

Giuseppina Ciuffreda, a Concrete Utopian*

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Giuseppina Ciuffreda passed away on July 7, 2015, having lived through a long illness with great courage and much discretion—with “levity.” Giuseppina was a writer, “teacher,” and journalist for *il manifesto*. That is the “communist” daily founded in 1971 by a group of journalists and intellectuals (among whom Rossana Rossanda, Luigi Pintor, Valentino Parlato, and Luciana Castellina) expelled from the Communist Party of Italy for dissenting on the role of the USSR, which they surmised to be no longer positive (no longer propulsive, as was later redefined) in the historical period opened by the end of the 1960s

At the start of the new century, in the midst of a new and tough situation for *il manifesto* Giuseppina became an essential reference point for *Capitalismo Natura Socialismo*, the Italian offshoot of the journal founded by James O’Connor in 1988. Giuseppina’s interest in *CNS-Italy* depended in part on her assessment of O’Connor’s work, the theoretician of “the second contradiction”—second because it emerged after the first, but not for this reason any less important. She was drawn to his approach as the only kind of Marxism that put labour and nature on the same theoretical plane, as she stated herself in the text cited below. She was also interested in *CNS-Italy* as a result of the journal’s position, following the Seattle protests, in favour of promoting environmental, feminist, urban, and workers’ movements, understood as a new subject capable of renewing the left and expressing a new perspective for the future. I would also add that perhaps such a subject has marked this century like the factory and the working class marked the previous century.

Giuseppina was a militant intellectual who was erudite and refined, filled with curiosity and a sense of irony, positive and inclusive, radical but not extremist, capable of a strategic vision and thereby political engagement in the highest sense of the term. Intellectually, she went beyond all schemes and sides, without the preconceptions that infest politics. She was a bridge builder, a protagonist and precursor to the transition from an old, lingering anthropocentric world towards a biocentric future that cannot be realised until it is first imagined, described, and therefore recognised and accepted. She was a brave woman who put herself at risk “on one’s own” both in life and work. Her politics were heartfelt and intelligent. She saw far and could interpret and analyse social change from their first stirrings, making them intelligible so as to be able delineate future scenarios.

She brought up issues in Italian debates that are still ignored or underestimated, like environmental justice, the Global North’s ecological indebtedness, global movements against the ransacking of nature and for Amazonia and Indigenous Peoples. She quickly grasped that the crisis of the Western left is a crisis in real democracy and that the solution to this can only come from common folks, who resist the decisions made by political bureaucracies and intellectuals and by so doing build alternatives. Thus Giuseppina described the roots of her thought:

Despite different visions and political opposition, there is a constant shared among the big parties and the workers movement, the Catholic-liberal left, the refounders, high-tech innovators, commons theorists, and all those liberal and classical economists, Chicago Boys and the Churches: **the removal of nature** [bold added]. It is a modern deceit shared by left and right, both anchored to the productivist capital-labour binomial. Victorians and revolutionaries were partly justified by living in an epoch of optimism that had faith in Progress and in the Coming Rising Sun, when the devastating effects of predatory capitalism, the dramatic distortions of real-existing socialism, and the planetary negative effects of industrialism were not

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yet visible. Environmental conservation was just beginning and information was the privilege of the elites. In light of the global explosion of environmental problems something has moved, but ecology still finds little space in party programmes: the political left was formed during the industrial revolution and has difficulty comprehending the countryside and nature even as it embraces the third way and forsakes the factory ... Since the Frankfurt School redefined nature as subject relative to humans, the only Marxist who has renewed himself is James O'Connor, with his “second contradiction”: beyond labour, there is nature. ... The left, as the majority of political formations, remains illiterate in ecology, does not see the gravity of the state of the planet, and regards environmentalism as an issue among many or as inimical to social policies. They do not understand that it is the primary action to making a more just world. (Ciuffreda 2010)

Her vast knowledge of literature in almost all fields, including science fiction, shows her free spirit and uniqueness in the context of Italian journalism. She stood out as well in the *il manifesto* collective, who then underestimated, or, actually, ignored, the environmental question, just as all the historical left, with very few exceptions. She gave voice to the excluded and to communities in struggle against the consequences of a model of society that is not only unjust, but also unsustainable ecologically as well as socially. She wrote a lot, especially in *Il Manifesto*, documenting her work not only in the extant literature, but also by going to see the investigated situation herself. She thereby avoided the prevalent provincialism and conformism characterising much Italian journalism to this day, which fails to play its role as fourth estate, due to both ignorance and opportunism.

