for France" – you feel that the Tuscan friend of Apollinaire, Picasso and the cubists intends to proclaim most clearly and unhesitatingly, in favor of the harvest of innovation and freedom which is the fruit of culture and the "refining power" of France, the birthplace of Descartes, of enlightened and of freedom; of Reason. At this point, the more violent intervention by Giovanni Papini on "Lacerba" in defense of *Zivilization* is not important. Suffice it to reread what Maria Pia De Paulis-Dalembert says of the propaganda effort by Soffici and Papini: «It is necessary to evaluate the mythic strength, the violence that underlies the project of defense of the Latin *Zivilisation* against the German *Kultur* understood as a synthesis of barbarous drives. The German is the symbol of a mechanical subculture, devoid of talent and therefore opposed to the creativity of the Mediterranean genius. [...] Artistic modernity, of which Papini and Soffici were protagonists in the first decades of the century, is paradoxically articulated in the appeal to violence and destruction, in the condemnation of others' barbarism yet resorting to the same barbarism». As always, Soffici is more pensive than Papini; he «adds, in an imaginary letter sent to the Germans, the cultural reasons underlying the fracture between the two peoples in terms of both geopolitical interests and of feelings. The result is a definition of the Mediterranean civilization opposed to the *Kultur* of which Thomas Mann was writing in those months "*To the mysterious obscurities of the German Dionysian Kultur; Soffici opposes the Apollonian clarity of the Latin genius* [author's italics]». Erudition, speculation, and German aptitude in science do not correspond to the idea that the artist [Soffici] has of the Mediterranean mentality, which instead consists in «the lightening of the spirit which leads it to profoundly enjoy the secret harmonies of nature loved for its simple concreteness, elegance, brilliant thoughts, of all the beauties in an atmosphere of joyful and happy serenity. We are far, as you see, from your metaphysical cloudiness,

from your sentimentality, from the mishmash of arrogant ostentation, from your all inclusive teachings. (*Per la guerra* p. 263)».¹⁵

7) Now it's time to return to our young architects who at the end of the 1920s decided to call their new architecture *Rational*; the new Italian architecture. That adjective was also undoubtedly chosen for the assonance with the rationalization of the project and the industrial production of architecture which in Germany had established themselves within the identity categories of the movement matured in the post-war period, especially around Bauhaus.

However, despite their direct knowledge of the Weissenhof and their active participation in the exhibition of architecture held in the areas of that model district, the victorious nationalism of Italy, in which they participated as well, prevented them, intellectually, from completely identifying their modernist vision with the tendency represented by the great new German masters with which they intuitively felt and shared the ideological and figurative force to the point of making it almost the innovative absolute. Suffice it to reread the second of their famous articles published in the *Rassegna Italiana* (Italian Review) – subtitled *Gli Stranieri* (The Foreigners) – which begins by declaring its main purpose is to «... fully illuminate the current architectural moment. And it seems to us, so much has the question of foreign influences been discussed, of their greater or lesser opportunities and plausibility, that a brief analysis of foreign trends in architecture is the first question to be tackled”: a statement that seems to me clearly addressed so as to sound a reprimand and an overcoming, in a polemical response, of the essay by Marcello Piacentini six years prior *Il momento architettonico all'estero* (The architectural moment abroad) published in “Architettura e Arti decorative” (Architecture and Decorative Arts) in 1921 (May-June issue) that I suppose they had read during their university period. But the slogan “what is functional is also beautiful” – as Bruno Taut would eventually declare in 1929, drawing up the five principles of the new architecture – was too simple a statement, too mechanical, for a group of sharp, young Italian talents of those times; it was a slogan that, in my opinion, posed no less of a problem for them. Surely the watchwords of the drumming Lacerbian polemic that had reflected and influenced, in avant-garde, the national feeling echoed in their minds, in their hearts and in their proud and patriotic conscience: the not much longer futuristic

15. DE PAULIS, DALEMBERT, *Ibidem*, pp. 101-102.

Papini, wrote in one of his incitements to war: «German civilization is mechanical or abstract. It starts with the empty metaphysics and end with the scam of the *schlecht und billig*. German culture is not culture but education, erudition, classification. [...] German thought is not thought but formula and formalism. [...] Heaviness, rigidity, formalism and mechanicality are the salient features of German life and civilization». It is therefore not surprising, if in the victorious post-war climate and triumphant fascism, in the last of the four essays published on Italian Review, Gruppo 7 seems to have attempted, even if with a little difficulty, to culturally deny the birthright of German modernity, by which they are fascinated however; a birthright they cannot historically dispute, but which they try to limit only some features of modernity. In a long note to that text they say: «When involving a movement produced by complex and distant causes, by new and radical necessities, such as this renewal of architecture, preceded by a few years in representing some [author's italics] characteristics, if it may be a reason of pride for the country that first experimented them, it can not, however, give them birthright to them. “Tendenza tedesca” (German tendency) does not mean, therefore, anything in this sense, because, even if identical in substance, it would have another name, if another country had been the first to experience it».¹⁶ What is still important is not to be considered Germans. I think it is superfluous to point out that the articulation of their critical discourse is based on a still decidedly “patriotic” vision, in the sense that it automatically attributes to the “country”, that is to the “homeland”, the merits of the best offspring of whose homeland it is that can and must be proud. This is the point: the conflict in architecture – between modernists and anti-modernists – in which our young people tried to find their affirmation both at home and abroad, does not eliminate the conflict between the different cultural homelands. They sincerely – I am led to believe – or influenced by the political context of their time, cannot hope any greater reward than the pride of their country for their work, the pride of a homeland, a victorious Italy, in the war between the “*raison and l’humanité*” – to use the same words as Thomas Mann – and the mechanical abstraction of German thought, to put it like Papini. Moreover, there is within them, as in all Italians, as in all Italian architects – anti-modernists and modernists – the certainty that history, contrary to the convictions expressed for the German side by Thomas Mann, has really obeyed fate, which it could only allow the triumph of

16. GRUPPO 7 1927, note 6.

the civilizations located west of the Rhine and south of the Alps founded on Reason and Continuity between classical antiquity, humanism, time of light and modern time. Here is how the note in the fourth essay in the *Rassegna italiana* continues: «As for Italy we declared, already in our first article, that “the spirit of tradition is so deep within us that, necessarily and almost mechanically, the new architecture cannot but keep the typical imprint that is ours”. Proving how fears of excessive foreign influence are unfounded». There is certainly a tone of defense due to the attacks received and already criticized in their third essay in the *Rassegna italiana*, but there is also the conviction that modernity must necessarily be expressed within “national blocks” and that the first distinction on which to establish the boundaries and the field of values of each of the major national blocs be the relationship that each of them has with history.

History

8) History. But was not the relationship with history at the origin of the irreducible internal debate at the Werkbund after the First World War? as it was at the basis of the conflict between the Weissenhof architects and those following Paul Bonatz? And which led the latter, even if with great difficulty and delay, to oppose the Weissenhof’s “wood district”, the Kochenhofsiedlung (Die Holzsiedlung am Kochenhof), which through a greatly tormented gestation did not see the light until 1933, just in time, unfortunately, to obtain the official approval by the Nazi administration? But in 1918 Germany had lost the war. History, which in the totalizing German vision, even according to Thomas Mann, seemed to guarantee in absolute terms, with its sequence of the events, the inevitability of Germany’s victory (see above page 2), had therefore lied. Or they had been profoundly mistaken, leading the entire German people into error, they who based on those events, on their sequence, had acquired the conviction that fate itself had already assigned to Germany its triumph. History suddenly revealed to many Germans its fatal nature, its being expressionless, uninvolved in human destinies, neutral and silent mask of time, to which attributing a meaning and moral will is an inevitable temptation, but as deadly as looking at Gorgon’s face. At the end of the war and in the dramatic first years of the post-war period, every German intellectual was compelled to rework the relationship between their works and history, the sense of their identity, in a range of possibilities whose extreme bastion had been prophetically set by

Thomas Mann himself in that same estranged essay here oft quoted: “[Germany’s enemy] does not realize that the defeat of Germany would be the only means to make us and Europe regress entirely to civilization; that after such a defeat, German “militarism” [the quotes are from Mann: the term is ironically used to mean Kultur as viewed by its enemies] would no longer give respite to the whole of Europe until Germany resumes the place it held before the war [author’s italics].” It is certainly the menacing prefiguration of the Second World War, but it is above all the irreducible conviction of the superiority of the German Kultur and of the German interpretation of history, which was to have been kept intact in their national purity even in defeat until its inevitable victory: a conviction which contains within itself the promise of the dramatic divisions, the cruel cultural violence to the bonfires of books, the 1933 Bücherverbrennungen, and Nazism: “you are Germans once again!” shouted in fact Hitler in 1934 to the whole of Germany, after receiving the oath of loyalty even from the army at the end of his complex and long coup.

