

The return to the rural-mountain lands: different aspects of an on-going phenomenon.

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1. The return to rural life

Starting from 1950s Italy has undergone to a slow and relentless outflow towards towns from rural areas especially mountain ones. An outflow favoured by the simultaneous reinforcing of a mental representation of countryside, mountain lands and their inhabitants in sharp contrast with town's one. This represented in fact the place where to get free from a life-style – the rural one – by then considered underdeveloped and loser.

As Batzing demographic studies upon alpine areas (2002) concerning 1951-1981 period also show, the north western and eastern mountain areas are right the ones to be heavily concerned by depopulation. These areas maintain a certain structural vulnerability also within the 1981-2001 intercensal period, even if in a less emphasized way.

In fact, towards the end of 1970s, therefore close to the last part of the intercensal period examined by Batzing, Italy begins to develop periurban settling pattern that involve rural areas next to large metropolitan areas, and particularly rural and mountain territories within the valley bottoms.

Subjects implicated in these settling dynamics are primarily families composed by commuters spending most of the day in the bordering urban areas and living in their rural locations only during week-ends. They are therefore typical for being above all “resident” of these rural spaces and bearing a rural ideology, rather than inhabitants getting close with the territory where they settle down (MAGNAGHI, 2000). It's a phenomenon of different residentiality which neither supports nor fosters rural areas territorialisation development.

At the beginning of this century, according with such approach, both in Italy and the rest of Europe, we can see – at last – an interesting circumstance based on the conscious return to rural areas: “In the most developed western countries there are definite signals of counter-urbanization and rural regeneration” (MERLO 2009, 29). In particular, by observing what happens in rural territories, there is a real going back up to the mountains which involves “deep rural” municipalities - as Merlo says- i.e. small rural and mountain urban centres which attract new inhabitants. They all are municipalities almost unpopulated: villages, housing clusters and mountain hamlets regaining new residents (CORRADO eds., 2010; CORRADO, 2013).

It's therefore a rural rebirth due not so much to a birth rate retake, but rather to an inward migration: subjects who consciously decide to move for different reasons: a better life quality (safer, more placid, in contact with nature), the possibility to find or to create an occupation, to practice outdoor activities and enjoy a magnificent landscape

These are subjects who – through their life-style and their activities – trigger land dynamics which can innovatively activate way land resources once used in a traditional way in the rural and alpine world. They bring ideas ranging from organic agriculture, to cyber business, technologic safe havens and bio-building, etc.

2. Three aspects of this return: physical-demographic, cultural and social

We therefore watch a return which begins from countryside, valley bottoms areas and goes on up to high valleys, even those more isolated and that can be described in relation with at least three aspects.

¹Albeit the contribution represent a common work by the Authors, the paragraphs 1 and 2 are to be referred to Federica Corrado, the paragraph 3 to Luca Battaglini.

These ones will refer – in this article – right to a multiplicity of situations and life experiences both of collective and individual type.

The first aspect concerns a physical-demographic return to rural areas – particularly the mountain ones: a shift made up of people who from other territories move according to their ambitions, desires and needs to rural areas through a wholly spontaneous exogenous-type process, not supported by diverse land policies.

This return shows significant signals of a link with the land, especially in Piedmont: as Streifeneder and Omizzolo (2011) observe, between 2000 and 2007 the strong decrease of the number of farms conspicuously slows down all over the peninsula except for Aosta Valley and Veneto. As to usable agricultural areas Piedmont is the region which records a strong counter-trend positive value +13,1%.

Farms belonging to these new inhabitants of the rural represent in fact an important challenge over the last few years. In Piedmont such is the case with Andrea e Silvia Scagliotti's farm. After their degree, they decided to pursue their dream to become cattle breeders in Val Cenischia. The case also with Marzia and Roberto who leave their town job to become potatoes farmers in Po Valley; and with Aurelio Ceresa who, once graduated, recovers family estates within Gran Paradiso National Park and realizes the dream to start a high quality cheese production farm.

These people think like this: “sure, owning an estate helps but the investments necessary to make land produce are huge, and so unbelievable the bureaucracy to comply with so that one's dreams fulfilment is by law (...) but there are people starting up from scratch: no farmer families behind them, no land, no assets. (...) The secret weapons that young people have, compared to older farmers: they have access to internet, request training and information (...) and decide to choose farming life, lending their know-how and getting what anybody will teach them” (PETRINI, 2013).