Giuseppina's interpretive lens is one of nature in all its aspects—physical, cultural, social, spiritual—and of alternative movements and social subjects. Her thought became clearly defined with time, as reality changed. It is because of this that her weekly column, ‘Ambiente viziato’ [Spoiled Environment], the last one she contributed to *il manifesto* between April 2011 and January 2013, represents an effective synthesis of her thought. Nature is alive, Giuseppina underscored together with few other Italian and foreign scholars, going against the current of still popular notions of nature as object for humans to do as they see fit.

Nature is alive even when heavily impacted by people. It has its own, autonomous life “project” because it uses endogenous resources, unlike humans, who depend on exogenous resources outside their control. Nature is therefore ruled by laws that humanity can stretch, but only within certain limits, beyond which there are negative, often irreversible repercussions. For all these reasons the ecological point of view can determine radical changes much more than traditional revolutions. An ecologically oriented culture in fact changes its ways of producing and consuming, its lifestyles, and its economy and politics.

To understand Giuseppina's life choices better, her many ideas, and the recommendations she has left us, it is worth retracing briefly the paths of her work and reflection. With a Philosophy degree from the University of Rome during the “flower children” years, she came to journalism and politics by way of collective feminist militancy, which, from the end of the 1960s to the mid-1970s, tried to “attack a history characterised by a high density of meaning, that of communism and the PCI, a most tough yet fragile kernel” (Campagnano 2015). Among the positive achievements of that period, in which Giuseppina was a protagonist, there are two worthy of special note: “the practice of starting from the self, which remains the ABCs of that kind of feminism and which has challenged and surpassed the emancipationistic approach of the historical left, founded on putting women and men on equal footing”; and “the formation of a large group of feminists who, like Giuseppina, have spread through parties and trade unions, schools and neighbourhoods and offices and factories like wildfire, as both feminists and hard-headed communists” (*ibid.*).

Giuseppina started in *il manifesto* in the foreign news section, through which she followed the disintegration of Warsaw Pact countries during the 1980s, from the Poland of Solidarność to the Hungarian, Bulgarian, and Romanian revolts. As an *il manifesto* envoy to Bucarest, for example, she was the first foreign reporter involved in political-cultural battles, struggling against the journalism of bad news, unilateral, of mere denouncement and thereby sectarian, incapable of seeing reality in its complexity, as a non-linear process, to be understood rather than judged. She in fact expected positivity from herself and others, and she looked to the future ready to face the risks that every change necessarily involves.

Giuseppina thought that real-existing socialism had run its course and in this she was in line with Il Manifesto. But she went beyond this, claiming that the new eastern European regimes that were clashing with the USSR had to be defended “regardless.” This is because they accelerated the end of the Soviet regime, which had become indefensible as much in terms of politics as of economics and ecology. Politically it was oppressive within the USSR and towards satellite countries, and dangerous towards the rest (from the cold war to the division of the world in spheres of influence). Economically and ecologically, its model did not differ at all from that of the West. The USSR was also founded on the forcing of industrialisation (not to increase consumption but to win the competition with the US), which inevitably brings the systematic destruction of environment and community.

Even in real-existing socialism, then, progress was understood as the enlargement of productivism, without any grasp of the fact that the natural cycling of water and materials cannot be violated without paying the often irreversible consequences. And this was dangerous, so wrote Giuseppina, because the economic model underlying that undervaluation had already revealed itself clearly as the harbinger of destruction of environment, nature, and health everywhere in the world, in the Soviet Union as in the West. An example among many that supports this analysis, brought to light only after the USSR’s demise, is the *programmed* death of the Aral Sea. Its upstream waters were redirected by Soviet government decision and their “five-year plans” for cotton, cereals, and fruit production in the desert of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and then growing rice at the bottom of the dried up lake, full of poisons and cause thereby of illnesses and death for both nature and people.

