

Special Part of the course

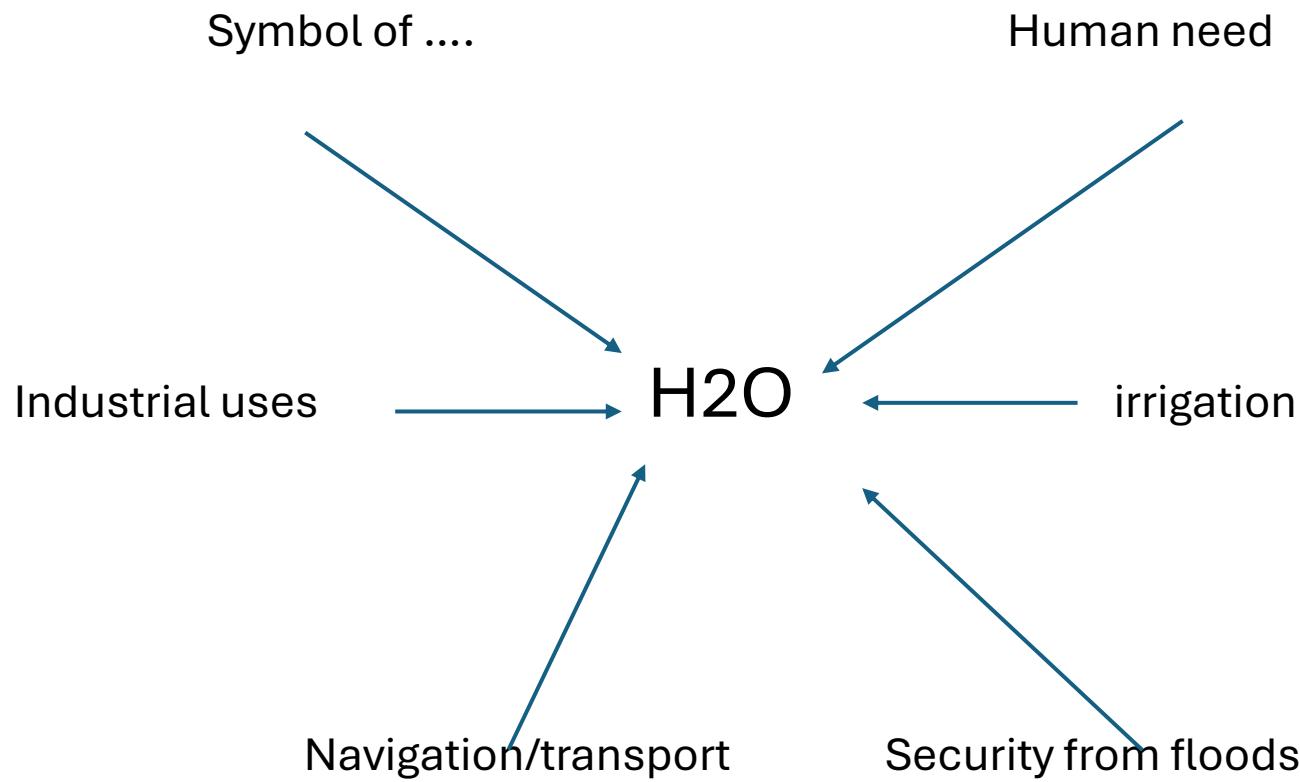
Introduction to water as a social issue

Sociology, Places and Cultures of Sustainability

Giorgio Osti

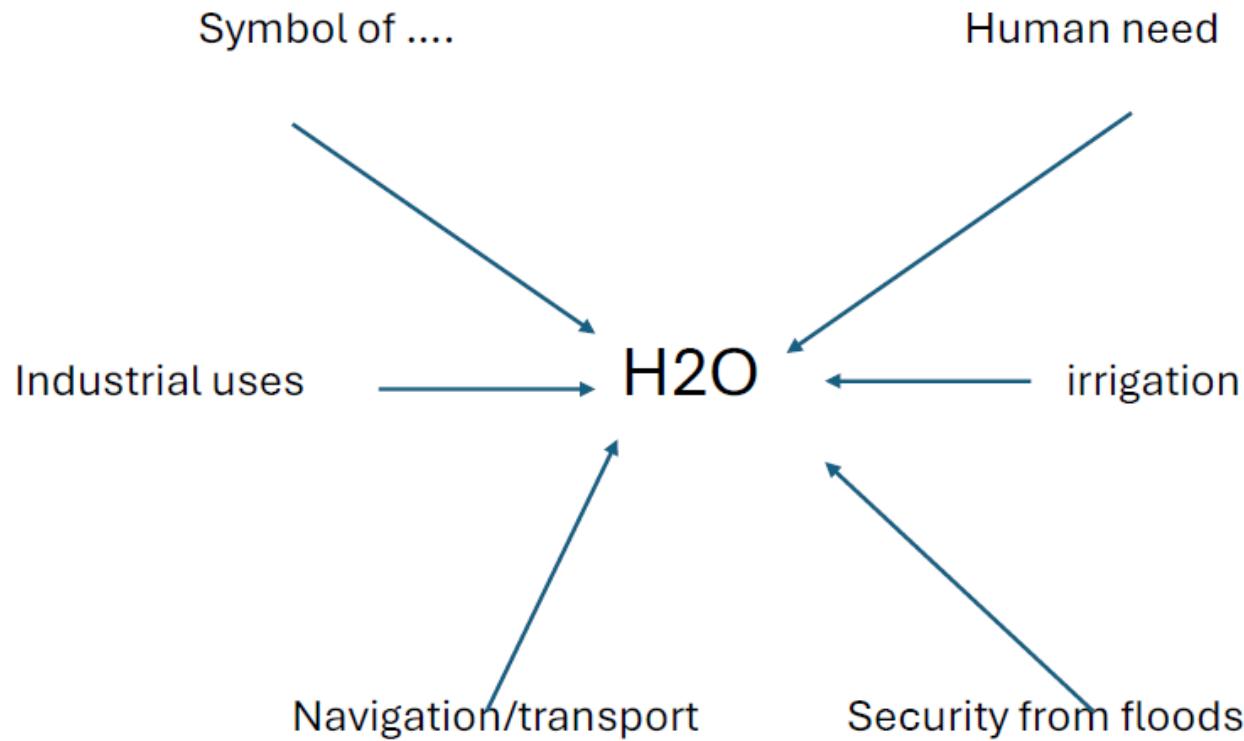
Lesson 5th November 2025

Meanings and functions of water



What is missing.....

Meanings and functions of water



What is missing.....

How to frame the water issue

To use initially the metaframe: levels of analysis (eg water perception (micro), water utility (meso), water political ecology (macro))

