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 Privatization of Italian Cultural Heritage 1996-2010

Part I

“The Real Dimension of the Process Is Not Visible to the Public and the International Community”.
 The Three Problems Inbuilt into the Privatization of Italian Cultural and Architectural Heritage 1996-
 2010

An Exclusive Introductory Talk between Salvatore Settis
 and Roland Benedikter

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First transcript: Judith Hilber, MA
 Final version: Roland Benedikter

Roland Benedikter: After fifteen years of privatization of Italian cultural and architectural heritage between 1996 and 2010, we are still struggling to get on our way towards a basic critical assessment of its achievements, shortfalls, backgrounds, and perspectives. As far as the minimum consensus in the international Social Sciences currently goes in trying to put together a first overall picture, there were - and are - at least three main problems inbuilt in this process. The first two ones are mainly problems of methodology, i. e. of how the process has been handled. Third, there are some crucial aspects surrounding this process, which primarily regard its political and economic contexts that seem to have heavily influenced it.

Salvatore Settis: Exactly.

Benedikter: Due to the extraordinary complexity of the overall picture, let me undertake one precautionary measure here right at the start. Before talking about the privatization of cultural and architectural heritage in Italy between 1996 and 2010 in the strict procedural sense, we have to enlighten the very basic historical and legal terms at the core of the current state of affairs which shape the regulations and practices in effect. This is particularly important for an Anglo-American audience which may otherwise struggle to understand the full implications inbuilt in the process, and why it can be regarded as problematic in the specific context in which it is taking place.

Settis: I agree. Here we already touch things at their core. Departing from the terminological dimension, the methodological and contextual dimensions become accessible more easily. So let us start with the one basic term that constitutes the center of the whole issue.

Benedikter: Which is?

Settis: The main traditional lead concept of cultural and architectural heritage in Italy is *demanio*, or “public good”. The long history of the concept of *demanio* in the Italian conservatory tradition reaches back at least 2000 years, with more or less stable connotations and enduring meanings and normative implications. It is totally different from what Anglo-American readers are used to identifying with the term “public property”. As a consequence, the whole idea of “heritage alienation” or “privatization of

cultural heritage” in Italy is different from what you would usually identify it with in the Anglo-American world.

Benedikter: In which sense?

Settis: Just to make a long story short, the idea of *demanio* goes back to the Roman Empire. Since then, in whatever period of Italian history up to our days, the idea of *demanio* has always been tied to the core idea of public responsibility through public administration. This was the case already long before the Italian unification in 1861, i.e. way before the birth of a national Italian state in the modern sense. It was true for the city states - i.e. the *comuni* - of the Middle Ages in Tuscany, for the kingdom of Naples in Southern Italy and for the state of the Pope until 1870 in Rome. In all the differing political and social environments throughout Italian history, there has always been the idea of *demanio*, e.g. the idea of a “public good” that constitutes the very core of what community and society as such are.

Benedikter: “Public good” thus means more than “public property”, namely sort of a symbolic and material embodiment of the communitarian principle as such.

Settis: Exactly. The understanding and self-interpretation of community and society in Italy has always been quintessentially linked to the very idea of common good, managed by some kind of public administration or even state. The idea is that the public good has to be protected by a public authority not primarily because it is something aesthetical or of artistic quality in the strict sense, but much more because it is a carrier of civil values, and a guarantor of social, of associated life. It is the common bond that ties together the different social experiences of different social classes like the rich and the educated, and the rather humble parts of the populations, like the farmers for example.

Benedikter: This attitude obviously has nothing to do with socialism (it is far older than any such concept), but rather with a lasting historical and social awareness of the defining role of collective ownership in shaping collective identity in Europe. It is not perceived as being “against” private property, but as a truly complementary dimension of equal importance, and this complementarity has always been and still is decisive to the mindset of European societies. Seen from an Anglo-American viewpoint, it might be just a remnant of traditional (and maybe outdated) concepts of community. But in continental Europe it is still very strongly felt as the indispensable second pillar of how society as a whole is made up and functions. In contrast, in the United States for example public property has never played such a crucial role in defining society – on the contrary. In the Anglo-American tradition, it is much more private than public property that defines nation, state and society, like it is expressed in the words: “My home is my castle” (UK) and “Privacy creates democracy” (USA). There is no such fiercely protected balance between “private” and “public” like in Europe – certainly with all pros and cons connected.