During the same period when the Soviet system and the USSR itself were imploding, in the rest of the world the dark side of economic development, as understood within capitalism, was coming completely to light; that, all the ecological disasters of industrial production, of consumerism, of monocultural agriculture, and associated pollution. There had been alarms raised earlier already, as shown by the struggles of affected peoples. And the intelligentsia had also given signs of attentiveness to these problems, such as the condemnation of pesticides by the US scientist Rachel Carson in her book, *Silent Spring* (1962), or *The Limits to Growth* (1972) by the Club of Rome, an association of industrialists, scientists, and reporters, among whom the Italian Aurelio Peccei. Even governments began timidly to acknowledge the problem, approving some environmental and health protection laws, such as, in Italy, the 1969 Law 183 on soil protection and, in the European Community, the 1986 Directive on publishing data on high environmental risk industries. Even international institutions had been giving a positive signal, organising the first United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1972.

During this growth phase of environmental awareness—not by accident named “ecology spring”—there developed conditions conducive to calling into question the perverse effects of “structural adjustment” imposed by the IMF on the Global South countries to pay interest on debts accrued with Western European banks since the 1973 oil crisis. The debt had already been repaid, but more loans were needed to pay interest. The strategy the IMF proposed to such countries was having catastrophic effects: cuts in social spending, the end of subsistence farming in favour of export-oriented monocropping, looting of natural resources, and the destruction of natural environments by multinationals, governments, and international financial institutions.

The cry from Latin America, “Pagar es morir, queremos vivir” [Payment is death, we want to live], captures the problem effectively, that is, the damning of Global South countries whether paying or not. Debt repayment with interest to foreign countries meant transforming economy, society, and natural environment according to creditor countries instead of the needs of local people. In this context, Alexander Langer, representative of the Greens in the European Parliament, launched the “North–South Campaign: Biosphere, Debt and People's Survival” during the second half of the 1980s with an appeal that appeared in *il manifesto*. The call was for the right of the Global South’s people to decide themselves their own development paths without the strings attached by the countries of the Global North. Tens of intellectuals and Italian and foreign activists, from the Global North and South, signed onto the call. As Giuseppina pointed out, “public debt, about which there was much talk, hurts but is not fatal. However, forsaking debt towards the biosphere, on which everyday survival and the existence of all humanity depend” (Ciuffreda 2012a).

Giuseppina collaborated intensively with that North-South Campaign from its very beginnings, establishing lasting relationships with the most authoritative exponents of critical thought, intellectuals and activists, both Italian and foreign. Among them were in the first instance Alexander Langer, along with many others like Vandana Shiva and Wolfgang Sachs. A new phase in her work, she participated in initiating communication with activists in other countries, North and South. She recounted all this herself in *il manifesto*, opening as much as possible the newspaper’s pages to Italian and foreign activists and intellectuals coming from cultures and political experiences different from those of the historical Left. Among these were family and traditional farming, marginalised as it was by large agro-food monocultural industry, even though it contributed, then as today, to feeding 80% of the world’s population. There was the critique of development, defined by Wolfgang Sachs, then still unknown in Italy, as “a ruin in the landscape of ideas”, in a book inspired by Ivan Illich (Sachs 1992). Giuseppina had several chapters of the book published in *il manifesto*, in 1986. And, obviously, as another example, she wrote on the above-cited debt to the biosphere, due to the growing imbalance between the extraction of natural resources, necessary to sustain unlimited growth, and the capacity for nature to regenerate itself, a theme central to the North-South Campaign. Giuseppina told of the Campaign this way:

In 1988, Alexander Langer launched a Call to convert the “unjust and unilateral” financial debt of the Third World into a shared ecological debt, linking “the demands of the creditor countries for self-manageable and sustainable development” with “the need of all humanity to safeguard the integrity of the planet.” The rich countries, the most responsible for degradation, have the duty to change life style and repay the environmental debt accrued to the South since colonialism. The Northern countries’ governments, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank are all asked to support the Southern countries, which will tie debt cancellation to social and environmental preservation commitments. The proposal was signed by ecologists, cooperativists, pacifists, trade unionists, and persons of religious persuasion. This concordance of intentions is an absolute novelty, and even the proposal itself (only the WWF had worked on Debt for Nature Swaps) ... The “North–South Campaign: Biosphere, Debt and People's Survival”, formed after the Call, ... is an instrument of elaboration and intervention ... It is not an organisation or one among many acronyms, but a free aggregation of resolute and committed people, a yeast more than a container. The campaign, lasting from 1988 to 1994, was on the external debt of the Third World, the critique of development, the protection of the environment in the South, and the conversion of life styles in the North. The members come from diverse political cultures: environmentalism, international cooperativism with rural and Indigenous worlds, pacifism and non-violence, eco-feminism, religious commitment, syndicalism. ... The direct contact with Latin Americans, Africans, and Asians introduces the perspectives from the Global South and dissolves the widespread prejudice that environmentalism is a rich country phenomenon. It confirms the proximity of the poor’s ecological sensibility to deep ecology, which defends the commons, from which their survival

depends, and a historical ecology of the Indigenous, custodians of knowledges lost in urban culture. The North-South Campaign financed the Italian translation of Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive* (Shiva 1988) and the writing and publication of Wolfgang Sachs' *Archeologia dello sviluppo: Nord e Sud dopo il tracollo dell'Est* [Archaeology of Development: North and south after the Fall of the East]. (Ciuffreda 2012a)¹

Organised by the UN twenty years after the "Human Environment" Stockholm Conference, the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Global Forum on "Environment and Development" marked an important turning point for Giuseppina as well, affecting her trajectory. Preparing for the Global Forum, Giuseppina had in fact contributed by way of the North-South Campaign so that civil society could meet that deadline with a strong innovative impetus. Enzo Nicolodi, at the time president of Alex Langer Stiftung, affirms that the Rio appointment was met with "a consolidated international leadership of groups dealing with issues of nature, of the critique of development, of women's contribution and specificity, of support of Indigenous Peoples and of simple technologies" (Nicolodi 2012).

During the Summit, Giuseppina participated as a protagonist in the working out of the Treaties on the causes of environmental degradation and on ways to overcome or reduce it. These were edited by numerous NGOs present at the Forum and coming from all over the world. Pinuccia Montanari, one of the participants to the Rio Counter, recalls having gone with her one evening to an event on ENI's² land restitution to the indigenous Chavantes. She reports having seen her "proud of inverting history in a land devastated by all sorts of colonialism and exploitation" (Montanari 2015). However, the 1992 Global Forum was saddled by the worsening state of the planet's health, documented by the 1987 Brundtland Report, the debt crisis that exploded after 1973, and the negative consequences of the austerity policies imposed on the countries of the South by the IMF. In 1990 a World Bank study recognised that the number of poor people had reached about a thousand million. World political leaders participated in the Forum and *potentially* important measures were approved, such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the one on biodiversity, as well as Agenda 21, on local and global development goals. But the concrete outcomes of these measures were well below expectations because in the 1990s the context had changed and geopolitical prerogatives prevailed once more. The environment was regarded as important, but only within the framework of economic development, the only thing of actual importance.

In the Rio 1992 official documents there was in fact no trace of the human environment, nor of the critique of development, nor of the debt to the biosphere, nor of the damage resulting from the free market, from foreign debt in the countries of the South, from structural adjustment programmes imposed on them by the IMF, and from the predatory activities of multinationals. It fell then on the Counter-Summit NGOs, wherein Giuseppina "moved about as if she knew all participants personally" (Montanari, 215), to investigate the causes of environmental degradation and point to ways of eliminating it, or reduce it, as stated above. Despite everything, Rio 1992 was a success. But hard times were ahead. In Italy, the right wing won the elections in 1994 and the Berlusconi government was born, lasting nearly twenty years. The PCI imploded, giving way to a long transitional period on the left, divided between a reformist wing obsequious to capitalist market rules and a radical formation, split and fractious, and therefore impotent. In Europe, the disintegration of Yugoslavia gave way to a horrible war in the Balkans involving ethnic cleansing. The war (not the ethnic cleansing) was justified by European governments and especially the one headed by an Italian ex-Communist (Massimo D'Alema). It was the first time in fifty years, from the end of the Second World War. At the international level, the approval of the World Trade Organisation signalled a new international treaty on foreign trade that tied to impose on the entire world the patenting of life and made explicit the

¹ Sachs' work later appeared as a chapter in Sachs' *Planet Dialectics*, by way of Zed Press.

