

"Peasants and accomplices": a dialogue with Ermanno Olmi

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edited by Laura Colosio

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In the dialogue with Olmi, a conversation rather than an interview, introduction and inter-locutions are by Giorgio Ferraresi.

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GF - In proposing "Back to earth" as the core theme for the first issue of its Journal, the world of territorialist culture, research and social practice cannot avoid meeting a figure like you, Ermanno Olmi: an eminent witness of peasant civilisation.

We would like to resume a dialogue already started with you from sharing the interest you presently show for the re-emergence of peasant agriculture; a wish for listening and thoughtful interpretation, expressed in frequent journeys along the Lombardy countryside and shared public meetings about such 'peasant ways' able to regenerate lands and territories, which not only provide local and environmental quality food, but involve us in exchange relations made of solidarity and alliance.

In such new rurality experiences, territorialist culture acknowledges a core, an essential reference that can renew and give body to the very basis of research and projects we carried out in these years: territory as a living person (and cultivating and taking care of the earth as its matrix) carrying in itself a value which is essential for life, a 'local' territorial value, based on differences among places and on biodiversity, apt to govern environmental cycles and regenerate the city itself. Territory as a common good. To us such peasant experiences look as a 'controcanto' to the demolition of 'rural' as the basis of land occupation and degradation carried out in the centuries of glorious industrialisation and urbanisation, up to the present, catastrophic decay and crisis of this model.

On the threshold of this disaster, but inside the alliance with those peasant paths of hope, may we start again the dialogue already in progress with you?

EO - First question I ask myself, as an opening one, is 'Why are you here, today, asking me these questions? Why didn't we think at all to ask ourselves questions like that twenty years ago?' Because in the immediate post-war period we made choices starting a process we considered right at the time, and that - above all - would have entirely changed our previous condition, still tied to a nineteenth-century world. In fact, despite being a fairly developed country in the modern business economy, Italy was still an agricultural country. So it was then that the choice was first made which

has led to the present situation: we believed more in industry than in nature. The rural world was being emptied. It even got to the point that girls refused to marry a peasant: that would have meant being tied to a past no one wanted to live any longer.



Picture 1. The meeting between Ermanno Olmi and Giorgio Ferraresi. Photo by the editor.

And this took place with an arrogance and an immediacy only great epochal events show, a kind of tsunami. The whole world was running towards a technological future: between the 1906 Expo, where Krupps presented their cannons, and the two wars which those cannons had announced... As soon as the rural world is abandoned by the 'new people', machinery appears for extensive crops (agricultural modernisation). After forty years (1906-1946), while people were celebrating the new year after the war, the rural world faded out and the mechanical world triumphed - this world, which would have provided for all of our needs according to a very precise goal: wealth. Europe was now absolutely sure about that: we were all becoming rich. Thus our lives had completely changed. Fancy that, from the dream of a bicycle we got to scooter, car and everything else. We were confident - and reasonably so, in that context - that money would have solved all problems, including the affective ones. That is, if you have money you take part in this sort of banquet of life, where poverty would never ever notch our existences, and the joy of possessing things was already an answer to every affectivity demand: and this was a great deceit. 'Cause we were sure that, once defeated poverty, affections would have been greater than before, since we had no more to worry about what to eat, about how the crop is growing this year and so on. We were reassured to the point to say that even our feelings would have been guaranteed by money. But it wasn't so: we understand it now after having done all the way, making every possible attempt to give money this power to make us happy. I don't like to pronounce this name, but *Berlusconism* is an extreme version of this concept: buy it and be happy. I've been very lucky in my life, because in my childhood I lived the nineteenth century (before the last war, in Italy twentieth was still nineteenth century). After that I