Settis: Correct. So the concept of *demanio* in the strict Italian and European sense does not exist in the USA (and most of the Anglo-Saxon world), although there is of course the concept of public property. That’s one point which should be underscored, because it is so crucial, so critical to understand the difference between the continental tradition of public property and what is true in other areas such as the UK and even more so in the United States.

Benedikter: Right.

Settis: The second point to underscore here to understand the specifics of the Italian privatization process is that within the *demanio*, i.e. public good, not everything belongs to what is more precisely called *demanio culturale*. *Demanio culturale* is a sub-concept of *demanio*; and as such it is part of it, but not identical with it. So within the public property of the Italian national state, which in relation to the population and to the total of property is one of the largest in Europe and probably in the world, there are many, many objects - comprising buildings, military areas, but also large plots of land,

mountains, islands and beaches, which terminologically speaking are indeed part of the *demanio*, but not of the *demanio culturale*. For instance, when somebody dies with no heirs and with no testament, his or her property might be incorporated by the state. It could be a flat, an apartment in a condominium built ten years ago, which has clearly no cultural value and which clearly doesn't belong to the dimension of cultural property. In this case it becomes part of public property, but certainly not of the *demanio culturale*.

Benedikter: I think it is very important to make this distinction clear, because the enormous quantity of public property, of single items currently belonging to the *demanio* of Italy derives precisely from the fact that under the umbrella of the term "public property" there are very different things that are summarized under it, but that are not necessarily and not in any case part of the concept of "public good". All of them certainly belong to the state and are thus public property, but most of them have no defining value for the community, its historical collective memory and its socio-cultural "founding myth".

Settis: Now it becomes obvious that when we talk about "privatization", we have to make some distinctions. It's very different conceptually if we talk about the privatization of let's say a school built in 1965 which is no longer in a good state or a series of small "postmodern" mainstream apartments of the 1980s on the one hand, or if we talk on the other hand about privatizing the seat of the president of the Italian Republic, the *Palazzo del Quirinale*, or important monuments like the *Colosseum* or the *Pantheon*, which clearly belong to the *demanio culturale*. What I want to point out is that there is a strong terminological difference between what is called "privatization" depending on the differentiation of *demanio* in *demanio generale* and *demanio culturale*. And thus there must also be a strong principal difference in enacting the respective processes. The distinction between *demanio generale* and *demanio culturale* should be made very clear right from the start; otherwise it looks like everything would belong to *demanio*. And I think one real failure, one of the reasons for the failure of the attempts of selling or privatizing a portion of public property or real estate belonging to the *demanio* is precisely because this distinction has never been made as clear as it should have by the Italian governments from 1996 until today. The lack of a sufficient distinction between *demanio generale* and *demanio culturale* is the origin and the cause of most of the confusion inherent in the process of privatization so far. It is at the very roots of its enormous ambivalences and problems.

Benedikter: Building upon these seminal terminological differentiations, let us proceed now to the three problems inbuilt in the Italian privatization process I mentioned initially. I propose we go point by point and start with the *first* of the two methodological problems. One outstanding, characteristic feature of the Italian privatization process is that the Italian cultural and architectural heritage is being sold not by one, but simultaneously by two ministries: the Ministry for Economy which is leading the process, and the Ministry for Cultural Heritage which has an auxiliary role to the extent that it can in theory deny specific sellings by pointing out their historical and cultural value. But rather to improve the efficiency, transparency and precision of the process, this administrative double-dimensionality seems on the contrary to have increased uncertainty, opacity and unreliability. It seems to have also created a noticeable information gap, since a lot of information is obviously continuously lost in the space between the two authorities, as well as in inner administrative and procedural conflicts between different departments about the already administratively and politically highly disputed and fragmented procedure of "heritage alienation".

Settis: Right.