Certainly, after the war, Mann, observing Weimar’s Germany and reasoning on it, managed to overturn his position; but it remained, instead, the position that not a few German architects and critics decided, dramatically, to maintain and perhaps to stress after the defeat; one example Schultze-Naumburg,¹⁷ who even before the advent of Nazism accused the Weissenhof of cultural betrayal, of being Mediterranean, even Arab, perversion, therefore, of racial and cultural felony, as an integral part of the stabbing in the back inflicted onto the destiny of the homeland – according to the German rhetoric of defeat. But from that ideological bulwark, which eventually became the creed of Nazi cultural policy, on the one hand was immediately articulated in a range of passionate redefinitions of the German tradition, from Heinrich Tessenow, to Paul Bonatz to Paul Schmitthenner, and on the other, perhaps supported by the solid confidence of Mies in the direct relationship of industrial modernity – passing over all the historical development – with the principles of classicism, distanced himself and established the opposing position, that of Gropius, which, I believe, among the new German masters recognized by the young in Group 7, explicitly represented the spearhead of the conceptual elaboration and practice of modernity in Germany; the most revolutionary, denying (or mistrustful) position of a relationship with history to history and yet

17. The first important essay by Paul Schultze-Naumburg, *Häusliche Kunstpflege*, was in 1899, but the book *Das Gesicht des Deutschen Hauses*, came out in 1929.

egregiously instrumental towards it. Therefore, even the most German in some respects.

9) «Since Gropius had limited knowledge of the history of architecture, [at Harvard] he relied on others, Hudnut or Giedion, to help him with historical references – so writes Jill Pearlman in his book *Inventing American Modernism*¹⁸ – in which Gropius is viewed in his fruitful American exile. He continues: «The use of history by Gropius can be compared to that of Sigfried Giedion, though he lacking the same mastery of the subject. Like Giedion, nonetheless, he used the history of architecture and technology to outline the itinerary of modern architecture, but in particular to carve for himself a place within the great tradition». Once again history modified to demonstrate an “ideological” assumption, though be it personal. But apart from this instrumental use, history, as a possible source of critical reflection to the detriment of creative spontaneity, Gropius keeps it far from his teaching methods, to which he most greatly owes his affirmation as a teacher. “Gropius, due to his conception of history – continues Jill Pearlman – has been condemned by numerous critics and architects, including some of his own students. Bruno Zevi, [a student at Harvard the years Gropius taught there] perhaps gave us the most negative criticism in his 1959 essay entitled *Architecture in the Encyclopedia of World Art*. Zevi wrote that many people consider Gropius “as one of the most cultured and profound» masters of modern architecture, but in fact, no one had a “more reactionary and biased” concept of history than Gropius. Zevi’s critique of his old master stemmed above all from the reflections on history that Gropius expressed in his 1950 essay, “Blueprint for an Architect’s Training”. In this and many other essays, Gropius wrote that at most, when history transcended “the intellectual collection of facts”, it explored “the conditions and the reasons that had led to the visual expressions of each period” [...]. Zevi also rejected the warning often repeated by Gropius that only the most advanced students should study history. He understood that Gropius conceived history in much the same way as the academic period of the conflict of styles in the nineteenth-century, the only difference being that Gropius considered modern style in opposition to the various of past styles. “On the one hand then, the use of history as a flexible instrument to glorify an ideal assumption – his own position among the masters of the new architecture – on the other,

18. PEARLMAN 2007.

based on the experience of the devastating ideological malleability of history, censorship or at least paternalistic – but not a little extreme – distance of history from the purity of the formative development. An ambiguous rejection, but in any case extreme almost to reach its opposite – for Zevi, we now know, Gropius “had a very similar to an academic conception of history”; an extremely bitter rejection weighed greatly by the dramatic ideological elaboration after his defeat: how very German? How further from the Group 7’s instance of exaltation of modernity as a development of a winning culture, albeit revolutionary? and therefore, a victorious history?

Between Austria and Italy

10) Two of the youths of Group 7 had been subjects of the Austrian Empire until their fifteenth year. Adalberto Libera and Gino Pollini were born in 1903 in Tyrol, in Circolo di Rovereto, a city that from 1510 to 1918 had been part of the Austrian dominions. Pollini studied at the Imperial Regio Ginnasio in Rovereto until his transfer to Milan, after the war, where he then attended the faculty of Engineering, and then at Architecture School. Libera, instead, after attending the Städtliche Schule and the first year of the Scuole tecniche (Technical School), at eleven, on the eve of the First World War, followed his mother, Italian of “noble lineage”, in Parma; his father, called to arms by the Empire, did not want to join the war on the side of the Austro-Germanic block. Irredentist, as they were called. In Rovereto, during the Austrian period, German was the second language of instruction in schools for Italian-speaking citizens, although not a compulsory subject. After 1866, following the passage of the Veneto to the Kingdom of Italy, the subjects of Italian culture in the County of Tirolo had lost the natural access to the University of Padua, available for fifty years after Veneto was passed to Austria in 1814. Their highest aspiration had almost always been Innsbruck or Vienna. The political and cultural pressure of the Imperial Administration on the Italians of the County had certainly not been oppressive; living in the Cisleitania – the western and northern part of the Austrian Empire – was considered a privilege compared to the conditions in which many other European states lived, including Italy. Alcide De Gasperi, a member of the Parliament of the Austrian Empire, still in September 1914, addressing the Hapsburg Deputy Foreign Minister, Baron Karl von Macchio, sent to Rome to try to prevent Italy’s entry into the war, assured him that if a plebiscite were held, 90%

of Trentino would vote for Austria-Hungary.¹⁹ Censorship had already been strict at the outbreak of war between the Central Empires and the Entente powers in 1914, but became much more so with the approach of the entry into the war of Italy alongside the enemies of the Empire, in 1915. In 1918 the two future architects of the Italian avant-garde, Pollini and Libera, to all intents and purposes were able to drop their original Austrian citizenship. Certainly the “Austrian” part of their formation, as in the case of repressed and declared “national” identities, will have had the effect of making culture closer to the family’s linguistic tradition – in this case Italian – the image onto which to project one’s own identity; image the more mythical the more it is opposed. But in the case of those who were born subjects of the Austrian Empire, the custom and close cohabitation with another culture, politically dominant, but more advanced in some fundamental sectors and, above all, open by its nature to linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity, in general made of the “irredentist” intellectuals of special Italian citizens, sometimes more able than other Italians to synthesize the complexity of the present in a geographically, culturally, historically broader view. They were often very active, skilled and apparently very sure of their cultural choices, aiming to assert the Italian national identity as a fundamental part of a superior international *koinè*, which certainly also included the one they opted to fight with their patriotic choice to conquer not to destroy it; to reinvent it and relive it in a new *koinè* of peers. It is enough for us Italian architects to remember the person and the story of Giuseppe Pagano Pogatschnig. He, only nine years older than Libera and Pollini, precisely because of that age difference was more directly involved in the political component of the cultural choices of that enthusiastic, varied and diverse constellation of intellectuals and artists – and politicians – who, born subjects of Austria Felix, chose to fight to build the myth of an Italy assumed among the nations that would be the guide of modernity. Among them stand out – we know – precisely those who today are regarded the extraordinary group of Rovereto led by Fortunato Depero and included – in addition to the slightly younger Iras and Luciano Baldessari, Fausto Melotti and Carlo Belli – Pollini and Libera among the youngest protagonists. The group represented, the first post-war period Italy, with the greatest emblematic force, the special quality, the intellectual restlessness, the freedom of research, the international openness and, in the end, the absence of the closed