² ENI (Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi, National Hydrocarbons Utility) is an Italian state energy utility established in 1953. Since 1992, it has been turned into a limited joint stock company and has become a multinational with a majority of capital stocks held by the Italian state.

prioritisation of foreign trade, in whose name any laws protecting nature and the environment would be erased. Lastly, after the attack on the Twin Towers in New York in 2001, the preventive and permanent war on terrorism was theorised and introduced, still continuing in ever more aggressive ways by “radical” Islam, to which the countries of the North respond in short-sighted fashion, interested above all in reshaping and partitioning the Middle East in their favour.

In the meantime, everything was being questioned, beginning with social and environmental policies attained during the ecological spring. At the same time, the left was proving incapable, in all its dramatic fashion, of finding an answer to the new challenges, to protect both nature and people. The new *barbarism* stimulated a new phase of mobilisation, such as Zapatismo in Mexico, the no-global movement in Seattle against the WTO, the alternative Forum in Porto Alegre. The historical left was unable to draw any advantage from such mobilisations because it was incapable of understanding their innovative aspects. As Giuseppina remarked “When in the nineties the antagonistic movements arrived on the world scene, the radical left only recognised the aspects familiar to it: the struggle against neoliberalism in the Zapatistas, and not Indigenous reawakening, or, after Seattle, the critique of economic globalisation, and not the long-standing yet until then ignored activism, well planted in nature.” (Ciuffreda 2012b)

The new political and social situation strengthened Giuseppina’s conviction, already present inchoately in her thought from the beginning, that the solution had to be found elsewhere, in the “new” communities the world over, and not only in the West, who had elected for alternative ways of life. These include ecovillages, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist centres and communities, movements like Chipko in India, the Greenbelt in Kenya, the Ogoni Movement in Nigeria, Marcos’ Indigenous Movement in Chiapas, Curitiba in Brazil, and Arcosanti in Arizona (USA), to mention only the most well-known cases. On this, Giuseppina wrote:

The real end of millennium novelty is the millions of people all over the world who change life routines and their perception of reality, breaking completely with the technological and consumeristic model. It is a movement certain of humanity’s location at a turning point, living through changes of epochal proportions: the crisis of western civilisation and the hegemonic model of the world. It is a crisis that is also an opportunity for transformation for millions of people towards a spiritual era. Many groups assert the emergence of the Age of Aquarius while the Age of Pisces declines, an astronomical passage that brings with it a change of Earth-shaping energies. The worse part of the process is currently under our eyes: poverty, violence, war, destruction of nature, the old world closes ranks and defends its power, and the new world is not yet in sight. But life, the deep energy that animates the world or, in political language, the ‘propulsive push’, has abandoned our civilisation and it is beginning to express itself in new forms that individuals and groups live and spread. To put the symbols that contain the qualities of these transmitted energies into social language—so say the astrologers, from the Pisces to the Aquarius constellations—, it is the transition from petrol to sun, from competition to cooperation, from hierarchical control to popular participation, from domination of Nature to perception of being part of it as a living entity, from theology to the direct experience of ‘God’, from religions to a scientific approach to the world beyond, from patriarchy to the feminine principle, from an emphasis on divisions to attention towards that which unifies. The key question is how such dispersed subjectivities can build a new civilisation, involved as they are in the sort of personal labour that little resembles the political activity familiar to us ... the transformation of large masses of people always begins from the intuition of the few, of small groups ... But for a while now millions of people, even in the West, see, feel, think according to cyclical rather than linear understandings. We do not yet know it but the revolution has begun. ... It is a spiritual revolution. It is born out of individuals, those who are willing to lose themselves and have abandoned the beaten paths, going beyond the edge of the known world. They are builders following lines still little understood. They do not think of strategies ‘against’

but 'for'. ... It is the choice of starting with oneself, to know and accept oneself. Others have failed because they did not grasp that the revolution first begins in us. It is not demand for consistency, more often than not hypocritical, between ideology and action. Rather, it is the need to experiment personally the change that we want to realise in society. (Ciuffreda 1997)