Benedikter: The *second* crucial, equally complex methodological problem institutionally and structurally inbuilt in the current practice of privatization is the partition of the selling process between the state and its 20 regions and other local bodies, like provinces, cities and municipalities. Some assets are sold by the two state ministries, some others autonomously by the regional and local authorities, without any explicit coordinated methodology recognizable and without a clearly

identifiable oversight institution that collects, integrates and distributes all data and information of all the actors involved. That risks to cloud the specifics of the process by making it very difficult, if not nearly impossible to provide coordinated and up-to-date overall statistics. It contributes to the dramatic shortage of statistical material everybody who wants to research the issue as a whole in an empirical manner immediately notices.

Settis: This is indeed objectively the case. I guess not even the most expert Italian analysts and practitioners themselves, including the national and regional administrators, have sufficient data and statistics at hand. The sad truth, as I can personally confirm after more than 2 years of service as President of the „Higher Council for Cultural Heritage“ of the Italian Ministry for Cultural Activities and Cultural Heritage, is that as at today, due to the over-complicated ways in which the selling process is handled, there is no satisfying, not even approximately sufficient information available – for nobody, not even for the experts who carry out the process.

Benedikter: While this fact seems to be rather unusual, it has certainly been brought to the attention of the governmental authorities many times during the past 15 years. As it seems, not much has been done. Since my last publication on the topic in 2004, I myself have repeatedly and officially approached both ministries and several regional authorities with the request of data, but none of them could give me any satisfying statistics. What was even more surprising is that there was no specific information about the privatization of cultural and architectural heritage available at all, not even by the *Ministero dei beni culturali*. All they could provide me in the past 7 years was some general information about the intentions and goals of the privatization process envisaged for the timeframe 2000-2010, but without any distinction, as you rightly mentioned, between the privatization of *demanio generale* and *demanio culturale*. Thus none of the available data, and I repeat: there are basically no overall data, but only pieces of selected and scattered documentation in different archives, can tell which of the sold or still to sell properties are of cultural and architectural value, and which are not.

Settis: Yes, and exactly this is the main problem.

Benedikter: But again: Given that everybody can see this problem immediately and that it has been pointed out so many times during the past 15 years, why is there still such a dramatic lack of statistical and empirical material? Why do we not find any clear information, thus being hindered to sketch any empirically based overall picture of the privatization process? Why are the ministries in Italy hesitating to share any more meaningful information? Is this incompetence, or is there a method in it? Is it on purpose?

Settis: You ask a question which everyone asks, and must ask, and which we indeed have asked for many years. A proper answer to this question can't come from me, but must come from the respective public offices - starting with the two ministries, the Ministry of Economy on which the privatization of public property depends, and the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, or *beni culturali*, which has a kind of advisory and occasional veto status in the process.

Benedikter: Right.

Settis: This is a very sensitive issue which is being debated quite hotly in Italy today, as you know. My impression is that the approach not just of the current minister of economy Giulio Tremonti, but of all the Italian ministers of economy throughout the history of the last 15 years has been lacking clarity on what is the essential distinction between *demanio generale* and *demanio culturale*. The result is that whenever a sale of some *demanio generale* is announced by the authorities, everybody is afraid, or a lot of people are afraid that something of it could belong to the *demanio culturale*. Therefore, there are always statements and polemical declarations or interviews against it on the newspapers, which sadly in most cases are very general and do not address the concrete contextual circumstances, thus making them weak and imprecise, if not unfounded right from the start.

Benedikter: Which means?

Settis: My impression is that the lack of clear statistics and of clear information, the idea of distributing all the information in very small pieces that is totally impossible to put together for everybody, including a serious researcher as you are, for whose efforts we should be much grateful, I came to think that this is on purpose. I came to think that this is precisely to avoid the level of clarity and transparency that would be required. In order to make it clear to the general public both in Italy and outside Italy to what extent public property is being put on sale regarding the *demanio culturale*, we would need basic statistical information. This has not been provided. That is a fact, and it seems to be clear who is to blame on it in the long run. It is 15 years now that we have been kept blind!