19. PICCOLI-VADAGNINI, 2004. Vedi anche: ZUR MÜHLEN (1929), 2010, p. 21.

and discriminating nationalist rhetoric that we have seen, instead, burst forth in purely Italian intellectuals, such as Soffici and Papini. The intertwining of close family and friendship relationships, the influence of provincial schools and high-qualified teachers (especially the Scuola Reale Elisabettiana – founded on the principles of the Deutscher Werkbund – and of Professor Luigi Comel), their subsequent diaspora to Berlin, Venice, Florence, Rome, Milan, the equal focus on art, music and architecture all this really destined this small group of new Italians to contribute poetically to maintain the link after the First World War between Italian and Central-European international culture, and more. Pollini, after the war, completed his training, began in the county of Tirolo, in Milan. Libera, following a more complex route, in Rome. But he too, almost naturally, turned back North as soon as it was possible, joining precociously – not yet graduated – Group 7, a group with a decidedly Milanese or at least Lombard character, even though not all of its members were born in Lombardy (Guido Frette was born in Viareggio). Therefore, the complete ranks of Group 7, for two sevenths it was formed by former Austrian subjects, for the rest Lombards by training. Closely observed by Giuseppe Pagano Pogatschnig and from a bit further away Ettore Sottsass the Elder, also born Austrian.

Long Day of Milan

11) The Milan school, however, was the real culture bed of Group 7. The long-term resistance of the Milan Polytechnic compared to the School of Architecture of the Giovannoni model – adopted only in 1934 – seems now avenged by the emerging role that its current school, still – institutionally – of “Giovannoni” form, seems able to exercise, with a good dose of aristocratic detachment, as compared to all the other great Italian architecture schools. But one can not ignore that in the twenties of the last century, when the majority of our young rationalists formed within its walls, it was still the school as modeled by Camillo Boito, from Belluno, also of Lombard-Venetian nationality when, in 1836, he was accidentally born in Rome only due to his father's difficult life. I am under the impression that only in the last decades, in correspondence with the weakening of the prestige of the Italian unitary state, of its political class and of its capital, the special and autonomous cultural identity of Milan, its solidity, is revealing itself with the proper evidence to the Italian executive class. Or at least to those more aware of the deep reasons for the Italian crisis. The fatherland history

as taught to us at school, in the attempt to create a place in a unitary fresco to all the protagonists of the Risorgimento – often, in reality, in bitter political opposition against each other – has attenuated, deformed or entirely silenced the voices of those who, during those patriotic events, had different ideas and great doubts regarding the validity of the unitary nationalist project as it evolved from the beginning and, above all, how it unfolded, then dragged by events. Thus, the exaltation of the Five Days of Milan in March 1848 does not seem to me to have evidenced the various original aspirations of the leading classes and Milanese intellectuals, relegating, for example, almost exclusively, to the level accessible to specialists the doubts and the tormented choices of Carlo Cattaneo, Milanese, who, perhaps, better than anyone else, knew how to represent those aspirations. And who hoped first and then harbored a different project – more enlightened, I would prefer to say more historically founded, more open and radical than the one implemented – for the modern fulfillment of our history. I certainly do not want to say that Cattaneo's writings and experience were direct sources of inspiration for the young founders of Group 7; but for a non-Milanese like me – thus for the vast majority of Italians – it is certainly useful to refer also to the thought of that great figure to understand, since, so natural, one may say – paradoxically – to be even unaware, the political and cultural identity of the Milanese ruling class on what cultural, historical, political sensibilities has leaned and rests. Which has gone through, substantially unharmed, even the periods of more intense national and fascist patriotism; therefore, also the period of formation of the young people of Group 7. What to remember about Cattaneo so that it may help us understand why, after the frantic anti-Italian delirium that culturally dominated official Italy during and after the First World War, a handful of young people “patriots and fascists” Lombard-Venetians, newly graduated or still students dared to cross the fatal border between *Zivilisation* and *Kultur* with so much decision and enthusiasm? It would be enough to recall that Carlo Cattaneo on the night of 18 March 1848, the first of the Five Days of Milan – a popular event he was called to lead with rigor and strength the following day – gave the press «the opening article of the newspaper *Il Cisalpino* in which he put forward the hypothesis that Austria should be transformed into [...] the federal state, granting [armed] autonomy to the different nationalities».²⁰ But one can not disregard that in his essay *Notizie*

20. AMBROSOLI 1969, pp. 418- 434 (p. 423).

naturali e civili su la Lombardia (Natural and civil news Lombardy), published on the occasion of the 6th Congress of Italian Scientists held in Milan in 1844, five years before the Five Days, «Cattaneo recognized how the Duchy of Milan, detached from the “Spanish corpse” [1714], was reunited with “Living Europe” and noted how «the Austrian, various language domains [...] began to be a state, to possess a principle of administration and unity». He attributed the merit of this progress along «the great ways of public good and prosperity» to the “spirit of the century” and to the soul of the ruler, that is, of Maria Theresa».²¹ *Living Europe*; thus the Milanese Cattaneo, the patriot, the military leader of the Five Days revolt, the radical republican, the exile Cattaneo, defines in a sentence that seems to me high and definitive, the supra-national horizon which Milan, Lombardy, the ruling class of the Regno Lombardo Veneto (Lombard-Venetian Kingdom) could not give up even when Austria, grim and wary after the Napoleonic adventure, was struggling to find those enlightened *ways of public wealth and prosperity*. Need one add anything else? Perhaps; perhaps it is necessary to recall that Cattaneo, who was elected to the parliament of a united Italy several times, never set foot in that parliament so as not to be forced to swear loyalty to the King of Piedmont, now King of Italy. Piedmont: a state that he judged to be much more backward than Lombardy. Gaetano Salvemini in his 1899 essay *I partiti politici milanesi nel secolo XIX* (The political parties in Milan in the nineteenth century) writing of the Piedmontese administration after the granting of the Statute (1848) can still claim: «The Piedmontese administrative system was [...] the most reactionary in Europe: the elective principle was reduced to the bare minimum and gave monopoly of power to the wealthiest». For a Lombard of enlightened roots such as Cattaneo it was a monarchic regime, democratic only in appearance, but in fact authoritarian, closed, militaristic, to the point that he defined as early as 1821 “fatal project” that «meditated by the Piedmontese federates and by Federico Confalonieri [Milanese], to annex Lombardy to the Kingdom of Sardinia».²²

12) The contrast between the figure of Confalonieri – high Milanese aristocracy, pro-Austrian and anti-Napoleonic before becoming pro-Piedmontese – and Cattaneo’s – bourgeois, a lover of practical sciences