And in these many return-to-the-land experiences that are arising, there are also those who in their adult life decide to courageously leave the town, because of a job more and more difficult to maintain or – even worse – they are no more up to, in order to find a different quality of life: more homely, more true and personally satisfying.

They are those who, during a meeting promoted by Turin Province at 2012 *Salone del Gusto* in Turin, have been defined the “new unemployed” i.e. subjects who – once out of urban areas working life – re-integrate themselves into a new economic rural reality and choose to start a business and life project.

The return to the land by these subjects is therefore a commitment to repopulate rural areas. Farming activities bring to an attention towards these areas and their resources thus taking important benefits also to urban areas.

Rural areas' management processes, from pastures management to the control of waterways and wooded areas, are directly related to the possibility of urban areas to enjoy the ecosystem services provided by rural setting and with a reduction of natural hazard which involves the same urban areas.

The second aspect concerns a cultural return to rural areas performed by the new inhabitants together with those who had the will and were able to remain – due to their sense of belonging -in their own land and had seen the farmers and mountain people role out of common clichés and over their traditions.

Right a cultural return mostly carried out by countryside and mountains 'new inhabitants', thus confirming the assertion of local identity which is not always the same, where tradition and innovation are combined to create new forms of an aware and worked out territoriality.

And so new images of rural and mountainous landscape take place: these new inhabitants of rural land, especially the mountain one, are today the main protagonists, of the more and more tangible and visible transformation of rural landscapes.

And that is happening in different forms and in different places: from the renovation of the existing rural real estate (often abandoned and decrepit that is recovered with local materials and processing), the recovery of ancient crops that would otherwise be lost in time, to the recovery of large land areas increasingly subject to a process of re-naturalization justified as a choice of extreme wilderness that however erases traces of a skilful job of anthropization (VAROTTO, ed., 2012), to the creation of new jobs and new agricultural structures related to the increase of land resource value.

As to this last issue, the third aspect arises which is connected to a social return in the Italian rural areas. On the one hand, the creation of land-connected new jobs has resulted in the practical application of the concept of innovative multi-functionality.

The farm has become agri-kindergarten, social farm, therapeutic recovery centre, etc. through the convergence of farmers and social workers.

In Piedmont, due to past EC planning, projects were right carried out designed to contribute to a better life quality within areas where services usually lack. In this situation, the trade union Coldiretti has worked to support entrepreneurial actions aimed at providing assistance for disadvantaged people through the project "Women and territory, the reality of the multifunctional farm" and also by means of social projects which have identified a useful means to re-establish social links broken due to situations of physical and/or social need.

In other words, the farm has become a place for the production of social/care common goods addressed to different subjects: from children, to the elderly, the disabled, people with low conceptual capacity. "Social farming is a path of social innovation that requires the mobilization of a wide range of stakeholders in order to mobilize new resources in the area (...) The innovation consists in making use of agricultural resources for integration purposes, in avoiding welfare to privilege paths of social justice based on the active integration in society, but also in setting a new dialogue among sectors and know-how, in adopting unconventional principles in the economic and social field" (DI IACOVO ET AL., eds., 2010, 3).

On the other hand, the social return to farm land has resulted in a return to social life, from the establishment of recent neo-rural movements that are spreading a little 'all over Europe to the construction of real networks meant to ethically and economically share rural areas, to the so-called buying groups. This is a different sociality i.e. "the aim is not merely economic, but identified into the human and social need.

A sociality therefore arises that eludes appreciation, because it breaks the dominant interpretive schemes: deny, concretely, the merchant categories, flooring them "(VITALE, 2007, 6). The time and effort devoted to socializing plays a fundamental role, the sociality changes thus becoming really experienced.

As Mark, a young rural inhabitant points out "the great strength of buying groups is this (...) i.e. the fact that people who adhere to these groups live a kind of human relationship where you experience a direct contact between individuals (...) , where satisfaction doesn't lie in consuming, rather in meeting each other, in exchanging know-how, recipes or other "(VITALE, 2007, 11). This assertion, therefore, emphasizes the idea of a new rural society as a collective and cooperative action responsible for the community of life in which subjects are involved.

These three aspects of return therefore highlight an on-going change in rural areas that joins an individual and a social matter: "au niveau de l'individualité (...) le neo-ruralisme constitue une réponse de la conscience planetary par la renonciation à une territorialité violente. (...) Le travail néo-rural est porteur d'un paradigme de pratiques alternatives pour changer l'individu et la société". A livello sociale, "le néo-ruralisme comporte un capital culturel progressiste fondamental en contra position avec les valeurs dominantes du capitalisme, comme la compétition, la spécialisation, l'individualisme de repli" (MERCIER, SIMONA, 1983, 264-265).