lived through the second twentieth century, and I'm now living in the 2000s, time of great and amazing technologies - and in fact these things are happening, but all this resource availability has not solved the affectivity problems yet. Now we know very well that the more rich you become, the more you realise you haven't got emotions, the more you get mad thinking 'How come? I'm rich but not happy?'. Then we cannot avoid making a negative appraisal. But at that time we hadn't experienced wealth yet. Now, after 60 years and over, we know that it's not wealth that will create a civil society able to live in harmony with both human race and humanity, it's the earth that is the home for all. What shall we do now? In '78, with *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, I thought to make a portrait which would be not only feasible, but almost a tale of a reality that was fading away. That farmhouse, its things.... I was sure that 'now, you must make this film to remind us what the peasant world, the rural civilisation was'. And keep in mind that the rural civilisation is the only accomplished civilisation, all the others - the industrial, technological, the computer ones - are just provisional. Now we think that there's nothing left beyond the computer. I thought that *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* would have celebrated the end of the rural world. But no. It celebrated the warning that nature was throwing in the face of man: 'Do you know what you're doing?



Picture 2. Frikì (nee Vittorio Capelli), the fabrics peddler of "The tree of wooden clogs". Source: <http://infoalberodegli-zoccoli.blogspot.it>.

Know that? Know how outrageous you're being to your own life?' - because we depend on earth. Finding ourselves in front of this abyss (and we know we can not go beyond that, because it's the end) what shall we do? The earth evolution has passed from the earliest microorganisms that came out of the sea to the creation of worlds that have failed because the very attempt was wrong, and then the dinosaurs.... Nature has developed the search for harmony, and we now live a condition where we can become accomplices of natural phenomena, with a trade that we can renew, in the myth of the Mediterranean culture, at the end of the flood, after the seas cover all of the earth: and Noah comes back out in the dry and plants the vineyard. Well, what can we realistically do right now to plan this way out of the ark, when the flood

withdraws its waters? Where to start, if not from the vineyard and the first coup de hoe? So, to do this we must first wait for the waters to withdraw altogether. In fact, the dove comes out many times, and only when does it finally bring the twig you can go with the coup de hoe. We should do this route backwards. Since the time we made the choice between being on the nature or on the wealth side, now, from the threshold of the abyss, we cannot find what we could have found if we were careful in our choice. We must go back to the moment the two perspectives of life started diverging. We have to go back - say to '46, to speak in terms of short period, but actually even earlier, down to the root; but in coming back, do not make the mistake of throwing away everything: while we go back, we actually begin to take a step forward, recovering the original thread of history.

GF - In this view let me recall an image you brought up in a previous meeting, just to express this new beginning with an ancient heart. You said: we are moving house so we not only throw away used things, but we choose among them and bring with us a few things we recognised as essential while living in the old house, and that will help us living in the new one.

EO - Exactly, it would be just stupid to say 'from now on we'll wear peasant clothes'. No, the new peasant must know what the 'Higgs boson' is. Before, the peasant used to make an act of faith towards the mystery under the sod. At that time he didn't know how and why the seed gave a small grain or a tree. He didn't know, but he had faith because it had already happened and he knew it would happen again. Today man changes his nature and becomes the *aware man*: aware of good and evil. When addressing the problem of food, today man must be aware of the goodness of a fruit and discern it from the *fruit-look-alike* of the food industry. In this historical period, the gigantism of food industry supported by all the chemical equipment runs into the need to return to the origin of food. Listen, I'm not interested in the 'ecologic', I'm interested in the 'natural' - which is to say 'how nature expresses it'. Over there, in the next room, the latest small apples remain - I've always had those ugly small apples. There were in nature more than 150 kinds of apples that used to meet the nourishment needs throughout the year, because the last could be stored in a cool room while the first were ready at the end of May. At the orchard of the Gonzaga ducal palace in Mantua (where they could eventually hole up for a long time) there were rooms that provided all the fruit and vegetables for the inhabitants of the palace. When dealing with issues like nourishment, "feed the world" etc., you can hear a bunch of nonsense by many 'competent' idiots. Well *idiot* is not *silly*, an *idiot* for etymology is one who secludes himself and doesn't give a damn about the world. And many 'experts' are idiots 'cause they still retreat in certainties that - as they know perfectly - are no longer certainties. For example, the pretence to create agricultural development by increasing the quantitative capacity of producing food without any value - which forgets that the value base of food is biodiversity, that produces differences in taste and peculiarities of local varieties. For this reason, the small apple is so important and it can be a symbol of a new/old agriculture.