21. AMBROSOLI, *ibidem*, (p. 421).

22. AMBROSOLI, *ibidem*, (p. 419).

and engineering of the territory, polygraph like many great illuminists of the previous century, realist more than positivist, republican, federalist and anti-authoritarian – strongly reminds us of the complexity of the Risorgimento affair and above all defines the two extremes of the range in which the Lombard ruling class of the 1800s acted and moved culturally and politically. I do not think I venture too much if I believe that, in the period from those dramatic years of the early nineteenth century to the time that interests us, that of the twenties of the last century, conservative patriotism, decidedly unitary and monarchical, with peaks of literary exaltation and of political heroism, represented in these notes – with more than a few summaries – by the figure of Confalonieri, even if historically successful he learned to live with, often merge, with the feeling of the fundamental European identity and with the democratic and strongly secular sensitivity represented in these pages – still with more than a few schematics – of the figure of Carlo Cattaneo.²³ This contradictory combination, in spite of the vicissitudes, had time to settle in the collective consciousness of the new Lombard industrial class, composed almost in equal measure of old dynasties – who invested their ancient estate capital in modern production – and of new men who invested there, instead, their own, positive technical and entrepreneurial skills. And became the ideal natural substratum of the institutions, teachers and students of the ruling class of that extraordinary city that was and is Milan. Only by recalling this picture, composed by contradictions and certainties, of indispensable hopes and of incomprehensible – for us – political adhesions, I hope to be able to clarify – more to myself than to those who read me – the meaning of the tenacious battle for modern architecture of European character fought by our Milanese “young fascists”. Thus, I hope to have clarified, in particular, the sense of their uncomfortable and passionate inclination for the research of German and Central European architecture flaunted in a country, ours, which for many years would officially claim, with obstinate and growing rhetoric, the supremacy of their own cultural self-sufficiency. And once again I am aided by the example of those who, together with Cattaneo, discussed the public interests of Italy between 1815 and 1848, knowing full they were soliciting the dominant

23. «The tendency of being very practical» is one of the main characteristics of Italian enlightenment, including the intellectual tradition in which Cattaneo believed». So claims Filippo Sabetti, (quoting M.H. FISCH - T.G. BERGIN, *Introduction*, in EAD, *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1975, p. 31) nel saggio, *Incivilimento e autogoverno nel pensiero politico dell'Ottocento: il contributo di Carlo Cattaneo in una prospettiva comparatistica*, in *Città e pensiero politico italiano dal Risorgimento alla Repubblica* a cura di Robertino Ghiringhelli, 2007, V&P, p. 461.

regime (Austrian at that time) perhaps beyond its capability; in fact, to our young rationalists we can apply without changing a single iota, one could say of the “narrow circle” of the early nineteenth century Milanese: in them «... there was also a common conviction that they worked in harmony with the course of events, with the journey of the century; in other words they had found a method of action that also obliged the national rival to collaborate with them as that power was vigilant in caring its material interests. This was their “*conspiracy in the light of day*”²⁴.

Conspiracy and (re)pressione (repression-pressure)

13) Conspiracy in the light of day. In the words with which our young people of Group 7 in some of the articles published in the Italian Review try to render the accusation of being followers of the “German tendency” harmless – see above, point 5) – we feel, in fact, the fear of those who know that they run the risk that this *conspiracy in the light of day* be judged as antinational activity pure and simple. They were not wrong: Marcello Piacentini in two 1928 articles on “Architettura e Arti Decorative” (Architecture and Decorative Arts), with his tone between the professorial and the paterna, echoing for them, in the exalted sky of Italian architecture of those years, the threatening grumbling of a storm, perhaps imminent, certainly immanent in those alltoo provincial skies. Piacentini’s first article, August 1928, is a veritable critical presentation of the First Italian Exhibition of Rational Architecture organized by Adalberto Libera, Ambassador of the Group 7, and by Gaetano Minnucci, representative of the young Roman architects among the most open to an international vision. Piacentini immediately puts his stature as a great protagonist of Italian architecture and an official leader of the Roman Academy on the line. To nail down, in comparison, the schematic vision of our schematic youths, he flaunts a poly-linguistic vision of the city’s architecture, oh! the richer, the more dignified, adequate, and realistic than that of our budding rationalists; a vision one could call pre-Quaronian if it were not for the implicit evocation of the differentiated use of historical styles – or at least their materials, forms and symbols – according to the many functional and

24. K.R. GREENFIELD, 1964.

representative themes that make up the complexity of the city. The schematic and very poor and schematic rational “style”, however, is taken seriously, even if only to highlight “the economic factor, indeed the social economy”. “But – continues Piacentini – what constituted a reason of reasonable economy, has now become theory, mania, vice.” And with paternal condescension, he finds in the modern city the right place to bring back to virtue, to everyone’s advantage, this poor architecture for the poor: «Replace this new architectural vision to the cribs of the workers’ garden cities, to the untidy and presumptuous toys of the thousand districts of the petty bourgeoisie. These will be the basic forms of architecture, the new abecedary of future metropolies, and so much nudity and nudity will be perfectly in place among the gardens and tree-lined avenues *outside the city* [*italics is mine*] And he continues: «But when we begin to climb a few steps on the ladder of architectural questions [...] then this sacrifice, there reasonable, becomes aridity, insufficiency, absurdity». The article ends with a challenging question: «If I had to build a four-storey building in a street in the center of Rome, with windows proportionate to the rooms that need lighting, I can not imagine a glass and reinforced concrete facade. Then what?» A bit arrogant dare, but good-natured, that nevertheless sounds threatening if one thinks of the academic and political caliber of the person who pronounces it. But the rumble of thunder that lasts throughout the article, in fact was already announced on the first page with a sharp crash in the ears of the reader. The title of the famous article, in fact, is: *Prima Internazionale Architettonica*. Three words that, used to define an exhibition that presented itself ostentatiously as *First Italian Exhibition etcetera* is like a slap in the face to communicate to the rash responsables of the Exposition two things: firstly that the new architecture for which they fight is international stuff, not Italian; secondly, that their internationalism is so similar to the communist, theoretical, ideological, subversive. Antinational. But the worst was yet to come.

14) Piacentini’s second article, dated November of the same year, is on a completely different subject. This is the account of his visit to the exhibition of the projects – more than three hundred – presented in the competition for the Palace of the League of Nations, in Geneva.

An opportunity of great breadth, truly international, which could have constituted under Piacentini's pen, the inspiration for a selected account of the *architectural moment* in the world, in his usual style. The title, however, may already leave a little uncertain: *Problemi reali più che razionalismo preconcelto* (Real problems rather than preconceived rationalism). A collective recognition of the designers who participated in that memorable competition? Or, on the contrary, a rebuke to those same designers? Or, finally, the exhibition of the ideal key, not to say ideological, on the basis of which Piacentini himself was about to select the many projects on display? But more surprising is the subtitle: «This article should follow the one entitled 'First International Architecture' by the same author, appearing in this magazine in the August 1928 issue». The refutation of the "First Italian Exhibition of Rational Architecture", for Piacentini continued to be a primary task to which every opportunity could be used. The article evolves like a lesson in architectural analysis and evaluation; knowledgeable, professional and realistic. Selecting the many projects into categories of increasing sufficiency, he examines thirty, the best, less than 10% of all those presented (377) and as a great professor of professional realism Piacentini examines them anatomically by parts, by themes, by functional areas. Everything is admitted, everything is equated as long as the solution is practical; and without any preconceived exclusion praises Le Corbusier when he solves the problem of the multiplicity of driveways (the solution on stilts is considered and praised only in this light) but many other participants he praises identically when they present interesting "expedients" – is his term – typological. Then he stops: «Other more modest problems – position of toilets, asymmetric and irregular shapes of halls of interminable steps, etc. I will not be here to illustrate, to not go too far.» And finally, with clear reference to the organizers of the "First Italian Exhibition of Rational Architecture": «I regretted that in in Geneva no one had thought of making an international congress of architects on that occasion to discuss the positive problems, studied and dealt with so much love and so much effort». And then, the lunge: «Of course it would not have been an empty and sterile discussions about rationalism or ambientism. It was the *architecture of the true* [italics by Piacentini], that is, of the practical and organic problems,

