

FROM MODERNIZED AGRICULTURE TO PEASANT FARMING: THE CASE OF CALABRIA, ITALY.

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ABSTRACT

After a brief examination of the contradictions inherent to industrialized agriculture, the paper explores the experiences of new forms of peasant agriculture in the Southern Italian Calabria region.

Keywords: New peasantries, Alternative food network, Calabria, Italia

1. INTRODUCTION

Modernizing agriculture to feed the planet: this was the watchword of the twentieth-century development paradigm. Decades later, industrial agriculture has proved unsustainable, and peasants are still feeding the planet (ETC, 2017).

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, it briefly traces the terms brought by the literature to show the profound social crisis of an important part of world agriculture. Second, it attempts to highlight how, at the edge of this crisis, unprecedented social behaviors could indicate new emerging models. The new trends will be investigated with reference to Calabria through the case study of the "Humus Network". Humus is a national network composed by agro-biological cooperatives, associations and different other organizations operating in organic farming and in the Italian solidarity economy. It refers to the organic agriculture's principles established by IFOAM (International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements) in Adelaide (AUS) in 2005 and is partner of the Leading Organic Alliance (LOA), the network of European organizations who hold national organic farming standards.

2. THE RISE AND FALL OF INDUSTRIALIZED AGRICULTURE

After the Second World War, one of the main policy concern was to make sufficient food available for what was expected would be the massive increase in the world population within a generation. This need was particularly strong in Europe, which was materially destroyed by the Second World War and strongly oriented towards rebuilding the foundations of its development starting from food self-sufficiency. The emphasis was on the land as a field of intervention and on the rural as a space essentially devoted to agricultural production.

The twentieth-century development paradigm assigned to agriculture the mere role of supporting the industrial sector, which was assumed to operate as the very engine of economic growth. Its first and foremost role was to provide food - and labour – at low prices, to reduce wages in the industrial sector, thus facilitating capital accumulation and the reinvestment of profits in the modern sector. Emblematic was Arthur Lewis's (1954) two sector model of development: since he assumed a low level of labor's marginal productivity in the countryside, he suggested that low-paid rural workers could be transferred to the industrial sector at no significant cost, as to enhance economic growth and development.

Hence, the model of production designed and promoted by national and international agricultural policies: highly specialized and large-scale enterprise. Policy intervention tools were aimed at stimulating scale increase at farm level and production intensification through the technological leap to ferry agriculture towards entrepreneurial styles of farming (Ploeg, 2006).

Massive increases in productivities were achieved by applying the principles of Taylorist and Fordist industrialization (mechanization, specialization, standardization, economies of scale) (Grigg, 1992) and by promoting those technological packages (selected high-yielding varieties, indissolubly linked to components such as planting method, weed control, fertilizers and other agrochemicals) that made up the so called 'green revolution'. The results were not long in coming: at the end of the twentieth century, the availability of cheap food had managed to offset the increase in world population, tending to eliminate hunger, reduce malnutrition and improve the diet. With the sole exception of Africa (Grigg, 1999), where, still in the seventies, Ethiopia (1972) and the Sahel (1973 and 1975) were experiencing a deep food crisis.

From the 1990s, however, the emerging literature on 'food regimes' (Friedmann, 1982; Friedmann and McMichael, 1989; Araghi, 2003) and on the globalization of agri-business (Bonanno, Busch, Friedland, Gouveia and Mingione, 1994; Goodman and Watts, 1997) began to tell another story. The production of cheap food had made peripheral countries dependent on food imports. Many of them, especially in Asia and Latin America, were performing the unprecedented role of New Agricultural Countries (NAC) in the international division of labor. That is to say, the role of producers and exporters of low cost and high value-added foods (fresh fruit, vegetables, poultry, seeds, crustaceans, dairy products) thanks to a massive concentration

of foreign direct investment in production, processing and distribution for the global market. The result has been the decrease of the revenues of small and medium-sized exporting farms and the worsening of working conditions in agriculture, as shown, for example, by the case of tomato production in Thailand (Rosset, Rice and Watts, 1999), lemon production in Argentina (Ortiz and Aparicio, 2006) and the fruit and vegetables sector in South Africa (Kritzinger, Barrientos and Rossouw, 2004).

On these trends, the restructuring of value chains for the benefit of multinationals has given rise to 'agri-food complexes' (McMichel, 2006) articulated on global supply chains, able to concentrate and centralize in the hands of a few large groups of lords of food (Patel, 2008; Liberti, 2016) the government of the whole system, from production to consumption. An evolution of this process is what has been called "the revolution of supermarkets", i.e. the imposition of traceability and labeling standards, which deepens the dispossession of small and medium-sized farms, subsuming them in a completely subordinate position within the supply chains (Campbell, 2005; Campbell and Le Heron, 2007; Fox and Vorley, 2006). And making them highly dependent on technology packages, with a consequent increase in production costs and compression of revenues.