But, to go back to the *way out from the ark*, I remember that there were animals and also a vegetable garden in the ark. Noah took care of an entire catalogue, so we now have to be really convinced and confident that we still have a chance to collect it all. So not all is lost yet, and we can reproduce it for the present and the future with the new awareness that we have built right over the experience of bad choices we made in history.

GF - If you bring up these images, these metaphors ('leaving the ark', 'moving house') you're saying something that it is not in the usual sense but that confirms what we faced in the introduction to our discussion: this re-emergence of peasant agriculture doesn't mean the mere recurrence of such forms of growing and trading in food goods (crafty forms based on direct labour, local products, earth care and regeneration), but also represents the seed for questioning values and 'codes of modernity' that, in agriculture, generated agro-industry and the destruction of the rural world, and that in general conceived their own civilisation as based on the 'instrumental reason' of mass-producing things as commodities, treating territory just as a platform for these tracks of merchant competition and their functions and as a ground for urbanisation (whose value is essentially a real estate one); a model that stems from the early industrialization, in the English eighteenth century, which is later recognised as universal in the early decades of the twentieth century and which produces the large-scale modernization (starting in the late twentieth century) you have recalled.

Peasant agriculture is therefore the seed of a radical new beginning, trace of a 'primary' reconstruction of new ways of life and territorial empowerment, in the death of that dominant model: a new form of wealth.

But around this structural problem of reviving 'local value', what fundamental change realises when we start a living relationship with this re-emerging peasant world?

Should we recognise as central the transformation of relationships between people, between social actors who share the bread coming from the peasant careful cultivation of earth? And that becomes cooperation, mutual reliance, another reason, communicative and not only - or no longer - instrumental? In fact, these processes (in some direct food supply chains in particular) not only change the nature and structure of social demand and peasant supply on the basis of use-value and the quality of goods, but they also express *an ethic of intersubjective relationship* going beyond the competitive market. Principles and practices that build up a 'common', *traces of community*, and determine social forms of fiduciary agreements, fair and democratic interaction practices, and expressions of 'sovereignty': food sovereignty and constitution of territory as a common good. I think this has to do with the reconstruction of 'affectivity', as you defined what we have lost: is it so?

EO - I must say that I wouldn't use the term 'new *wealth*' (a word that I have referred to what was pursued during the post-war development) and - most importantly - I would like to clarify one essential thing: the more rich I become, the more poor someone else becomes, 'cause it is clear that we cannot take anything from Mars, just steal something to others. We enjoyed 'wealth' at the expenses of those who were dying of hunger - even with some flicker of emotion when we saw a young black boy die. Let's then neglect the term 'wealth', and use instead the other term you used, 'value', something that allows us to live, a fundamental value.

And then we found out, to resume your speech, as this dimension may play a role in the reconstruction of agreements, cooperation among people.... But in the ground of these reports there is a fundamental act, which is *complicity*: when you buy from the peasant with ethical purchasing groups, you already plead yourself a peasant, 'cause you are his accomplice. There is the direct peasant and the accomplice peasant. So that I, who am not materially a farmer, never use the hoe, I become an accomplice when I put myself in relationship with the peasant. 'You produce the bread

for me and in return I give you... don't know, a few feet of film? I am a farmer who has strayed ... but I'm in solidarity with you, and with you I have to participate in the knowledge of these values. I must participate with you in knowing that the small apple is better than the big apple.'



Picture 3. Ferraresi and Olmi during their dialogue/interview. Photo by the editor.