as they arise in the life that evolves every day. For me this is the real solution of contemporary architecture: to see where the problem is, to unearth it, and to face it without prejudices, without parties taken; studying it for what it is, and solving it scientifically, technically and with *ideas*. *Ideas*, therefore, more than *rationalism*». Here too, the *inclination* of the print character is original, by Piacentini; which in the last three lines of a very professorial article, with a sudden leap from the professional to the political field, affirms that, however, the aesthetic quality of the architecture must be considered, however limited to the decorative and “ambient” surface of the work, as a matter – ouch! – of race: «The aesthetic vision and the decorative vest each one will give according to his race, according to his own temperament, according to the environment in which he will have to operate». It seems to be a slight variant of the dictates of the noblest tradition of modernity. Immanuel Kant dedicates an entire chapter of his *Observations on the feeling of the beautiful and the sublime to national characters*, of course; but they are meant as a consequence of a different feeling of the Sublime and of the Beautiful. Here we are to the race, mythical human reality defined not by poetic motions of the soul – the aesthetic feelings – but by predestined, biological hierarchies of blood. I met Marcello Piacentini as a student; I went, along with other students of the early years, to listen to his lectures on European cities when he, now an untenured professor after the Second World War, continued to describe them masterfully for the undergraduates up there on the top floor of our school of Valle Giulia. Our mind was of silent protest of his personal history; we wanted to know the great enemy of modernity. And he seemed to me confident, certainly, but not aggressive, a perfect, conversational professor. Here; one might think that that reference to race was a simple verbal alignment with the jargon of the winning political faction. But in the context of that second article against young rationalists the reference to the race still today seems a clear call, even if almost en passant, to the political reality of official Italian culture for those who had not yet understood it while living, as well as our young rationalists, in the rhetoric of the victorious war, declaimed by the words of Papini, Soffici, and many others, intellectuals, artists and politicians. The rationalism of our young people, to whose redemption

Marcello Piacentini dedicated, therefore, two committed articles in his magazine, the most authoritative of the Capital, risked being considered not only a symptom of an antinational attitude, but also a sign of that racial crime, a greater sin, on which we already touched in point 6) of this article when I recalled the accusation of which, in the same turn of years, the designers of the Weissenhof – the primary reference of Group 7 – were the object of ideological violence early Nazi (and later Nazi) of Schultze-Naumburg.²⁵

The Shield of Reason

15) «Rava e Terragni claimed the choice of the term *rational*, as Figini wries, Group 7 had often thought about changing it; the term lent itself too much to a mechanical affirmation which did not allow the artistic questions to shine through».²⁶ So Ilaria Bernardi reminds us in her recent study on Group 7. The choice of the rational adjective was, therefore, pondered, debated among small group of young architects and claimed by two of them – both Lombards – as an original choice, perhaps consented by the others with some difficulty; perhaps not always considered adequate to their diverse “spirits”. However, the young people of Group 7 chose to commit to that rational term to defuse the impending charge of representing only a young local agency of international functionalist architecture dominated by the German “genius”. Had not Reason represented the Latin culture in contrast with the Germanic culture that Thomas Mann had staged, protagonists Voltaire and Federico II?²⁷ And was it not Athena, the Goddess of Reason, the Olympic entity to whom the French, according to Heine, should have turned to support the terrible impact of the future German catharsis?²⁸ And finally, was not *raison* the quality of *humanité* that, according to the rhetoric of the intellectuals of imperial Germany, should history have humiliated in the inevitable march towards German triumph?²⁹ But on a somewhat more careful reading, the title *First Italian Exhibition*

25. The first important essay by PAUL SCHUTZE-NAUMBURG, *Häusliche Kunstpflege*, è del 1899, ma il libro *Das Gesicht des Deutschen Hausen*, è del 1929.

26. BERNARDI 2018, p.40.

27. See above, part 2).

28. See above, part 2).

29. See above, part 2).

of Rational Architecture reveals that the message launched with the strategic attribute – *rational* – was more penetrating and ambitious than might appear at first sight. It postulated that there really existed in the world a movement of Rational Architecture, therefore morally and culturally linked to the principles of that universal Zivilization – which Cattaneo called “civilizing” – rooted in the culture of lights abhorred by German nationalists, to be clear. From that descends that the European architecture gathered under that attribute, even German – which was the linguistic and ideological reference of our young people – actually represented values opposed to those of the *Kultur* that was dear to the nationalism of imperial Germany; as if it were its abjuration. Here then is that the First Italian Exhibition of that Rational Architecture implicitly proclaim that the values so passionately supported by the voices of Italian nationalism during the war, had also converted the Europe of enemies to itself, precisely because of the victorious outcome of the patriotic war. Hence the irritation of Piacentini who well understood the potential “nationalist” irresistibility of that message. Already a year before the opening of the First Italian Exhibition of Rational Architecture, in the fourth article on *Rassegna Italiana*,³⁰ Group 7 had posed the problem of the *name* of modern architecture as being essential for its understanding, for its acceptance. Despite the years since the First World War, it was at a time when the representation of the complex identity of opposing ideologies was still entrusted to the power of the semantic synthesis of the passwords (think, once more to the role played for two centuries by the two words *Kultur* and *Zivilization*). In that article of the “*Rassegna Italiana*”, Group 7, perhaps in an excess of conceptual simplification, affirmed that, when the renewal of the architecture depends not on local causes, but on complex, radical and internationally shared reasons, attributing to it a national name, such as German Tendency means nothing «because it [innovative architecture] would bear another name if another country had been the first to express it». In other words, the attribute *Rational* did not present itself as the *Italian translation* of the name or rather of foreign names with which that modern architecture was presented, but as the name given to it by Italians who recognized in that revolutionary architecture, mirrored

30. See above, part 5.

entirely and finally revealed, still unifying, the roots and values of what had been the broadest unitary philosophical movement of the West, which had involved, and deeply at that, Italy: the Enlightenment, and above all its *rationalism, spread over the entire European continent*, from Filangeri to Verri, from Montesquieu to Voltaire to Kant; to Immanuel Kant the most German among the Germans, the greatest at that time of the philosophical foundation of rationalism. It could not be otherwise: Carlo Enrico Rava himself, one of the two “inventors” of the identifying attribute rational, had affirmed with an inspired utopian tone «So, Europeanism: now it is time to understand that, just as the *overcoming* of the individual can lead to a truly characteristic and vital creation, **so only a work whose scope far exceeds the confines of those who create it, and has therefore *European* value and influence, is worthy of being part of the national heritage** [bold by the writer] The concept of European, therefore, leads to an ultra-nationalism: the whole of these works, whose qualities are so complete as to have value everywhere, represents the civilization of a period. So Europeism is to be understood in the field of art, and in architecture particularly». ³¹ In this inverted ideological framework, in which to national heritage can only belong values that far exceed the boundaries of the nation and have European value and influence, the strong neologism used by Rava, *ultra-nationalism*, should be understood, I believe, not as a dilated and sharper level of nationalism, but as *supra-nationalism*, or rather as a feeling that overcomes nationalism in an absolutely cosmopolitan vision of civilization. Of which Europeanism – which Rava writes capitalized! [tr. Note, europeismo not normally capitalized in Italian] – is fundamental and part of the motor. For that time, in Italy, a true Copernican revolution; as Kant could have said, in fact.

Civil Architecture

16) From 2000 to 2015, one of the two schools in which the ancient School of Architecture of the Milan Polytechnic was divided in 1997, wanted to be called the School of Civil Architecture as proposed of the newly elected Dean, Antonio Monestiroli. ³² In that proposal “the