The subordinate role attributed to agriculture by the dominant paradigm is further deepened by its transformation into a simple provider of raw materials to be used as low-cost inputs in global value chains. This is the case of livestock production, which requires 45 per cent of the world' grain (Unccd, 2017:124). And also the case of Large-scale, export-oriented production of biofuel, a project that, McMichael (2009:155) writes, "represents the ultimate fetishization of agriculture, converting a source of human life into an energy input at a time of rising prices". Treating land and food as undifferentiated commodities is not without consequences: financial speculation on agricultural products and arable land, which has generated an increase in the world food prices, does not seem to find solution in the current rules of the game (Sivini, 2008).

These profound contradictions of agro-industrialization, already abundantly denounced by activists (ETC, 2013; Greenpeace, 2015) and scholars (Moore, 2010; McMichael, 2013), are now organically put into question by the first report on the state of soils in the world, drawn up by the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), which highlights what are still and too shyly called 'side effects'. The report traces a merciless picture: "the current agribusiness model benefits the few at the expense of the many" (Unccd, 2017:9), the "food system food system has put the focus on short term production and profit rather than long term environmental sustainability", food production consumes 70 per cent of the entire fresh water and is responsible for 80 per cent of deforestation (Unccd, 2017:11).

According to the report, the blame lies with the very fundamental characteristics of modernized agriculture (Unccd, 2017: 135-145). The development of a few high-yielding crop varieties promoted by the 'green revolution' has consolidated larger industrial companies oriented towards intensive industrial monocultures, heavily dependent on chemical inputs (fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides) that have harmful effects on the entire ecosystem (human and extra-human life). The result has been the drastic reduction in genetic diversity.

This, in turn, undermines the ability of crops to adapt to climate change and the absence of natural predators makes them vulnerable to attack by pathogens and invasive species, whose rapid worldwide diffusion has been increased by the transport system of the globalized agribusiness industry. The new 'technological leap' proposed by genetic engineering is not the solution, it only deepens the scope of the problems: the introduction of GMOs, the report says, did not yield returns higher than those of conventional crops; did not decrease the use of pesticides; instead of increasing the resistance of plants to herbicides, it has made them immune, encouraging a more intense use.

In short, a system that tends to destroy the conditions of its own possibility of reproduction.

It should be underlined, however, that the objective crisis of this paradigm (Moore, 2010) is acted out by new social forces and behaviors capable of triggering unprecedented trends (Cavazzani, 2008, 2009; Vitale and Sivini, 2018).

3. PEASANT FARMING PRACTICES IN CALABRIA: THE CASE OF HUMUS NETWORK

First of all it is useful to delineate a socio-economic profile of the Calabria Region using national and European statistical sources (Banca d'Italia, 2019; Eurostat, Istat). Calabria is one of the Southern Italian regions, the 'toe' of the Italian 'boot'. It is a long and narrow peninsula surrounded by two seas (Ionian and Tyrrhenian), centrally crossed by three mountain ranges that are home to three national parks (Pollino, Sila, Aspromonte), with the lower terrain composed by slopes and valleys utilized for agriculture. The industrial sector plays a marginal role in the regional economy, while the agricultural sector assumes a significant weight in comparison with the Italian average: according to the latest available data, agriculture represents about 6 percent of the added value, over double the corresponding national figure, employing about 15 percent, the highest incidence among the Italian regions; 20 per cent of the active enterprises in the region operates in the agriculture. The more recent statistical data of the Italian National Institute of Statistics show many conditions of vulnerability for smallholder farmers: in 2016 structural characteristics of agricultural holdings is the small dimension (average size is 4 ha) and the direct management by the farmer is the more adopted holding system (almost 80 per cent). Data from

Eurostat show that Calabria ranks third among the EU regions for organic farming, accounting for upwards of one quarter (29 per cent) of total utilised agricultural area, with a 11 percent growth since 2013.

The measures implemented since the late 1990s at the national and the regional level, aimed at promoting greater liberalization and modernization, have produced negative impacts on disadvantaged territories and affected social groups; moreover, since 2009, the regional economy as a whole has been affected by the economic and financial crisis. In 2018, the unemployment rate (21.6 per cent) is above the national (from 11.4 per cent) and the European averages (10.6 per cent), the region has the highest Italian female unemployment rate, which in 2018 was up to 24.9 per cent. GDP PPS per capita in Calabria is the lowest in Italy. In 2017, it amounted to €17,400, which is far below the Italian (€28,900) and European averages (€30,000). The family average monthly expenditure was less than a third of the national average, spending on food (equal to 25 percent for Calabrian families) represents a more relevant item compared to the rest of the country; household consumption continues to be significantly supported by the use of debt. Data show a reduction in the resident population, concentrated in the younger age groups.

The long-standing crisis in the agricultural sector has been often solved by lowering production costs through the employment of underpaid and exploited migrant workers. The social outcome of this practice in the citrus industry has been the progressive emergence of xenophobic behavior by the local population that culminated in what has been known as 'Rosarno events': the 2010 strong collective protest of sub-Saharan migrant working in the citrus production of the small town of Rosarno, located in the valley of Gioia Tauro which is mainly cultivated with olive and citrus fruits.