To privilege a level, not to exclude the other ones

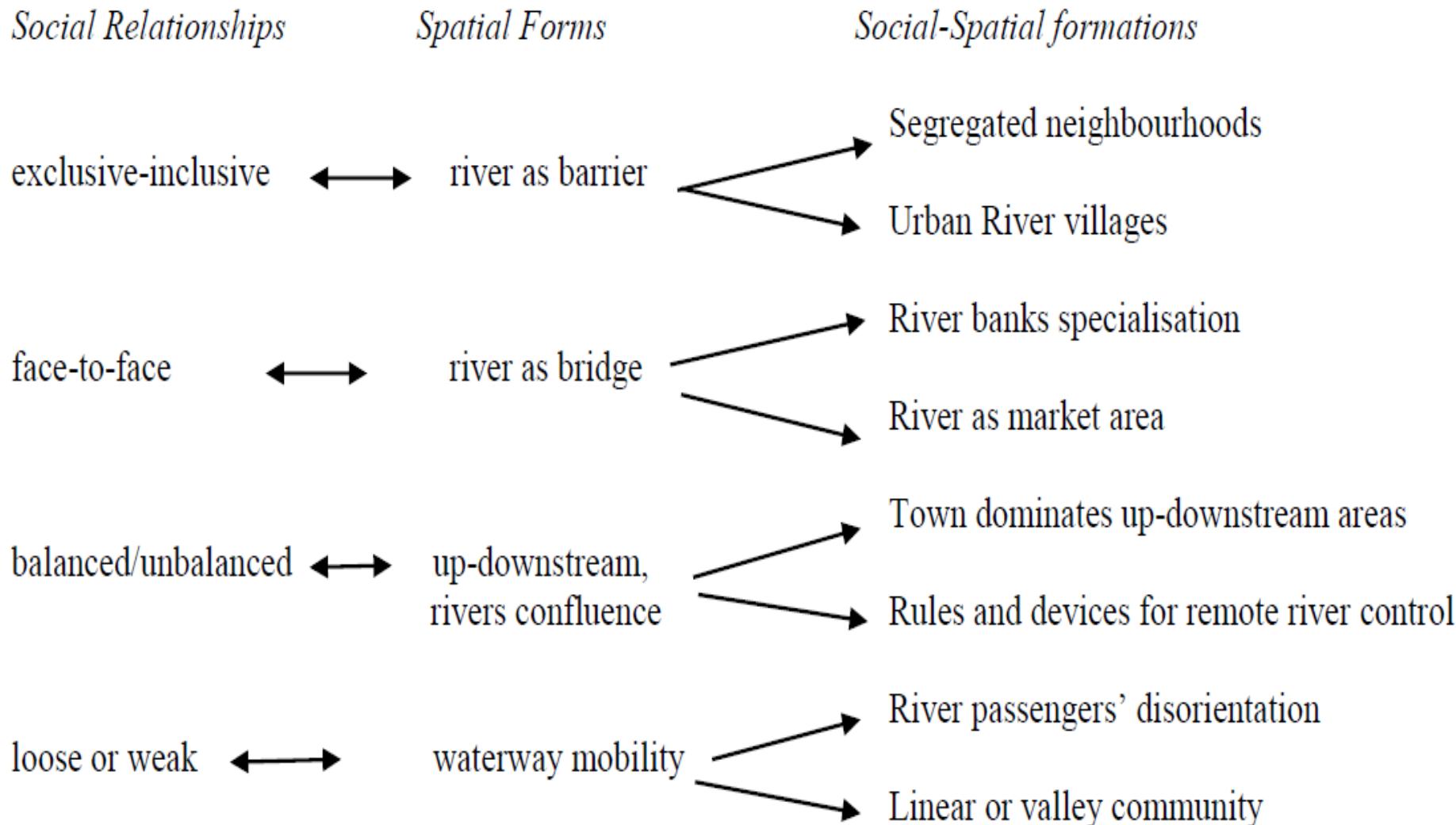
We prefer the meso level: social networks, mobilisation, collective action, organisations..... to be integrated with a spatial frame

A combination between relationship typology and spatial forms: water is a spatial form because occupies land; it has a morphology (river), it is often infrastructured (eg dam, artificial channels, pipes, dikes, locks, weirs ...)

Combinations (third column) of Social Relationships and Spatial Forms

Social Relations	Spatial Forms	Socio-spatial Relations
Inclusive/exclusive	Barrier/border	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Segregation/ghetto - Bounded solidarity
Face-to-face	Proximity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Specialization of places - intellectualism
Symmetrical/asymmetrical	Height/crossroads	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - centre-periphery relations - Control at a distance
Weak ties/loose coupling	Mobility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Disorientation/(re)orientation - Network community

Tab. 2. – Structural homologies between social relationships and spatial forms. Special framework adapted to town river topic



An exemplifying research

Mantua, a city of water

Mantua waters
as symbols of
spatial orientation

Some slides come from a presentation of
Caterina Bracchi
PhD Student – Università Cattolica

