ABSTRACT

My contribution focuses on an historical project of the early 20th century, which aimed at a revolution in energy supply and a redistribution of water and land and in the greatest possible scale. The „Atlantropa“ Project, first published in 1928 by the German Architect Herman Sörgel (1885-1952), was a project from the golden age of technicism. The founder of Atlantropa wanted to rebuild the Mediterranean region by a system of hydro-electrical interventions. By closing the street of Gibraltar, the waters of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea were to become a closed system, which could be controlled and exploited for clean energy.
With the level of construction technology which had been reached by 1930, it was considered possible to build a huge dam between Morocco and Spain, 300 meters high and 13 km long. Once the connection to the Atlantic Ocean was interrupted, the water level of the Mediterranean would have lowered by evaporation by 100 meters within 60 years. East of a second dam between Sicily and Tunesia, Sörgel proposed to lower even by 200 meters. All coast lines would move, all cities located there would have the chance to be rebuilt in a modern way on the new land emerging nearby. Architects from Germany, Netherlands, and Austria – among them well-known modernists as Peter Behrens, Cornelis van Eesteren, Erich Mendelsohn, Lois Welzenbacher, Hans Poelzig, Fritz Höger, and others less known – declared themselves as collaborators and some of them presented designs for a New Genova, a New Naples and a New Messina. The problem of sites of historical and touristical value was taken in account by an exemplary project for Venice. The Serenissima was foreseen to be preserved in its amphibious character by an artificial water basin around.

More than other regions, the shape of the Italian „stivale“ would have changed dramatically: The Adriatic Sea would disappear, Sicily would grow together with Sardinia and join the Italian Peninsular. Land of the size of France and Belgium would emerge to be desalinated and cultivated by landless farmers. But the major task of Atlantropa was energy. The difference of old and new water levels would have allowed the exploitation of water power in gigantic dimensions. At the big dams and at the mouths of big rivers only, 110,000 Mega Watt could be won at gigantic power plants, to be sent over long distances into a Pan-European energy network, which was an utopia at the period but is reality today. Electricity from the Gibraltar Dam would also help to irrigate and fertilize parts of the Sahara... In then 1930s, similar projects for Central Africa were added, aiming at an irrigation of deserts through a gigantic reservoir at the Congo river.

Herman Sörgel was a pan-european minded pacifist, inspired by the experience of World War I. He wanted the European nations, instead of preparing for a new war, invest their energies into a project which would force them into permanent cooperation for all time. At the end of the 1920s, the project caused a widespread echo all over Europe which balanced between doubt and approval. A special criticism was uttered in Italy, where Sörgel was suspected of bringing damage to Italian ports in favour of Hamburg and Bremen. The Third Reich made an end to Sörgels flight of fancy, as national socialist geopolitics rejected concepts fort he continent without a Nazi-German hegemony. Beyond that, Nazi expansion plans aimed not at South, but at East.

Sörgel's Atlantropa represents a megalomaniac project at the edge of science fiction: in terms of scale, the biggest architectural utopia of all times. It is undoubtedly an utopia of the past. Atlantropa was conceived free from ecological doubt at an age of unlimited and naive confidence in progress of technology and civilisation. The impact on climate, caused by the transfer of water in such scale, was impossible to foresee. The political philosophy of the project was still marked by colonialism, as Africans were only objects without rights on the chessboard of Atlantropa. But when the end of colonialism became obvious in the late 1940s, Sörgel invited Africans as equal partners and made Leopold Senghor, a pioneer of independence, a member of the Atlantropa Institute.

However, Herman Sörgel and his project do not deserve to be banned into the ghetto of mad inventors for all times. His visionary project was the first to feed the Pan-European idea, a dry matter at the period, with popular images of a common and prosperous future. Looking at actual tendencies in European energy policy, we find an interesting correspondence between the energy plans of Atlantropa and those of the Mediterranean Union of the EU, founded in 2007, and of the commercial international project of DESERTEC (June 2009). Building a mega-dam and lowering the Mediterranean Sea is not any more on the agenda, but the production of clean energy in the region in order to feed an EU-wide network and to desalinate water from the sea. With advanced technology, solar energy from the Mediterranean and from North Africa might be able to replace CO2 charged fossil energy all over Europe.

The Mediterranean project of Herman Sörgel was in the focus of a research project at the Hochschule für bildende Künste Hamburg under the guidance of Prof. Hartmunt Frank in the 1990s. The project was financed by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. It's results were published by the author (Wolfgang Voigt: Atlantropa. Weltbauen am Mittelmeer. Ein Architektentraum der Moderne, Hamburg 1998¹ and 2007²). An article, mainly based on my book, was recently published in Italy (Giacinto Cerviere: “La geoarchitettura continentale di Herman Sörgel e le utopie lente di Yona Friedman”, domus February 2007, pp. 74-81).