Benedikter: Let us eventually come to the *third* - and final - problem cluster inbuilt in the privatization process of Italian cultural and architectural heritage: the political and economic contexts that seem to have been strongly influencing it since it started. In many cases, the privatization process seems to have been used as a playground for political power games extraneous to the issue.

Settis: Indeed, this is a third important dimension to consider. It is strongly intertwined with the methodological problems though, since to a large extent it factually co-created them. The political influence, including political power games of all sorts between the left and the right, but also within most of the parties present in the Italian parliament, started right together with the implementation of the laws that triggered the privatization process. So we have to start with a short remembrance of what the political process in Italy has produced as privatization laws since the mid 1990s. You gave a brilliant overview on it in your excellent article on the issue in the "International Journal of Heritage Studies" of 2004.

Benedikter: It all started with the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and with the collapse of the East-West-dichotomy in 1991. After years of fierce debate over privatization issues influenced by the then prevailing "neoliberal" mindset, in 2002 the (in)famous law on the *Patrimonio dello stato SPA* was issued by the Italian parliament. It created a semi-private enterprise of this name, to which all public properties that were decided to be privatized should be transferred to by the state, in order to be sold then according to the rules of the international real estate markets.

Settis: Yes, and this was in its core an attempt to induce the rules of international private capitalism into the public sector. It was clear though right from the start that this law would be very difficult to implement, because there were too many polemical statements against it, including a very influential one from the then *Presidente della Repubblica* Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, and by many other opinion leaders to whom, in 2002, my book "Italia S.P.A." (i.e., *Stock Company Italy*) gave a collective voice. In view of these difficulties, one of the strategies applied to make the sale of public property nevertheless possible on a broad scale was a diversion strategy. This strategy led to political agreements between national, regional and other local authorities (*comuni*) to transfer large parts of the *demanio dello stato* into *demanio regionale*. The idea behind it was that once public property of disputed cultural or historical value is formally not any longer of national, but of regional ownership, it should have in principle the same status of being inalienable, but it becomes less controllable. It becomes less controllable because now instead of having one owner (the Italian national state), you have 21 authorities to deal with (given that one of the 20 regions of Italy, Trentino-Alto Adige, is actually not one region but consists of two autonomous provinces, and thus it is governed by two different regional governments). Additionally, a lot of property was transferred from the regions to the provinces that make them up, i.e. to even smaller administrative units, and from the provinces to the single cities and municipalities, or *comuni*. This has been made possible because the *demanio* of public goods, according to the existing laws still in effect, can in principle be *demanio dello stato*, *demanio della regione*, *demanio della provincia*, or even *demanio del comune*.

Benedikter: This kind of administrative dispersion seems not really a measure to increase transparency and oversight.

Settis: Not at all – on the contrary. After the transfer, the status of cultural and architectural heritage theoretically remains the same; but it becomes impossible for anybody to follow what the *comune di Verona* is selling or the *comune di Venezia* or the *comune di Palermo* all throughout Italy. Now this fragmentation, this segmentation of public *demanio* makes it even more difficult to understand how much has already been sold in the past, and what will be going on where and to which extent in the future. It makes it virtually impossible to take stock of the process, or to make any coordinated projections.

Benedikter: Right. For the moment being, the last act of this drama has been the introduction of the so-called *federalismo demaniale* (federalization of public property) as a guiding principle for the whole of public property in Italy by the Italian parliament on May 28, 2010 (*decreto legislativo 28 maggio 2010, no. 85*). Proposed by the current fourth government of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and approved by his conservative-right-wing majority in the two chambers of the parliament, according to it a considerably more significant amount of public goods belonging to the Italian *stato* will be transferred to the single regions or other local bodies. Although the current agreement seems to largely exclude properties of explicit cultural value from the selling process, it is foreseen that this is subject to re-negotiation and further change.

Settis: Exactly. And you must consider that the current agreement now includes, for instance, the Dolomites, an ensemble of protected mountains and natural parks in Northern Italy declared part of the world wide natural heritage by UNESCO in June 2009. According to the potential privatization of public property, the Dolomites were pre-emptively put a prize upon by the Italian Ministry of Economy, which was published in February 2011 at the official website of the *Agenzia del demanio della Repubblica Italiana (Official Agency for the Administration of Public Property of the Italian Republic)* at less than one and a half million euros.