Her last public appearance was on the 12th of March 2015. She was receiving the Carla Ravaioli award for environmental journalism from her friends at A Sud (whom she referred to as our daughters who will carry on our work). On that occasion she recalled her life's struggle to write on the environment and on the removal of nature, which she regarded as a very Italian anomaly:

Since I started to write these things from the late 1970s, it has been a battle from every possible perspective and it continues to be even today for those who want to write and inform about these very important issues. Italy, in its specific and particular way, expresses a sort of near aversion to environmental issues. It is an aversion that goes against nature, a difficulty in understanding ecology. Italy is a country where for years there have been two foundational cultures, catholic and communist (of the left). Both of them for various historical reasons have never had great interest in the question of nature and of the environment more broadly. We can cite Saint Francis and now this Pope [Francis], who is preparing an encyclical on the stewardship of creation and who represents a great novelty. On the other hand, the left and especially the communist party expressed a culture founded on labour, the worker, the human being as subject and object of all such things. It is an anthropocentric vision that has made environmental questions invisible, and on these issues there has never been much interest. This is even more so with trade unions, who in the past—but even today—has clashed with those dealing in chemistry, stirring up clashes between unions and citizens, starting with Acna di Cengio³. Even intellectuals share in the responsibility with their belief that culture is superior to nature and their general disinterest in, for example, farming. It is extremely hard to find an intellectual who studied agriculture until Carlo Petrini arrived on the scene and some other pioneers, critics of Italian development policies in the 1950s and 1960s. The conviction prevails that, yesterday as today, ecology is something for a rich country with a full belly. First there must be development and then the rest. This is tied to a very limited understanding of the environment. Agriculture is regarded as if it were not part of the environment, together with animal rights, natural sites, and health. The rebirth of nature in its larger sense is an epochal change, but in Italy there is very little interest in what we might call the ruling class and various opinion-makers. Even worse is the status of the media. The ignorance, the lack of knowledge by journalists is epochal, in this respect. An example is the NIMBY story. After all these years, to hear journalists still speak of defending once own backyard, when in Italy and the world there are millions of organised movements fighting, means that something is happening that those who should be able to see either do not or simply refuse to see. Never mind NIMBY. This blindness has weighed heavily and for a time it has even worked, but then something has been unsettled even here [in Italy], both due to the negative effects of industrialism and to the social activism and struggles in the Third World by communities defending nature to protect their own survival. But now, as we say in Roma, 'zero carbonella' [nothing comes from nothing]. There has been a general erasure of environmental protection laws and a regression of consciousness from every point of view, so that the initial cultural situation persists and it is getting worse at multiple levels. ... There is a great change happening and I have great confidence in the activism and personal involvement I am witnessing here this evening. We are approaching the end of something, but alternatives do exist, not just in small everyday acts but in the way of living. There is a fundamental right that is the right to decide how we wish to live and this is an issue of democracy. I do not think that those now in power—a minority

³ This is a century-old dye factory near Savona (Italy) closed in 1999 and defended by unions against local protesting citizens in spite of its toxic effects on the local community.

undertaking decisions for a majority who decide on almost nothing—represents the majority. I think instead that this majority is effecting a very strong change, which is occurring but is not being told. It is, rather, being demonised, and called NIMBY. But it exists. The activists who have spoken at this conference have recounted how one acts, how one builds, they have described the network that is born not to stop but to do something. And this is happening worldwide, where incredible things are happening. We must step out of our convictions and go to the field to see that everywhere there are millions of groups, experiments and experiences, millions of technologies, of different ideas. How all this will change the world, or is changing the world, remains to be seen. (Ciuffreda 2015)

Over the last years she had become increasingly critical of ideologies of overarching systems and instead very attentive to quotidian practices. It was also for this reason that she was reflecting more deeply about and analysing movements and eco-sustainable alternatives. And she had greatly appreciated Pope Francis' environmental Encyclical, "Laudato SI," published a few months prior to her death.

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