Course Unit: Social Dynamics in Local
Development
16.05.2023



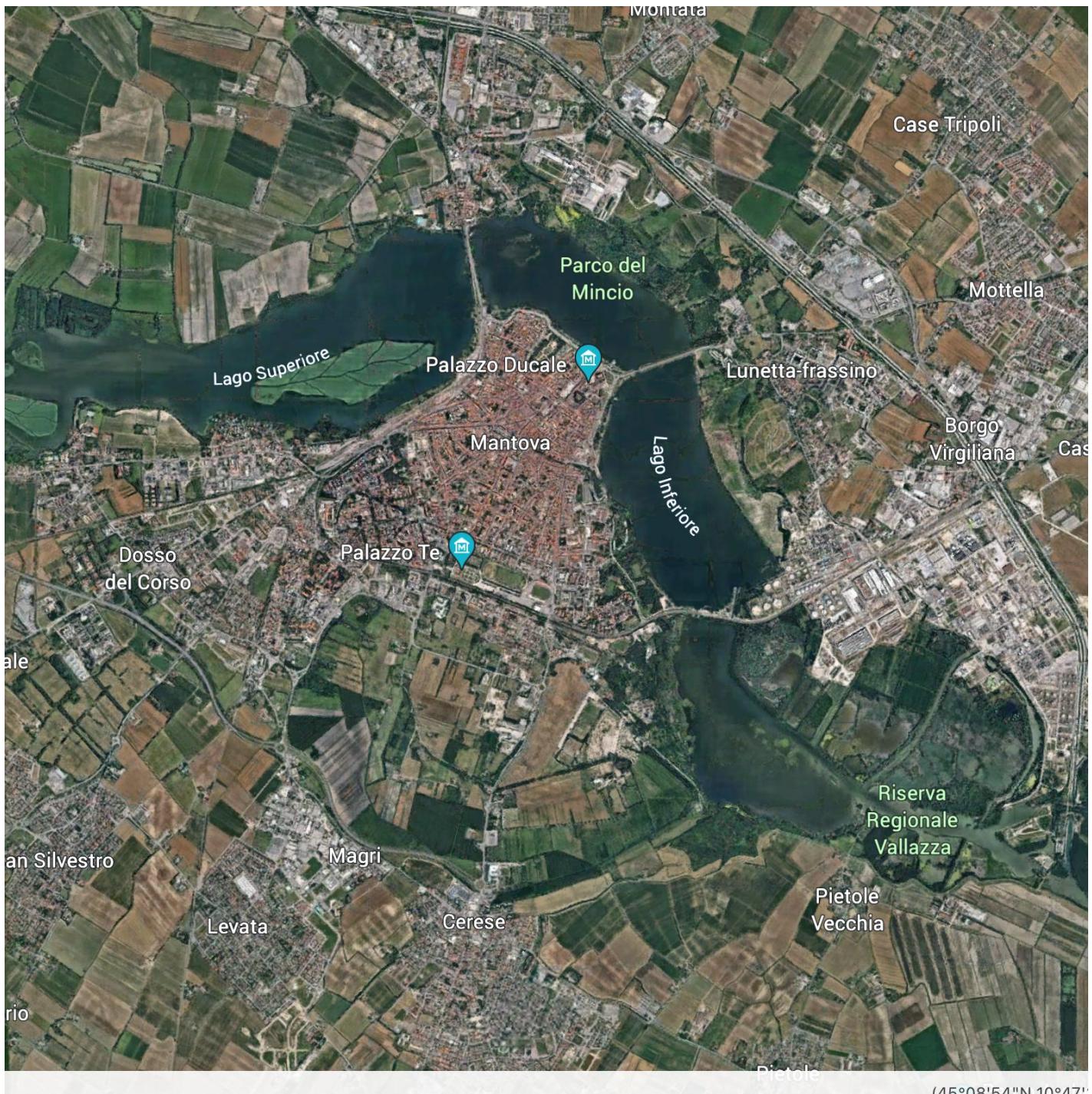
Mantua overview

Source: <https://www.naviandes.com/1itinerari-scuole.html>, cruise company



2. The placement of Mantova city

Mantua from google maps



Il Sito di Interesse Nazionale





Petrochemical panorama of Mantua

source: <https://dorsogna.blogspot.com/2008/11/leni-mantova-parte-seconda.html>



The same map, but larger to include surroundings of Mantua hinterland; that allows to see the upstream wetlands (Valli del Mincio) and the complex mix of industrial areas and wetland (Vallazza)-channel (Tartaro)-port (Valdaro) downstream, and a wide agricultural belt

<https://maps.app.goo.gl/wAeQfoRj9sje61P48>

Area for the collection of water from deep wells into the aquifer, then potabilization/purification and pumping tanks to towers for creating gravity for supplying the potable water system.