Benedikter: That sounds unbelievable. It seems rather surreal to put a price tag on a mountain chain that covers more than 120 square miles, or even on parts of it like the *Monte Cristallo* mountain group officially priced in its “inventory value” (*valore inventariale*) in the publication of the *Agenzia* you mention.

Settis: Indeed, who could believe that large part of the Dolomites could be priced as “inventory”, and at less than one and a half million euros! That doesn’t mean that they are actually for sale, but it means that the administration wants to keep this option open. It is a rather symbolic procedure that aims to point out that basically all public property, including the very land and nature of Italy, is in principle “alienable”.

Benedikter: Yes. Rather than a concrete plan of transaction this seems to be a public signal: an attempt to get the public used to the idea that in principle, Italy has the option of selling everything, including its own soil, in order to even out the national budget if needed.

Settis: Right. Again, the point I’m trying to make is that such public signals or symbolic price tags are accompanied by a more or less systematic strategy of diversion. Any attempt of controlling and statistically evaluating the entire process is made virtually impossible by the dissolution of administrative responsibilities which has been accelerated over the last couple of years. The dissolution of the *demanio dello stato* and its segmentation into a huge number of actually hundreds of *demani culturali*, *demani regionali*, *demani provinciali* and *demani comunali* through the new *federalismo demaniale* makes the entire process even less controllable than it used to be.

Benedikter: In pursuing these policies, is there any significant difference between the (past and present) centre-left and centre-right wing parties (as they call themselves)? It surprisingly seems that this is a policy of opacity that has been put into place by basically all governing political parties between 1996 and 2010, including the left and the right in similar ways. So an observer not familiar with the domestic political background in Italy would wonder how it is possible that such a crucial process like the privatization of “the public good” can be carried out in such a non transparent manner over fifteen years quite similarly by swiftly changing governments. There seems to be only a small difference between the left and the right concerning these privatization policies.

Settis: Right. I think that the difference between the centre-left and the centre-right governments since the 1990s has been more in terms of quantity than in terms of quality. This has different reasons. One of these reasons is positive to my mind, some others are negative. The good reason is that the amount of public property of real estate in public hands in Italy is objectively too large. It counts hundreds of thousands of buildings and objects, and many thousands of unused land areas. At the same time, Italy has a very large public debt; actually one of the largest in the world, not just in relation to the size of the GDP, but also in terms of pro capita. So something had - and has - to be done, because it makes no sense that so much property, including property which has no cultural value, is kept in public hands and sometimes is not utilized at all over many decades thus declining quickly, while Italy has such a large deficit in terms of its national budget.

Benedikter: Right. The stark imbalance between the amount of public property the Italian national state holds and its means to keep it in an acceptable shape is one good reason that lies behind the entire process of privatization of the *demanio*. I think everybody in current Italy would agree with that. So there is a comparatively broad public consensus that the process of privatization is in principle legitimate, and necessary.

Settis: And this basic consensus is shared by both the centre-left and centre-right political parties alike, as it is reasonable in my view. What I'm worried about is that within this reasoning, the distinction between *demanio generale* and *demanio culturale* in a stricter sense has never been made clear by any government. Not even by the centre-left government from 1998 until 2001 under the prime ministers Massimo D'Alema and Giuliano Amato, when the minister of cultural heritage was Giovanna Melandri, who was probably one of the most engaged ministers to protect the national cultural heritage, and to keep it a “public good” in the strict sense of the term. She made an attempt to distinguish the two levels, but in ways that due to the very high level of complexity of the issue in the end resulted to be far from being clear.

Benedikter: In any case, we can summarize that since the deficit of the Italian public budget is so huge, all governments of centre-left and centre-right have been consistent in their will to reduce it in some way, and therefore indistinctively all of them have been willing to sell some public property.