31. RAVA 1928.

32. Vedi il *Documento del Preside*, presentato e votato nel Consiglio di Facoltà del 27 aprile 2000.

significant name of the School of Architecture based in Milan-Bovisa ... [is] linked to the idea of a high, “civil” role of architecture. For this reason the Dean used as a reference the text by Milizia, *Principj di architettura civile* (Principles of civil architecture), as root of the name of the Schools». ³³ As usual, in electing a teacher from the past for one's own cultural, moral and symbolic reference, one intends to manifest a precise genetic interpretation of oneself. The choice by Dean Monestiroli, it is true, naturally included the reference to the famous text by Milizia as the theoretical foundation of the identity of the new Milanese school of architecture which had been located for more than fifteen years in the former Bovisa Campus. But it meant more; it was also an act of independence with respect to the ideal and formative conceptions of the ‘Roman’ system – especially in the case of Giovannoni – of the schools of Italian architecture, accepted, with difficulty, in Milan, only in 1934. It was also a sign to mark the difference with the sister – and rival – school which had its headquarters in Piazza Leonardo and was considered heir, in some respects, of the spirit of that “alien” order; Roman, that is. That new name, School of Civil Architecture, was, therefore, above all a reference to the autonomous origins of the school of architecture in Milan. ³⁴ Re-establishing that noble name at the outset of the third millennium, therefore, meant much more than calling Francesco Milizia, tout court, unique witness to the vocation of the new school of architecture. The school of Bovisa by the name *Civil Architecture* wanted to affirm its original polytechnic roots, which it had in Carlo Cattaneo – the Enlightenment, the positivist reformist – the moral founder. This is not the place to remember how much the work of Cattaneo – of which I have already much discussed – was also fundamental for the reform of the studies of Lombardy, that is the most vital embryo of modern Italy. Suffice it to recall his journal, “il Politecnico” founded in 1839, his pre-forty-eighth engagement as president of the Collegio degli Ingegneri e degli Architetti di Milano (College of Engineers and Architects of Milan) – an institution that preceded, with its educational activities, the

33. FLAVIA 2016.

34. The Scuola di Architettura di Milano began in 1865 as a section of the Istituto Tecnico Superiore – then called Politecnico – headed by Francesco Brioschi. It was Brioschi himself who, along the two existing Technical schools wanted to found the section – in fact – of *Architettura civile*, (civil architecture) to which Camillo Boito was called to direct, where he taught for 43 years.

polytechnic institutes – and finally , his constant attention to a reform of the educational system of the ruling class of a small country that wanted to place itself on a par with the most advanced European nations. Even the ideal and living memory of Cattaneo, therefore, lies in that name – *Civil Architecture* – as a fundamental link of passage – even in the field of higher education – from the great age of Lombard Enlightenment to the industrial age that, in his days, was already clearly visible on the horizon of Italian society, albeit as a hope. We non Milanese, especially us Romans, perhaps are still surprised to see how deep it is in the living conscience in the alternating generations, since then, at the Polytechnic of Milan, the deep link with the enlightenment and positivist roots of their city culture: It is the story of a labor that has its premises in the Enlightenment and has gone through the entire nineteenth century, from the Napoleonic reorganization, to the true reform phase with the Casati Law of 1859, up to the stabilization of the current status of the university and professional degrees with the Gentile Law of 1923.” So in 2014, a year before the reunification of the two schools of architecture of the Polytechnic, Luca Monica,³⁵ current professor of the School of Architecture in Milan, expresses himself. He continues: “In this great fresco emerge a multitude of problems that describe a prolonged phase of historical transition of architecture, placed between the two cornerstones of a first Neoclassical Rationalism, so-called *revolutionary* and *Jacobin*, and a second revolutionary, avant-garde Rationalism, of the twentieth century [the author’s italics]». The young of Group 7, who in the twenties of the last century were consciously contributing as “avant-garde” to the modeling of that second cornerstone – avant-garde rationalism – certainly knew they were heirs of Neoclassical rationalism and, with it, Cattaneo’s scientific and technical humanism and the linguistic research by Camillo Boito, aimed at defining an architectural language that, with the utmost sincerity, freedom of expression and realism, would transform the constructive needs of a new society based on a new industry into aesthetic values. And of that complex inheritance they certainly knew to select what most suited their ‘revolutionary’ time. So of Boito’s teaching they were able to overcome the brake that the master had before the most advanced

35. MONICA 2015.

construction techniques, those of steel, which threw into crisis his refined and meditated recourse to historical architectural languages to identify among them the less codified, the freest and, however, equally learnable from the study of the concrete architectural context of the Italian city. Equally clear, it seems to me to be their explicit reference to the Enlightenment idea of Rational Architecture excludes from it any purely stylistic reference to Neoclassicism and finds instead full resonance in the more rigorous and well-known statements by Milizia: «... because the architecture was born of necessity, all of its beauty must take on the character from the necessity itself. Everything must therefore appear to be made for needs. It would be a reproach, if the artifice of pleasure manifests itself: art blushes if it is uncovered: for everything that is done for mere adornment is vicious». And perhaps the most important statement: «The proportions are the most essential ingredients that constitute the beauty of architecture. A simple factory, that has no other merit than that of the right proportions, will always have a beautiful effect, sufficient unto itself, and will be admirable even without ornaments: like a naked statue, like the bust di Belvedere». (emphasis mine). From these simple – and all too quoted – principles, I believe, came to life, by natural means, the new and revolutionary rational rigor, neoclassical in spirit, cultivated in different personal ways by each of our young architects during and after the events of Group 7. And I can not help but wander with my memories to the studied proportional complexity of the Terragni's Casa del Fascio project or to the symbolic and well-established Danteum project. And even if in the architecture of those young Lombards I see the fruit of their assiduous looking at the revolutionary, industrial or visionary architecture of other countries, I can not help thinking that the daring operation of transition from the Novocomum project officially approved to the one actually realized was carried out by the very young Terragni (him again) just as revealing the architectural nude, dropping the drapery that adorned it. Just Milizia had taught them that the ornaments “are to architecture, as the drapery is to sculpture.”

Theory of Reason

17) However, I wonder how much choosing the adjective “rational”

then was the choice to resort to “reason” to define not so much his architecture as much as the international architecture of which he wanted to be a part, could have influenced the publication, in 1926, of the philosophical work of the Lombard Antonio Banfi entitled “Principi di una teoria della ragione” (Principles of a theory of reason). 1926 is the year in which Group 7 began the series of the four essays published in the *Rassegna italiana* (above mentioned). Bearing in mind that the writing of their first essay – in which the adjective “rational” appears to define modern architecture – dates back to November of that year, and that the preface to the first edition of the work by Banfi *Principi* etc., is dated May 1926, we can assume that they, or rather the most culturally aware among them, held in their hands, in time useful for their reasoning, a copy of the essay by Banfi, fresh from the press. The young people of Group 7 well knew – we have seen – that the search for a leading role in the international vanguard, led prevalently by German masters until then, ran the risk of appearing openly denying of the politically nationalist rhetoric, assumed still in the twenties, as proof of cultural citizenship and of adherence to the dominant regime or, more properly, of faith in it. Theirs was not only *juvenalis anxietas* if only four years later, in July 1930, Giuseppe Pagano, now director of “La casa bella”, felt the need to write an editorial entitled “The use of certain adjectives” in which he rallies against the difficulties of modern architecture even when “on the part of the future client, there is the best disposition.” The obstacle is represented by an adjective that surfaces with melancholy monotony whenever one wants to give a stab to the “traitors of the Italian tradition.” The threat the wounded fatherland, and the hypocrisy of those who feared the competition due to lack of understanding, have condensed into an adjective that should describe the limits of modern architecture: “German”. This was the situation; in that same year, 1930, Waldemar George, curator of the 12th Biennale di Venezia, of the exhibition *Appels d’Italie*, “reserved for young painters who return to drink at the source”.³⁶ wrote in the exhibition catalog: “A people that he has colonized the world, literally and metaphorically, has the right to aspirations far superior to those of generating purely local

36. From a letter by M. Tozzi – [founder of *Groupe des Sept* (Group of 7 known also as *Les Italiens de Paris*) including Campigli, de Chirico, de Pisis, Paresce, Savinio and Severini] – to A. Maraini, secretary general of the Biennale di Venezia, 28 dicembre 1929.