Str. Circonvallazione Sud



Waters spaces and social forms combinations in the city of Mantua: disorientation vs ri-orientation and flows control at a distance

Upstream

upstream wetland low control (Mincio nature park)

Disorientation

Divisive and polluted
lake

Mantua Waters

Ri-Orientation

Lakes source of
identification by
eco-landscapes

Downstream

wastewater sanitation high control (town utility TEA)

SOCIO-SPATIAL RELATIONS: SPATIAL DISORIENTATION (SPAESAMENTO) / (RE)ORIENTATION (APPAESAMENTO)

- The term disorientation describes the feeling of loss that arises from an inappropriate relationship with a place
- Disorientation is used also in psychology: “*n. impaired ability to identify oneself or to locate oneself in relation to time, place, or other aspects of one’s surroundings.* Source <https://dictionary.apa.org/disorientation>
- *Spaesamento is an emotional and cognitive reaction that occurs when a person finds themselves in an environment or situation perceived as foreign, unfamiliar, or disorienting. From a neuroscientific perspective, disorientation involves the activation of various brain areas, including the hippocampus, amygdala, and prefrontal cortex.* Source <https://fondazionepatriziopaoletti.org/glossario/spaesamento/>
- *Dynamic: Disorientation as a possible step towards re-orientation after a shock, eg migration, health or affective problem,*
- *It belongs to the big family of senses of place*
- *Question: if water and wetlands are source of orientation, disorientation, re-orientation*

Socio-spatial relation: control at a distance/governmentality

Governing at a distance as a form of state-civil society relation (Pertsas)

- Government, as a particular form of power, seems to presuppose a **distance** between the governors and the governed. This distance allows the governors to exercise their power *not on* the governed but **through** the autonomous actions of the governed.
- It is not a matter of subjugating them, but of **managing their conduct** in a way that it becomes aligned with their general political objectives.
- **Neoliberalism as a political rationality** tends to govern individuals, collectives and organizations not by crushing their ability to act, but by fostering their self-governing capacities.

Recapitulate, the research design

Systemic Object of research: **a water city**

A framework: spatial/relational spaces combination:
disorientation and control at a distance

Methodology: case study, with a plurality of report tools:
documents analysis, interviews, direct observation

Hypotheses:

- 1) water was a source of orientation at alternating period (pendulum)
- 2) control at a distance of water happens more when there are established technologies of invisibility
- 3) civil society associations resist to the control at a distance when they work with visible waters

Results in brief

Disorientation produced by the long and heavy pollution of lakes and detachment of workers neighbourhood from beautiful touristic city centre