Settis: Right. Nevertheless, a negative side aspect that should be taken into consideration just in brackets here is that Italy has a very large amount of people who don't pay taxes, and they should. I think that within Western Europe, Italy has a record in tax evasion. So it is true that Italy needs more state income in order to reduce the public debt, but I think that we should focus much more on a good fiscal policy in making people pay their taxes, than in selling the public good. Which is something the right definitely doesn't want to do, and the left does very timidly. When there was Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa as minister of economy and finance from May 2006 until May 2008, he did something about it, and the amount of tax evasion was slightly reduced. But immediately afterwards when Berlusconi came back to the government, tax evasion increased again. So I believe there has to be a more general rethinking of public policy not only regarding the size of sellings in the framework of the privatization process, but about the whole philosophy of making the public sphere more functional.

Benedikter: Let's come to a conclusion now, and to an approximate outlook. You have been in charge in many important public positions in the past fifteen years that have directly or indirectly been connected to the process of conservation of Italian cultural and architectural heritage, as well as to its privatization. You have often criticized the practices of the privatization process, and you've published about it critically. What is your personal résumé, your overall judgement about the process over the past 15 years? What went well, and what went wrong? And where are the perspectives?

Settis: I've never been in a directly deciding position. I've been working mainly at the university, which has nothing to do with this process. But I have also been president of the *Consiglio superiore dei beni culturali*, a sort of a supreme council of cultural heritage of the Republic of Italy for two consecutive periods from 2006 to 2009. Unfortunately, this council has no direct decision power. It is only a consulting body which can be consulted by the minister and the state, but then the minister can do whatever he or she wants. So I have never been in a position to really influence the decision-making process. That's the reason why I decided to try to make clear some aspects of what is going on by writing in newspapers which I had almost never done before. But in the last ten years or so I started writing more frequently on a daily basis just to make it clear to the public what is at stake with the privatization process. My personal idea is that I'm in favour of selling parts of the public property whenever it doesn't have any historical or cultural value. That is the case for a large amount of real estate currently in public hands. On the other hand I think that in relation to what is the civic and legal culture of Italy, it would be against the whole tradition from pre-unification Italy to the present to abolish public property of culturally significant land and real estate. The tradition of public ownership should be preserved, with more public money invested in its conservation. I believe this money can come not least from a better commercial use of the public buildings which in fact can be put into practical use. I don't want a general mystification of indistinctively all public property in Italy. But in general, I believe public buildings can be put into use. It can be given to different non-profit institutions, for instance, that actually do need buildings and venues where to carry out their activities. But in order to make any progress here, we need a clear distinction between what is *demanio culturale* and what is public property with no cultural value, i.e. *demanio generale*.

Benedikter: So what is the state of things here? Have there been new, current approaches made in this direction?

Settis: The state of things is that to implement such a basic distinction will not be simple, given the large amount of public property and its scattered ownership on different administrative levels. But in your previous publications on the issue, you made a very intelligent and important remark about the fact that the Ministry for Cultural Heritage has never completed a census of all the buildings in public hands of cultural value. While such a list has been completed in one way or another for the *demanio generale* by the Ministry for Economy, the fact that it has not been compiled in agreement with the Ministry of Cultural Heritage diminishes its value. We need such a national list of all public goods of cultural value, and we need it as soon as possible, because it's a shame that a modern nation like Italy, one of the seven most industrialized nations with the sixth-highest government budget in the world, does not have it at hand yet with all the electronic and computer options and the new communication technologies available.

Benedikter: Right.

Settis: Additionally, we have to consider that Italy still has the relatively largest amount of people of all Europe countries employed in the public sector of cultural heritage in the broad sense, currently about 20,000 people. The so-called *soprintendenze* (public monument protection services) are one of the largest working forces dedicated to cultural and historical heritage in the world.

Benedikter: Without any doubt, even if the total numbers have been slightly decreasing over the past years.