glories. His ambition is not to see Italians taking their place among European glories, but to rip Europe out of the tutelage of the North". I suppose, therefore, that to baptize "rational" what was internationally recognized, yes, with different names, but especially as functional or functionalist architecture, meant to indicate the need to overcome the dramatic "bellicose" interpretation of European culture fiercely divided into ethnic identities – here Zivilization, there the Kultur; here reason and there wise beauty, there the passions of irrationality and the power of functional mechanicity – proving that instead, finally, the course of civilization was resumed transcending the ethnic-political boundaries: true civilization once more ran before all reviving the idea of reason in modernity, the great Western heritage to which the whole Europe of every court or parlor, university, or Stift,³⁷ developed, had collectively contributed to its history. To complete the proposed vision – I would say "advocated" – by Group 7, therefore, Antonio Banfi, philosopher of the generation, already adult during the First World War, could really have contributed not only with his youthful philosophical works, but above all with his biography, as a providential figure of Italian intellectual cut out in a manner and certainly stubbornly alternative to the one that he still felt the duty to appear, in the twenties, decidedly or implicitly anti-German because patriotic. Banfi in 1910, having just completed his university and doctoral studies, had chosen to refine his philosophical education at the Friedrich Wilhelms Universität in Berlin, where he was a pupil of Simmel. He had not joined, at the outbreak of the First World War, any of the right or left interventionist currents. With his isolation and his studies, just at the moment of the exaltation of war as a national purification from any political and cultural influence of Germany, he remained among the few Italian testimonies of the supranational unity of modern thought, from Kant to the present. After the war, in 1923, his intellectual consortium was born with Edmund Husserl and in 1926, as we have seen, he published "i Principi" (Principles), and others. An architect like me, Antonio Banfi's work often poses not a few problems of interpretation; on the other hand, when, in 1931, he presented himself to the competition as extraordinary professor at the University of Genoa

37. Stift (literally union hall of a monastery); inevitably recalling the function and history of Tuebingener Stift, center of higher learning of the institute with the aid of the Lutheran Church of Wurtemberg, where Kepler, Hoelderlin, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel studied and taught.

– which he became – the commission, to which Gentile belonged, wrote: “It is noted, especially in his fundamental work (Principles of a theory of reason), certain obscurity perhaps not divorced from the immaturity of theoretical thought, obscurity, however, which, in the opinion of the majority of the commissioners, does not prevent Banfi from rising above other competitors». ³⁸ Certainly to educated and passionate people like our young rationalist architects of Group 7 will not have missed, unlike me, the scholarly concentration and the intellectual tools to immerse themselves without perishing in Banfi’s arduous philosophical prose. However, I think it would have been enough to know his life choices, his never disowned, deep relationship with German thought as well as the title of his book in which Reason, right on the threshold of the cultural relationship with Germany, was evoked as an essential theoretical foundation of the knowledge, to strengthen in Rava and Terragni the decision – perhaps already made in the name of Lodoli and Milizia – to claim the primacy of their own *transnational* choices of architecture in the name of Reason (here is the ultranationalism evoked by Rava; see note 25). I have not (yet) managed to know whether Antonio Banfi, who in 1926 had started teaching at Parini high school in Milan, ever had the opportunity to meet any of the young people of Group 7. ³⁹ Certainly direct relations between Banfi and the world of young Milanese architecture seems to have begun that year, 1926. Among his students at Parini high school there is Ernesto Nathan Rogers, only five years younger than the youngest of the Group 7 (Terragni was born in 1904). From that time Rogers saw his teacher in Banfi and six years later, in February 1932, still a student at Milan Polytechnic, he was officially called by Banfi to lead an Exercise on the *Directions and Currents in Modern Architecture* ⁴⁰ for his course on Aesthetic at the State Institute of Milan. Sign of a not infrequent meeting and a very solid relationship,

38. FUSARO (web).

39. In writing this I confess to have openly asked Chicco Bordogna (who honored me by inviting me to have my say in Bovisa next to Fulvio Papi, student of Banfi), Daniele Vitale (of which one need only recall his *Ernesto Rogers e Enzo Paci, considerazioni sul rapporto tra architettura, ingegneria e pensiero filosofico*, written and edited with Pier Aldo Rovatti), Elvio Manganaro (of whom I know of his intense studies at *Scuole d'architettura di italiane*, especially in Rome and Milan) and Luca Monica (whose Punti di vista point of view on the School of Civil Architecture in Milan I have already cited), should they read these notes, if they could help me clarify with their mastery of the history of Milanese architectural culture, of which, with their various identities and biographies are certainly among the most active subjects.

40. DEL VECCHIO 1932.

truly between professor and assistant, between teacher and student. In the post-war period, Banfi continued to be one of Rogers' constant references, when he first became director of Domus and then of Casabella Continuità; and of the circle that formed around Casabella an integral part was Enzo Paci, perhaps Banfi's most illustrious student, only two years younger than Rogers, his cultural brother. Finally Fulvio Papi, in order of time Banfi's last assistant, seemed to testify most directly, with his essay in honor of Rogers, from the title, in fact, *Rogers-Paci*,⁴¹ the solidity and longevity of that "interdisciplinary" group – we would say today – that foreshadowed the future of Milanese society in the 1930s.

18) Group 7, therefore, in the very few years of its existence, moving its steps in parallel to the Banfi's affirmation of critical rationalism, almost anticipates the resumption of the cultural identity process that, around Banfi, seemed to bring a part of the best Milanese intelligentsia to rise again fully autonomous in the Italian landscape after the violent national unanimity imposed by the war and the first fascism. So I do not think I'm too mistaken if I look to Banfi and his students, architects and philosophers, at least a part of what the increased awareness of the young authors of the Rational Architecture was due to, that in their writings, immature and daring, were always too occupied to find a way out between two opposing pressures, that of their own "revolutionary" convictions and that of the "conservative" rhetorical eyes, already more functional in the Rome regime. The identity awareness of the Milanese society, avant-garde of modernity, which, perhaps, only implicitly I can read into the proclamations of Group 7, I find it expressed, with surprising transparency, by Antonio Banfi in one of his letters to his Venetian student Giovanni Maria Bertin «I feel today, for example, that being born into an old Milanese family with an Enlightenment tradition, tempered by a slightly romantic tone of a relationship of interiority, familiar to legal and scientific studies, divided between the city professions and the life of land owners, has had a *profound meaning* for me»⁴² [italics mine]. A synthetic portrait, almost too perfect, of the average Milanese society, modern, traditional and cultured, I would dare to say, "in the manner of

41. BAGLIONE 2012.

42. SANTUCCI 1962, p. 197.

Cattaneo” – enlightenment, juridical and scientific studies – as well as solid for professional and patrimonial condition: the lands. A society that knew how to leave a deep meaning of itself in the civil conscience of its descendants. So deeply linked to the history of the Milanese society Antonio Banfi, moreover, very soon, already in 1910, had tried to refine his dialectical weapons to be used, when he felt ready to confront the highest representative of the other, true, great culture identity of Italy, at that time dominant in the whole nation: Benedetto Croce. And I am not the only one to think that his choice to perfect his studies in direct contact with the modern masters of German philosophy also stemmed from his dissatisfaction with the finalization that Croce gave to the great course of German Idealism. Drawing directly from the living heirs of those sources, beginning with Kant, reconsidering the role of science, and therefore also of its technological achievements, in the “development of the rational self-consciousness of philosophical knowledge”⁴³ this seemed to be Banfi’s goal. Thus his thought, in spite of the theoretical complexities, immediately must have appeared to the young modern architects of the Milanese school, more suitable than Croce’s conception to understand and consider the architecture – practical and useful art, social prophecy, expression of technological truth – all *together with its impurities* among the highest human expressions. In other words: art. Thus the philosophical, humanistic and polytechnic interweaving was strengthened which, by reviving in new ways the old eighteenth and nineteenth-century traditions, naturally led architects to confirm the role that the Lombard capital played in the Italian and European scientific and philosophical dialectic. Today – not only for us Romans – I think it is difficult to understand the sense of fullness that must have been felt to participate in that extraordinary interweaving of minds, hopes, intellectual and creative passions. Emilio Renzi, nevertheless, gives us a glimpse when, in describing the formation of Enzo Paci in the thirties writes: «Here the joy of the meeting with Antonio Banfi on the one hand and with an overall Milanese culture on the other are clear. Not only that of the other students of Banfi whose names need not be repeated here, but also with the poets (Antonia Pozzi, Vittorio Sereni), with scholars such as Lavinia Mazzucchetti, architects such as Belgiojoso,

43. BANFI 1967 (1926).

Rogers and Banfi of Studio BBPR, in Milan of the thirties. And with that restless impenitent that then always was Alberto Mondadori. Who as a “free auditor” attended Banfi’s lessons... These are known facts; pity only that there is no “history”, the philologically documented reconstruction, the restitution of **the only European coagulum in the history of Italian culture after the First World War to 1945** (what a pity that the great Milanese exhibition of the Thirties in Italy, three years ago, barely mentioned it)» [bold mine].