However, attempts to find more sustainable and innovative solutions to the contradictions of modernized agriculture have been going on for several decades in Calabria. These experiences are based on what Van der Ploeg (2008) identifies as 'peasant mode of farming', whose features lie in a dynamic, territorial and ecological based relationship with living nature and local social environments, multifunctional and oriented to the production of value added. Its relevance consists in the attempt to both counterbalance the squeeze on agriculture and put in place local economic systems based on civic engagement, sensitivity to environmental and social justice.

It was from Calabria that the constitution of the Humus Network prompted. Farmers that have been working in the organic sector for over twenty years decided to further develop the experience in order of dealing with the new trends of agri-food sector on international scale: the growing weight of large-scale retailers in the global value chain and the 'conventionalisation' process (Guthman, 2004), increasingly subsuming organic production in the logic of industrialized agriculture.

One of the farm inspiring the process is "Op Carpe Naturam", which is among the first Calabrian companies to be certified, with 80 thousand quintals of exclusively organic fruit. For it, the events of Rosarno were decisive for the choice to move beyond the conventional organic certification. To avoid being assimilated with local farms using low paid migrant workers, it was necessary "to raise the bar (...) to "develop relationship". As another founders of the network summarizes, "we cannot be colonized, it is we who live and work in the territory ... we closed ourselves to resist, now it's time to share".

As stated in the Humus's *manifesto*, the social and nutritional value of food is directly linked to the ecosystem. This is one of the reason why the farmers have chosen to locate their action within alternative food networks, in view of the economic and social sustainability embodied in the pursuit of the 'right' price for producers and consumers; of the respect for the dignity of work; and in the awareness that agriculture, in its multifunctional expressions, has an ethical dimension, both in the relationship with local communities and in respect for the land as a common good produced by the social and productive practices that take place on it.

Thus, the network is committed to implement a way of farming embedded within a holistic and alternative worldview, a feature that, as Hilary Tovel's seminal work (2002) had already shown, defines, since its inception, the organic movement. The leap, in the case under analysis, consists in the particular approach to the concept of biodiversity, translated into the epistemic principle of relationship with the extra-human world, as can be seen from the same name that the network has chosen to attribute to itself. Humus, says one of the founders, "is a state of the nature, an airlock between life and death ... a plot in which the relationship between the plant and the soil develops". The main scope of the use of chemistry is the mere growth of the plant, conceived as an economic resource, therefore separable from the system that also defines its existence. The paradoxical consequence is that "it is we who define weeds infesting, while in reality "we are the weeds". On the contrary, agroecology emulates the mechanisms of the ecosystem, nourishing the multiplicity of life that seems invisible to inattentive eyes: "the living beings living under the earth, that are more than those that live above the earth ... there are more organisms than human being".

In this context, the action intends to be inclusive and self-reflective, as evidenced by the choice to apply the new participatory certification method, that is a certification which is not delegated to external auditors, but is the result of a process of sharing between the social actors. In addition to producers and consumers, also workers who intervene as active agents of this process of social validation. Farmers are entrusted with the task of formulating a transparent self-assessment, which is then scientifically validated.

It is significant that, in addition to producers and consumers, also agronomists, scholars from the university world and professionals engaged in civic associations operate in the network. The idea is to build in process a cognitive paradigm that does not replace the means to the end, since even science-based techniques cannot be separated from the alternatives of meaning within which collective practice is taking place. The idea of reorganizing the entire cycle goes in this direction: agroecological production, transformation and solidal logistics, critical consumption, post-consumption and services related to agriculture (agritourism, environmental education, training for the recovery of traditional knowledge through the project of an itinerant school of the earth, and so on).

It is a social practice that is also characterized as socially relevant in relation to the local context, understood not as a datum, but as a product of responsible and civic social relationships directly experienced. For this purpose, the network created the 'territorial monitors', whose task is to indicate the emerging critical issues, such as, for example, the possible recourse to 'caporalato', that is illegal employment of agricultural workers for very little pay.

Finally, what seems particularly interesting is the terrain on which the network intends to project itself, also to overcome the limit inherent in the nature of the product, which would not find locally its exclusive end market, since citrus growing is very diffused among small farmers. As the entrepreneur Maria Grazia Minisci from "Op Carpe Naturam" tells, "the company refused to be protected or to enter in Fairtrade Italia, because we wanted to deal with the international market".

In sum, it is a challenge to conventional agriculture from a different cultural vision.

4. CONCLUSION

With modernized agriculture, production factors and products - food above all - have taken the form of abstract commodities, undifferentiated and interchangeable goods, separable from the environmental and social conditions in which agricultural practice should find its meaning. To counterbalance its crisis, the action of social forces strongly pose a new agrarian question and directly carry out activities capable of transforming land and agriculture into a common good.

Our case study show that the pathways to sustainable agricultural development are diverse, depending not only from the history and geography embedded in specific locale, but also from the world vision of farmers. The growing social demands for a more equitable, resilient and inclusive food system can be met by different way of farming, including new forms of peasant agriculture, for too long considered inefficient and traditional.

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