Settis: Now if you take these two aspects together: the still missing complete census of buildings of cultural value, and the unusually large number of public employees in this sector, it is easy to see what has to be done as a concrete next step. The national authorities should make use of a much larger part of the employees working in the broad field of *demanio* in order to achieve a more or less complete inventory, even if it probably may remain utopia to have a complete inventory of really everything. But if you achieve 95%, the census might not be complete, but it would be quite a lot. This inventory should be the *first* thing to be accomplished now; it should be given top strategic priority. The *second* step should be to see then how many of the existing buildings of cultural value are actually used for public purposes, i.e. for what in the Italian legal tradition has been called *bonum comune* or *publica utilitas*, which has been the core purpose of *demanio* from the Roman law up to the present. And the *third* step could be to distinguish those buildings that will be needed by the public sphere also in the future, from those that are in public hands but could be sold, because not needed or of only minor cultural and historical value. So we need first of all a comprehensive list, and then a much more filigree and systematic differentiation within this list.

Benedikter: Another proposal - a fourth step if you like - could be to identify potential reutilizations of existing, non-used buildings of cultural value. There is a huge number of public institutions like schools, universities, libraries, public offices, city administrations, provincial authorities and so forth that are notoriously short of space and are constantly looking for old buildings they could reutilize. Why should they not get culturally important old buildings currently left empty, and thus often gravely neglected?

Settis: Yes. I think the theme of reusing old buildings for new purposes is a very important part of the overall solution pattern. Putting them for sale in order to transform them into privately owned and run hotels or apartments should in any case not be the only solution considered. Again, to make reasoned decisions here, we first of all need a full list of all buildings available, and second a clear distinction between *demanio generale* and *demanio culturale* regarding every single building.

Benedikter: But who could make such a distinction? Would you need a special national commission composed of scientists, specialists or public administrators? Or who else could do such a delicate and far-reaching differentiation on a systematic, professional basis?

Settis: The professional 20,000 employees in the *soprintendenze* who are already there. They have in their large majority been trained as art and architecture historians. They have been employed exactly for purposes of evaluation, research and differentiation like the one needed, but have been totally left out of the process so far. The reason why the *soprintendenze* are not functioning as well as they could in contributing to the differentiation of the privatization process is that they are left out of this process precisely because they have the competencies to say: "This particular building is too precious to be sold". That's why the Ministry of Economy doesn't want to hear their opinion. Second, over the last fifteen years both the centre-left and centre-right governments have stopped hiring new professionals in the sector, so there has been no turnover. The result is that the average age of people working in the *soprintendenze* now in 2011 is over 55, which means some of them are not always up to date with the current state of things and the new technologies available. In order to make use of the *soprintendenze* to accomplish the goals we have sketched above as top priorities, the Italian system of *soprintendenze* has to be revived.

Benedikter: To conclude, what is your personal balance sheet of the process? Where do you see the biggest mistakes that have been made during the past fifteen years, and where are the biggest successes of the privatization process that you would identify?

Settis: The two main mistakes are *first* the lack of a clear distinction between what of the *demanio* belongs to the greater cultural good, and what doesn't. The *second* mistake consists in the fact that

the Italian state does indeed have a body of highly qualified public officers who are paid, not very much, but who are paid in order to give their advice and their opinion about how to handle the cultural and architectural heritage, but are normally not consulted when the Ministry of Economy decides to sell something. I think these are the two biggest mistakes. It is sincerely difficult to see any particularly outstanding successes of the privatization process so far. Besides that, as we said, in some instances in principle it may be legitimate.

Benedikter: Has Italy in your opinion lost some important cultural buildings or cultural heritage due to these mistakes? In other words: Have these mistakes produced concrete consequences as at yet?

Settis: Given the lack of statistical and empirical information, it is very difficult to respond to this question. So far, the real quantitative and qualitative dimension of the privatization process is not visible – neither to the public in Italy, nor to the international community. This can be interpreted in two different ways. If you want to be optimistic, you can say that maybe a lot of properties have been sold, but not truly important ones, given that we are not aware of such sales. On the other hand, if you want to be pessimistic, you can say that a lot of properties may have been sold, but a sort of cloud has been created that shadows the process, so that it has become virtually impossible to understand how much of what exactly has been sold. Certainly in your remarkable article of 2004 you mentioned some concrete cases of “alienation”, and there are certainly many more in the meantime. But I think we are not in the position to issue an empirically founded judgement so far. And that is both a matter of concern and a reason of hope.