Rosario Assunto, many years later, in 1967, seemed to want to summarize, celebrating it, the value of that vigorous season of the Milanese philosophy *at the dawn of which, appeared* the young people of Group 7; or at least some of them. In Assunto’s essay “*L’estetica milanese e l’estetica napoletana; alcuni riflessi della polemica Croce-Banfi nella storia della cultura italiana*” (Milanese aesthetics and Neapolitan aesthetics; some of the reflections of the Croce-Banfi controversy in the history of Italian culture)⁴⁴ Milan rises to face in the conception of art, of society and of history, Naples and its incomparable philosophical story. The rest of Italy, Rome in particular, is silent.

The Group

19) But Group 7, in its short existence, was something more and less than the interdisciplinary group that gave life to that **single European coagulum**, precipitated around the Lombard philosopher. In times of crisis and revolutionary changes – as was the first post-war period in Europe – the duration of generations, usually measured in thirty years, seems to contract dramatically; well know to them that work in universities where, in times of crisis, the few years that separate the “freshmen” from undergraduates are enough to distinctly define two generations, each with their own, different hopes, visions, political convictions and diverse lifestyles and thought. The Lombard architects of Group 7 – unlike the BBPR, barely younger – had time to coexist more closely, and perhaps more convincingly, even with another gathering of Milanese culture, that of the twentieth century artistic of Margherita Sarfatti though as very young recruits *at the setting sun of that movement and of its animator*. Of course, the name of the new

44. BANFI 1967, p. 376.

century, Novecento (1900s), was for all the young people back from World War I almost a slogan that redesigned every artistic, professional and intellectual horizon, as if the century had revealed its identity of “the time of rebirth” – or revolution – only at the end of the war, demanding a new baptism of its name. I am sure that the future founders of Group 7 would not have missed the innovative model of professional action represented by the group of very brilliant Milanese architects – even they older than them – called Novecentists (but sometimes preferring to call themselves “neoclassical”) gathering at the beginning of the twenties, just back from the front, in the Studio in via Sant’Orsola – Giovanni Muzio, Emilio Lancia, Gio Ponti and Mino Fiocchi. And perhaps the school, so-called “Scuola di Sant’Orsola”, that was formed around them, gathering a large group of almost equally interesting architects of the same generation, would have made the future founders of Group 7 aware of the consistency and importance of the consensus that a proposal of linguistically updated and strongly identitary architecture could aggregate around young people of high talent and motivated ambition. But all leads us to believe that not so much the rather eccentric professional elegance of the Sant’Orsola Study as the militant, avant-garde, organizational spirit of the first Novecento artistic group, formed around Sarfatti in 1923 by the original “seven artists”,⁴⁵ influenced as a model of ideal and public action on the very young seven architects⁴⁶ who formed, in 1926, their Group 7. 1926 – again that year – was also the year in which, after a first exhibition of the “Seven modern painters” of 1923 – organized by Sarfatti, at whose inauguration Mussolini participated with a speech probably redacted by Sarfatti himself – and after participation in 1924 at the Venice Biennale of even closer formation – “Six painters of the twentieth century” (Oppi had the honor of having his own showroom) – the Novecento group, which in the whirlwind of controversy had already dissolved and regrouped with the new name of the *Novecento Italiano*, was presented in a major exhibition – in February – in the Palazzo della Permanente in Milan in greatly enlarged formation. Also this time “Mussolini is

45. The seven member of Novecento, in 1923, were: Anselmo Bucci, Leonardo Dudreville, Achille Funi, Gian Emilio Malerba, Pietro Marussig, Ubaldo Oppi e Mario Sironi.

46. The seven member of Gruppo 7 in 1926, were: Carlo Enrico Rava, Luigi Figini, Guido Frette, Sebastiano Larco, Gino Pollini, Giuseppe Terragni, Ubaldo Castagnoli.

present. It is not only the first official release of the new training. It marks the beginning of the great national organization under the aegis of the fascist state in Italy and abroad. And the loss of centrality of Margherita [Sarfatti] who, for the moment, was the president and curator of the exhibition. But then, when the group meets, it is no longer in her salon. And not only because they are too many. “The original creature of Sarfatti – the seven painters – has dissolved and has risen as a national movement, apparently with the regime’s benediction”. When the following year, 1927, our Group 7 guests were invited by Sarfatti to participate in the Third Biennial of Decorative Arts in Monza – organized around the theme *Il Novecento e il Neoclassicismo nella decorazione e nell’arredamento. La semplificazione formale* (The Twentieth Century and Neoclassicism in decoration and furnishing. The formal simplification) – accept the title and theme and participate, in a room reserved for them, with the famous models and drawings among which we all remember those, very touching,⁴⁷ of the Gas factory in Terragni. But what seems to have interested our seven architects, beyond the qualified participation in an event of great resonance, is certainly not the *adherence* to the language of Novecento, by now, in 1926, not easily defined, but the *adoption* of its model of action: from an initial group of a few avant-garde, who in a first phase publicly commit themselves to clearly define their positions with regard to Italian current affairs and their relations with the new world and with history, action passes, in its second phase, to the attempt to build a national organization, calling for a much wider audience of “peers” to participate. So I do not think it is a coincidence that Group 7, after the four founding essays on the Italian Review of 1926 and the participation in 1927, in a separate room, at the Biennial of Monza, in 1928 became promoter, through the initiative of Adalberto Libera, newly joined group, of the First Italian Exhibition of Rational Architecture, opened selectively – but not too much – to

47. Touching: when in 1963, recently graduated, on an architectural pilgrimage to London, I was admitted by James Stirling into his private office on a side street off Oxford Street – whose name I can not recall – he spoke to me of Terragni immediately, showing me the drawings and the model of his famous project for the University of Leicester: for me, having I already visited Leicester a few days prior, the very fact of seeing that project realized, I ventured my impression that it was poetic, so distant then from his first “brutal” works. Of course - he answered - in it you see too obvious references to the port architecture of Southampton, the homage to the landscape of my youth. But if there is a bit of true poetry in this project of mine, it comes mainly from Terragni. In the meantime he showed me one of the famous black and white photos of the Gas workshop. “Touching” he said in English, absorbed over those scant images, “touching, really”.

“peer” architects. Differing by only a handful of years – two or three – the activity of Group 7 seems to slavishly follow the Italian Novecento model. And one of the main purposes of the model is clear, at least in the approach to the Exposition by Libera, the only Roman hybrid: with the inevitable loss of clarity of the principles it obtained a participation and a “political” dimension that certainly moved the powers that be, arousing their interest and – hopefully – their favor. For the Milanese by birth or adoption, as were both the initiators of Sarfatti’s Novecento and those of Group 7, this also meant placing consciously in their professional horizon the transition from private to public commissions. Thus, in the debate in Novecento Italiano art scene moved in favor of mural painting – public par excellence – as opposed to “easel painting”, par excellence addressed to gallery owners and to a cultured private audience, in the architectural field it was echoed – and what an echo! – the debate on architecture State Art that will see in the front line all the protagonists of Rationalism of the first hour – Group 7 – and the second – Miart but not only. The path that led Sironi from the drawings and canvases exhibited to the Pesaro gallery to the monumental frescoes of Sapienza and the Palazzo di Giustizia of Milan was emblematically traced; Terragni from the Novocomum to the Casa del Fascio; Libera from the buildings of Ostia Lido to the Palazzo dei Congressi in EUR.

(to be continued)

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