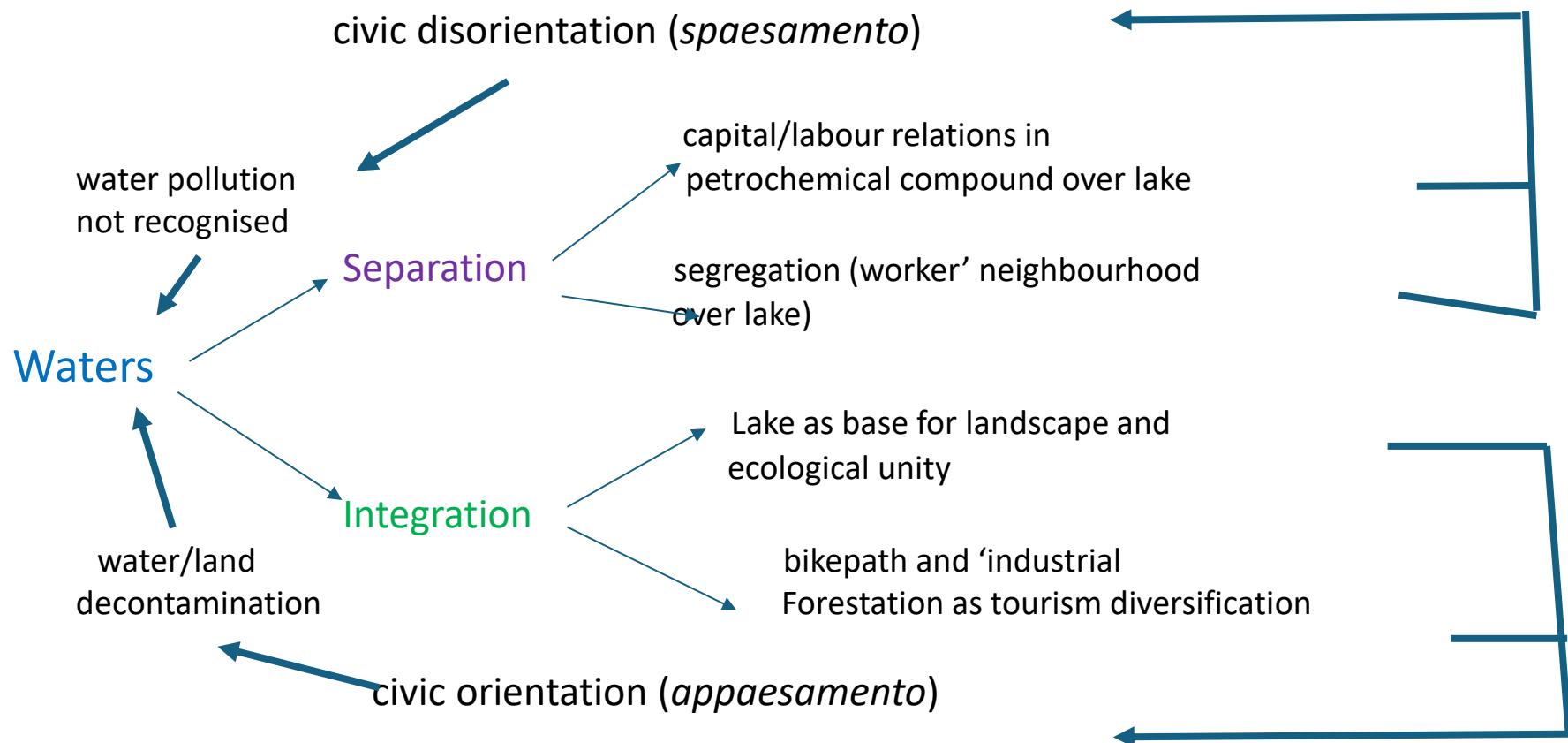
Ri-orientation through lakes depollution and creation of eco-landscapes in both sides of lake (forestation and bikepaths)

The reorientation path is continuously threatened by new high impact projects as logistic poles, urbanisation expansion, new navigation projects, further irrigation schemes