And with 'democracy' I mean the values of human coexistence consciously shared. In producing natural fruit, the leading role is for the peasant who knows what he's doing and is no longer 'ignorant of scientific processes', but is familiar with phenomena and respects even better the earth. But this is an achievement of 'his science', which is not the science one could just import from scientists. Woe if you trust just those few who think for everyone: each peasant must be up to what it does. It would be a terrible mistake to create a separate category of 'talking heads' who study the change process through an 'academy of science' method, never more so.

Who always messes things are those who think to cooperate with the constant belief that 'what I know you don't know', trying to make people depend on them. But that's not true: it's me who depends on the peasant... and of course, if I'm a dentist, the peasant with a toothache will acknowledge me as his other party. Things are simple, but there is always someone who wants a little power.

GF - What you say applies in particular to our research, studies and projects contribution with respect to the rural world; and the dentist metaphor as well. I think we should be 'depending on peasants' as for their knowledge, but on the other hand we should be their partners that provide their contribution if what's required is another kind of knowledge. This can properly be called an 'active listening' attitude, the starting point for every dialogue and mutual exchange relationship with the peasant knowledge. The opposite of being 'colonised' by the experts.

EO - Well for man to get the leading role, he needs a reality tailored on his own; the main thing is that the peasant be no longer an instrument, like a horse, but the *key actor* himself - and our wisdom is to acknowledge his wisdom as fundamental.

GF - But where is the peasant agriculture expressing this wisdom? Which is its 'measure', form and mode of production?

EO - Agriculture has changed in recent decades - and society as well. Different forms and structures of agriculture have succeeded, partly overlapping: from large estates (peasants as 'slaves'), to sharecropping, to farmers as independent entrepreneurs (owning or not the land) coexisting with large capitalist corporations in the industrial agro-food and large retail system - and living a widespread competition with the shed, which agricultural land is often abandoned to (in fact the domain phase of the real estate value). But it's here, in the crisis of this system, that the emerging peasant way starts realising, with the direct labour of cultivating in small and medium enterprises, starting with small pieces of land, producing local quality, finding third parties to sell those quality products, individuating which lands are best suited to specific crops, making alternations; and also building cooperative alliances among producers and with those who buy their products (their 'accomplices'), thus producing a shared economy in the territorial context, but using it to the best, enhancing it in all its interrelated differences.

GF - Here comes again the theme of territorial value, alternative to urbanisation, which is precisely the local value, which resides in the different characters of places; not only of lands, but of territories, coming from the knowledge which is embedded in agriculture - diversity of cultures as well as biodiversity.

EO - Well, I received from a great winemaker a package containing a bag of flour and various types of pasta made with spelt flour. In the package there was a card that described spelt variety, place of cultivation, features of soil: an identikit of the flour. And all tasty beyond description. Of course, price at the moment is quite higher than the supermarket, but at a little more cost you get the product quality of the product: instead of eating a bulk of pasta you just eat less. The bulk gives ladies cellulite, and now we are all devastated by diabetes ... kids with diabetes! Incredible! We have now all the elements to start over again. While nature is always the same, we have changed: so now we'll appraise it better, we'll love it more.

GF - But even the 'higher' price of peasant food is just 'at the moment' (and not always even now), because with short, direct supply chains we begin to reclaim 80% of the food cost (which will remunerate peasant labour and lower consumer price) that currently goes into the hands of industrial transformation and especially of large retailers. And this is also food sovereignty. But in this regard, food sovereignty must be recognised as a matter of general importance, like others already mentioned (territorial value, biodiversity, forms of social solidarity) that arise from peasant practices and experiences, but that, put into a network, become a '*vía campesina*' that travels around the world at least as a sign of contradiction to globalisation and degradation of the living world. A 'way' of global significance that has to face those policies as well as national and European choices about agriculture. We ask you then: what is the task of this world of living experience? Should they take on an explicit conflict in order to change those policies which - although as decaying superpowers - still fight the peasant way (armies in retreat are the most cruel, they destroy, rape, leaving just scorched earth behind)? Or their task - as you seem to feel - is to keep acting like embers under the ashes, in autonomy, privileging and consolidating their own forms of presence and solidarity?