If this changing perspective coming out from rural life stories is shared, then return to the land is also and above all a return to the territory in its complexity and diversity.

This requires a re-thinking of policies and programs aimed to support rural (local) development, which start right from the awareness of the on-going territory dynamics - demographic changes, creation of new landscape images, construction of a different rural sociality, etc. - and that starting from this awareness move to a re-definition of the needs and potentials and achieve a shared development planned within the local territories (even the rural ones) which can provide the right answers in relation to the needs, desires and perceptions of those living there.

3. The ecological and territorial implications of the return to the land

From the second half of the last century systems based on natural and spontaneous resources as the pastoral ones, so significant for the economy of mountain areas have unfortunately undergone a major transformation with a severe environment degradation.

In parallel with the above-mentioned progressive rural areas depopulation, also the number of farms was significantly reduced and at the same time there was a sharp contraction of agricultural surfaces, eventually deleterious in ecological terms. In fact, this had led to a significant increase in the average size of farms with more limited space available, causing further environmental damages (GUSMEROLI ET al., 2010).

We can observe today the results of this phenomenon, with much critical situations that, for various reasons, would require a very wise management, often impractical. Further difficulties also depend on a bureaucracy unfortunately still too heavy and widespread within the Public administration of several areas that would have an agricultural vocation.

This transformation has therefore sacrificed large mountain areas where the natural vegetation resources, from the sub-mountain horizon to the snow one, besides being an invaluable source of food supply for the animals, they have always had relevance to shape and harmonize the landscape, thus improving tourism (RAMANZIN ET AL., 2009; STEINFELD ET AL., 2010).

In these environments, as a reaction to this so senseless 'sacrifice' of territory, looking at the phenomenon of coming-back inhabitants, we are observing new trends in local development. Starting from productive dimensions characterised by 'traditionalism' or by recreational activities (CAMANNI, 2009) people are gradually moving to examples of active agriculture and livestock assets that are proposing again, with a more original and balanced meaning also under the ecological and cultural profile, that mountain that wants to return to the deep sense of rurality, as it was originally intended.

Young people who are reclaiming these territories become again aware of the role that, for example, has a livestock animal, meant as a user of locally available resources, capable, albeit indirectly, by its presence, to limit disruptions and environmental damages. Let's consider the action of flocks cleaning uncultivated areas in order to prevent forest fires, very frequent in low and mid-mountain areas, or the role of indirect defence against the risks of erosion, that by maintaining grass surfaces vital, prevent sliding of snow masses upon abandoned pasture vegetation.

New farmers, more or less young, as already said, occupy again rural buildings, pastures and alpine farms, settlements representing the heritage of previous generations. They are beginning to settle down, even permanently, with their families, at high or medium altitude, in those environments which suffered the highest abandon, fully convinced of their function of revitalizing the territory also with the ecological aim.

These are young people who in addition to detect the serious damage of abandonment due to the carelessness of previous inhabitants, point out that taking no care of land corresponds to waste: even the ethical implications related to the ecological consequences of resource misuse in this case are put into evidence (VERONA, 2012). Retrieving is not limited to acts of slight though significant extent, but it passes through the vigorous effort of what might be called a re-domestication of environments, together with technical and entrepreneurial knowledge. It's essentially a matter to recognize the potential of the territory but also to be able to face the difficulties for its enhancement.

For these people coming back to marginal or disadvantaged areas ("less favoured areas" as were indicated in the 90s these realities in Europe)it's not only matter to carry out livestock production and agriculture activities, but more often the resource maintenance, making it renewable, at low ecological footprint, even contributing to contrast major phenomena, such as global warming (SOUSSANA, 2010). Many protection activities, from timber cutting, to the mowing, to the cleaning of ditches and canals, etc. are however necessary.

The results of this commitment are extraordinary: from the enrichment in plant and animal biodiversity to the healthy effects on the territory due to the surface waters flows ramping and to the neat and accessible mountain environment maintenance as a whole.

In some rural settings it is eventually matter to revise those productive activities that have shown in recent decades, for social-anthropological reasons, a deep transformation, almost a drift, from simpler systems and closer to the tradition, certainly more expensive for the human labour but also more balanced and careful to resources, to production systems too 'technological', inspired by plain patterns (what we might call a kind of “padanizzazione” of the mountain) unsuitable for eco-friendly but not so infrequently applied in high mountain.

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