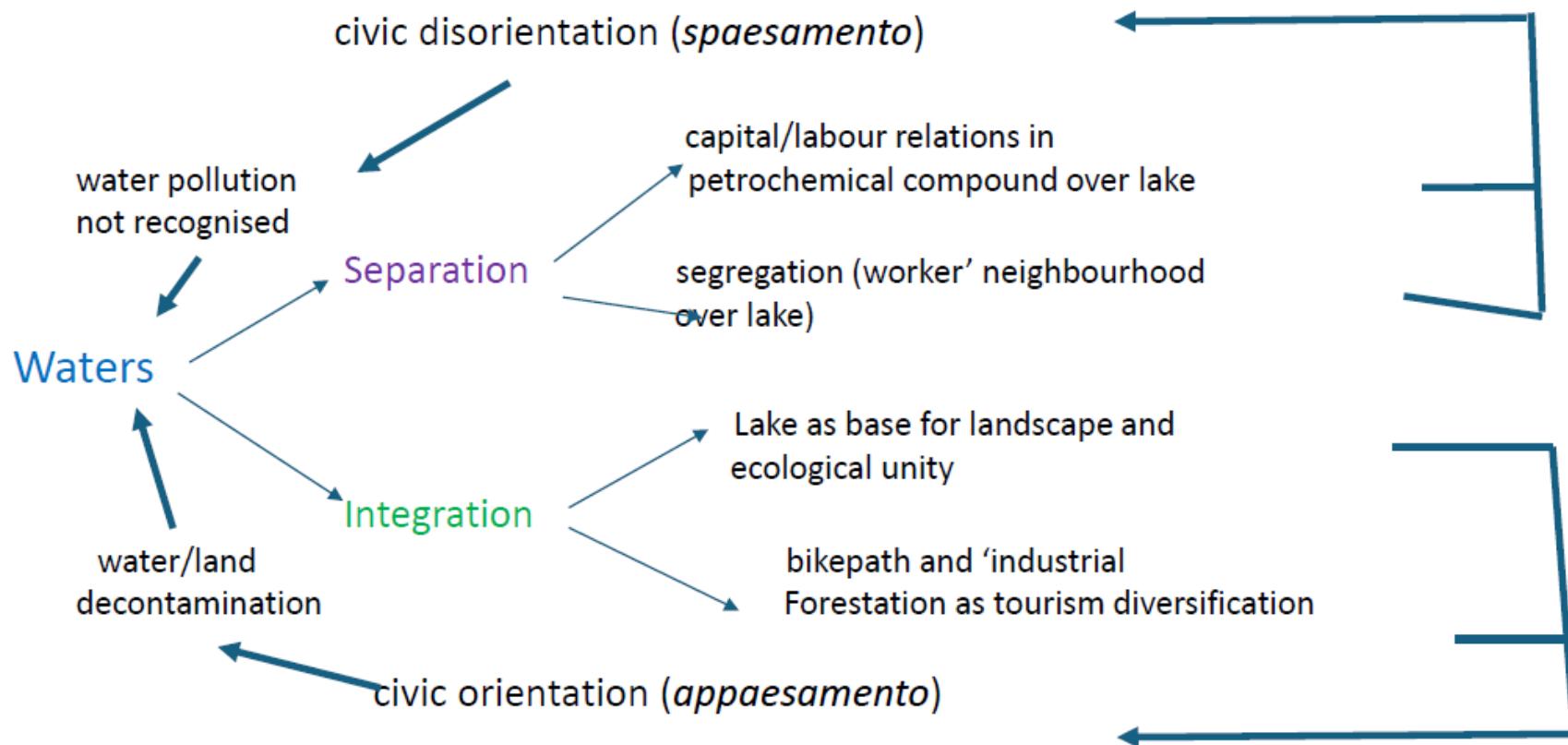


Source: <https://www.finestresullarte.info/viaggi/mantova-citta-d-acqua-arte-e-natura>

Cultural and political flows linked to waters and social relations in Mantua (Italy)



Cultural and political flows linked to waters and social relations in Mantua (Italy)



Second axis: control of water at a distance

No total, but easier, the control of drinkable water cycle, wastewater included, through a capillary grid and a modern depuration plant; and people-citizens-consumers-users are quite passive

Upstream Wetlands (Valli del Mincio) are difficult to control for weakness of dedicate institution (regional park), diffuse water pollution from farms, siltation, activism of local associations

Downstream wetlands (Vallazza) are difficult to control for other reasons: multiple infrastructures, low accessibility to public, multiple sources of pollution

Conclusions

Hypotheses: 1) water was a source of orientation at alternating period, **YES, even if the pollution of the downstream waters remains unresolved and then it is permanently a source of disorientation**

2) control at a distance of water happens more when there are established technologies of invisibility, **YES, municipal utility manages 'successful' technologies for monitoring consumption and depuration**

3) civil society associations escape control at a distance, but they work better with visible waters, **YES, there is a greater activism of the civil society in upstream more accessible wetlands than in Water Hygiene and Sanitation cycle: potabilisation-distribution-sewage purification**

Lesson END