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The Environmental Humanities at Ca' Foscari: Old and New

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The Environmental Humanities at Ca' Foscari University of Venice are both very young and very old. Institutionally, we could pinpoint one or two birthdays, which will be detailed below. More crucially, these latest developments built on very solid foundations. Ca' Foscari was a pioneer in environmental sciences in the 1990s; scholars of geography, archaeology, and economics had long engaged with ecological issues; and ecocriticism had been dealt with mostly through postcolonial studies since the days when Australia, Canada, and Africa had been main areas of investigation for literary scholars. The denomination 'Environmental Humanities' may not have been circulating widely, but surely at Ca' Foscari and in the larger Venetian intellectual ecosystem there were many environmental humanists plodding away.

Lagoonscapes is a new, felicitous chapter of a more recent history, which may be said to start symbolically on a specific day. On 17th May 2017 Amitav Ghosh officially inaugurated the activities of the Center for the Humanities and Social Change at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. Born from the partnership of an enlightened entrepreneur Erck Rickmers, and a strong internationally-minded academic leadership, Rector Michele Bugliesi, the Center was created to explore and deploy all the resources of the humanities to face the most pressing challenges of a world in crisis. The keynote lecture "The

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Humanities and Climate Change"[1] echoed Ghosh's seminal book *The Great Derangement* that pithily asserted that "[t]he climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (Ghosh 2016, 9) and also examined the role of Venice, a city that would feature prominently in his next novel *Gun Island* (2019). The Center went on experimenting the multiple directions of the humanities can take to face the crisis, and through a call open to all Ca' Foscari scholars funded twelve research projects that in turn have produced important academic publications as well as a number of public engagement programmes. Afrophobia, the analysis of fake news, the future of the labour market, the representation of blackness in literature, Medieval economic discourse, the ethnography of Bangladeshi migrants, plantoids in India – these are just a few of the topics explored. When the need was felt to narrow down our focus and maximise our resources we first opted for 'cultural pluralism' as a general focus but the seeds planted by Ghosh were particularly deep. Many other guests who came after him also investigated the multiple ramifications of the environmental crisis. Laurie Anderson, who explored the Venice lagoon under our guidance, came to discuss her poignant memoir *All the Things I Lost in the Flood*, narrating the devastating physical and psychological impact of an extreme weather event that destroyed much of her archive. Salvatore Settis came to honour the Iraqi painter Al Kanon, whose religious paintings had been defaced by Isis members and restored by Ca' Foscari students, as a part of a project of reporter Emanuele Confortin. Edmund de Waal came to discuss the fascinating cultural history of porcelain, calling attention to the materiality of things. All along, in a stimulating and dialectical discussion with our founder the pressing question was: how can we make an impact on society? How can the theory turn into practice? How can we communicate to broader audiences while maintaining the indispensable sophistication of academic research?

The idea developed in 2018 to invest in innovative training and in the launch of a degree in Environmental Humanities. As explained above, the ground was indeed very fertile. The mapping of competencies and interests revealed that the Environmental Humanities already existed at Ca' Foscari and one had only to connect the dots. In an unprecedented interdisciplinary effort, over thirty colleagues from seven departments (out of eight!) trespassed their conventional boundaries to become part of a new programme combining natural sciences, social sciences, and the humanities. The Environmental Humanities are by definition a very malleable area of teaching and research, and it has been thrilling to see that we could actually have chemists and philosophers, anthropologists and Indologists,

1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9EZRHuFEdmg.

linguists and sociologists coming under the same roof and out of their comfort zone.