EO - I believe that each one of us should not think primarily of relating to the world. Each one of us should relate to the reality he lives in. It's there that one's behaviour becomes visible so that he can also communicate with the world. Everyone must start from what he is (either farmers or accomplices, then) without proclamations of general principles, just start doing things. And this is already happening in several ways. But I cannot find any trace of that e.g. in *Expo 2015*, by which I've been asked for a contribution(*1): and my uneasiness is for maybe we are wasting a great opportunity. In one of the meetings with the Expo supervisors I had one of those experiences I've told before, denouncing many experts' emptiness and lack of relation to the real actors and processes actually on the way. So much that to let them know my disagreement I had no means but to take one of those famous, ancient, 'wild' small apple and put it right on the table we were discussing around. And then I had to explain the gesture meaning: "feed the planet" can only reappraise natural food and its production modes, which are not the agro-industry ones they want to discuss at the global level on that occasion.

GF - The Expo settings, for the character it's taking, finds its most significant contradiction - with respect to its very theme - in its lack of a widespread relation, in general, with the city and its territory (see also the proposal of a 'widespread and sustainable Expo'), but especially with its vast agricultural system (South Milan agricultural Park and more) and with the peasant, social, fair transformation practices of that agriculture - which should be the basis of an Expo proposal about 'feeding the planet' to discuss with the world 'starting from ourselves', as you say, and from our own territorial responsibility. But beyond the case of Expo, and unfortunately having to quickly conclude our interview, we thank you also for your further input on this last question that we have asked about the choice between autonomy/witness in peasant practices (which seems so central in your opinion) and the need for a confrontation/proposal (or conflict) with powers and policies on agriculture, land use and development model, based on the values delivered by those experiences and important to the entire society. Your answer is an enrichment of the theme from which we would like to start again continuing our dialogue; let's keep this question open, then, as a proposal not to drop this fertile relationship with you.

*Note (*1)*

Before doing this 'interview' with Olmi, we were wondering what nature could be his contribution to Expo 2015 in Milan requested by the event promoters. In fact, Olmi has translated its contribution into the proposal of a work about waters, building and nourishing this agricultural territory coming from the Alps glaciers to the fertile land of Po valley and Milan plain. A 'wing flap' by Olmi beyond the limits of Expo he himself detected. His work, his view of water, catch our territorialist attention since our past of studies, proposals and transformative practices in Lombardy and the Milan area saw precisely the production - around '90 - of a project of 'reclamation and ecological conversion of territories' who renamed the Milan metropolitan area with the names of the river basins of Lambro, Seveso and Olona (between Ticino and Adda): a fluvial network and a complex water system that have been the matrix of the vast agricultural structure of this plain, also generating the historical urban system, before her bulimia degraded territories and agriculture. But as for that, let's refer to the sight of this work of Olmi - which will be yet another way for us to continue this dialogue.

Abstract

Responding to suggestions offered by Giorgio Ferraresi, in a dense dialogue/interview Ermanno Olmi, great artist and high witness of the past and present of rural civilisation, explains the sense that returning a new centrality to agriculture - and in particular to the 'peasant way' to its rediscovery - assumes within a general movement of redemption of nature from the subjugation and abandonment in which the industrialist and 'developmentalist' post-war choices seemed to have inexorably thrown it, in our country as elsewhere; showing how a mature and aware return to earth, with its matrix and prospects both territorial, but also cultural, social, economic and emotional, represents today the only possible escape from the general crisis of human settlement on Earth.

Keywords

Rural civilisation, new peasant agriculture, back to earth / to nature, ecological crisis, redemption.

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