Benedikter: Looking at the present situation, which of these two feelings should prevail: concern or hope? Do you see any movements toward improvement on the political side? Or is the privatization process likely to be going, as many fear, in the wrong direction, continuing with an opacity that creates a development which the public basically cannot judge? From my - and other colleagues' - point of view this would be the most dangerous variant of all, because that would mean that there is a process that nobody is really in control of and which is basically going on without overall coordination.

Settis: Unfortunately, my answer is that concern must prevail, because what you are rightly describing is the present reality. It is, realistically speaking, the present outlook. I can see no political improvement. Given the constraints and problems added by the recent financial and economic crisis that goes far beyond Italy, but that hit Italy particularly badly, the temptation of selling more and more and of continuing to cloud the process by making it even less transparent will be continuing to be there. Nevertheless, I do hope that sooner or later - and I certainly hope rather sooner than later - at some point somebody, whether it's the current government or another centre-left government, will recognize that we need improvements in how the process is carried out and handled. I don't care about what government it will be. I just know that we need to improve things, and first of all to make the privatization process more transparent. Today it is certainly still not transparent at all.

Benedikter: Where do you imagine could the future of this process be in ten years from now? It is highly probable that the political and administrative culture of the Berlusconi era, which since his first office as prime minister in 1994 lasted altogether for more than 17 years, may come to an end soon - be it because of new elections, or because Berlusconi is approaching retirement age. What is the future in your view? Will new governments, will new leaders change things? And: Will Italy continue to have a (maybe necessarily) ambivalent stance towards its over-rich and over-abundant cultural and architectural heritage - or was the privatization process of the past 15 years just a temporary passage in its history that will soon be only a distant memory?

Settis: Predicting what is going to happen in the Italian political situation is as you know very difficult, and that's not something that I could engage in. I'd like to say something else. I'd say what worries me most is that even if Berlusconi resigned tomorrow and even if there were elections in a couple of months, even if a centre-left government came in his place, I'm not at all sure whether the privatization

process would become more transparent. Maybe even the contrary would be the case. So what is the most worrying part of this story to me is the fact that no political party in current Italy, neither Berlusconi's parties nor the leftist coalition, have a clear awareness of the true importance of the privatization process, and of how to address it properly. Whatever the political destiny of this country is going to be, I feel what is needed now is, more than ever, a rise in public awareness. That is what I hope for.

Benedikter: As you wrote in a more detailed manner in your last book on *Paesaggio, costituzione e cemento* (2010), you are advocating in favour of forming public opinion through newspapers and independent citizens associations that might end up by influencing the political parties sooner or later.

Settis: Right. The only thing I am truly optimistic about is that there are now in Italy a couple of thousand small civil society associations and some larger associations of citizens detached from the established political parties that advocate in favour of landscape protection, better conservation of public patrimony, better conservation of cultural heritage and so forth. And I think this is already increasing public awareness in this country, which I think is what we badly need.

Benedikter: Let's hope that this talk and the related essay may contribute to such a rise of awareness, and to a positive development.

Settis: That's what I hope too. Thank you very much.

The Authors

Salvatore Settis, Prof. Dott., has been Director of the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles (1994-1999) and of the Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa (1999-2011). He was also a founding member of the European Research Council, and is a Member of the International Committee for the Protection of the „Leaning Tower of Pisa“ and of the Scientific Council of the „Encyclopedia Italiana“, editor-in-chief of the publication series „Mirabilia Italiae“. From 2006 until 2009 he has been President of the „Higher Council for Cultural Heritage“ of the Italian Ministry for Cultural Activities and Cultural Heritage Rome. He currently serves as professor of Art History at the Museo del Prado in Madrid, and chairs the Scientific Council of the Musée du Louvre in Paris. E-mail: settis@sns.it.

Roland Benedikter, Prof. Dott. lett. Dr. phil. Dr. phil. Dr. rer. pol., serves as European Foundation Research Professor of Sociology in residence at the Orfalea Center for Global and International Studies of the University of California at Santa Barbara, and as Research Affiliate / Visiting Scholar 2009-13 at the Europe Center, Stanford University, USA. E-mail: rben@stanford.edu or rbenedikter@orfaleacenter@ucsb.edu.