And, as an unwelcome wake-up call, we were forcefully reminded that no other place was more qualified to be a centre of critical thinking on the environmental crisis. In November 2019 Venice suffered the worst flooding in half a century – the aptly nicknamed *acqua granda* that showed to the world that the city on the lagoon was a hotspot and outpost of the crisis. Since the Renaissance, Venice has been represented as a paradoxical city and this aspect acquired a new dimension. We are fragile and vulnerable and yet equipped with a century-old tradition of stewarding and protecting the ecosystem; we are a small community and yet an international centre of art and culture. As Serenella Iovino puts it,

> [t]o create a city suspended on a lagoon [...] is an exercise in hybridity, not only because it mixes water and land into a new elemental combination, but above all because it is an act of hubris, a violation of ontological pacts. Certainly, hubris may have a creative function, and Venice stays as the luminous splendor of this assumption. (2016, 49)

Unfortunately, the international coverage of the flooding suggested once again that the media was perversely more interested in Venice as a place of problems rather than as a place of solutions (for itself and for other coastal cities). The world loves Venice; it wants to protect Venice; it raises funds for Venice – all these actions and rhetoric paradoxically reiterate the trope of the city as a relic from the past that needs to be preserved rather than as a living organism that provides the ideal context to bring an international community of scholars and students to observe, examine, and fight sea-level rise and its social and cultural effects. The pandemic aggravated the phenomenon: an empty Venice (a dream scenario coveted by many of its residual residents and now turned into a nightmare) mesmerised global television channels, inadvertently rehearsing old literary tropes of Venice as a place of decadence and dying. Is it yet another paradox that while Venice is historically at one of its social nadirs that it is also at its cultural and artistic zenith? It is more than that. Students and residents who can no longer afford to live in a city dominated by overtourism are an essential component for the existence and functioning of its wonderful cultural institutions that have opened in recent years. Yes, they depend on tourism and tourism is an indispensable ingredient of the economy, but if it remains the only game in town it will end up destroying its own assets and premises. And maybe the promoters of such extractivist economy are the same ones who have understood that it is better to milk every last drop from a leaner and leaner cow that is going to drown anyway in a matter of years? The

corporations that doggedly turn palaces and monasteries in multistarred hotels maybe have calculated that they can squeeze enough out of the last days of Venice/Pompei just before they decamp ahead of the impending disaster. But environmental humanists know that apocalyptic scenarios, realistic as they can be, can also become a good excuse to grin, bear it and do nothing.

> If Venice dies – Settis has powerfully argued – it won't be the only thing that dies: the very idea of the city – as an open space where diversity and social life can unfold, as the supreme creation of our civilization, as a commitment to and promise of democracy – will also die with it. (2016, 179)

An alternative narrative and course of action is to fully embrace the potential of Venice as an international laboratory on the environmental crisis, a "thinking machine", using Settis's felicitous definition. Tradition is on our side, if we consider the century-long engagement of the Republic with its delicate ecosystem, with the whole gamut of interventions, from drastic forms of geoengineering (the diversion of rivers) to legal measures against those who tamper with water sources. And more recently the virtuous networks of universities, research centres, and cultural/art institutions indicates a vigorous and competent engagement with ecological issues, and sea-level rise in particular. So here is the key combination: a uniquely fragile place where we literally know what it feels like to live your life ankle-deep (and more and more frequently knee-deep) in water; and a uniquely rich place with more museums per capita than any other main city in the world.

In the fall of 2021, as this first issue sees the light, the International Center for the Humanities and Social Change has run its course and fully embraced its initial direction and new identity. With the transformation of its funding institution into the The New Institute, based in Hamburg, it has become the TNI Center for Environmental Humanities at Ca' Foscari, under the direction of Francesca Tarocco. The new focus makes explicit a trajectory and acknowledges a vocation. With a dedicated research centre, a growing master degree, multiple collaborations with scientific and cultural institutions dedicated to the environment, and many excellent scholars, *Lagoonscapes* adds another major contribution to the role of Venice as an international hub of Environmental Humanities. In and from Venice, but not exclusively about Venice; capitalising on the numerous themes that the city can offer to those who anxiously reflect on the predicament and the future of coastal cities, but also treasuring the tradition of the city as a crossroads of cultures and peoples, a unique vantage point on the uncertain prospects of our planet.

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