Neo-rurality: roots of future in the field (1)*

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1. The new peasant agriculture, a different way

This article, *this 'vision*', starts from interpreting a change, now taking place in farming, defined as 'new peasant agriculture', in which we see the early steps of a 'return to earth' and read a sign of a possible reappearance, towards the future, of the historic role of agriculture. Starting from there, from a comprehension of what is basically generating this seed, now beginning to bear fruit, it opens a _broader vision including the 'long history' of agriculture_, its roots in time and its projection on the future: this is the sight driving the 'vision'. The aim is to extend to this vast scenario _the close sights on neo-agriculture_ that here and now (but with large correspondence in the whole world) give us elements to understand its features and essential processes. 

_An experiential sight_ which stays inside the 'peasant ways' and their cultural and socio-economic interactions, a listening to their stories, a primary path of knowledge. And a _scientific/analytical sight_ reading its role in the actual context of agriculture systems after the wide process of global - technological, productivist, agro-industrial - 'modernisation' developed in the late twentieth century and presently undergoing a crisis.

Two sights that, although in different terms, acknowledge peasant neo-agriculture as a still minor but emerging and heterodox presence, in that crisis of the wide agro-industrial systems; a lively presence assuming _some distinctive features:_

- characters of _an embryonic 'different economy'_ , based on producing 'local and environmental quality', on the peasant work of care and regeneration of earth and on direct exchange with an aware demand;
- a _complex_ , non-sectoral economy (multifunctional, as they call it with a perhaps inadequate term, too close to 'functionalism'), incorporating the governance of environmental cycles within the production itself: _elements of a paradigm_ exportable to other economies;
- and not just an economy: rather a socio-economic system that involves _social and civil forms_ of solidarity relationship going beyond the trade of goods.

For this set of forms and relationships among the actors in the field and their environment, the definition of neo-rurality has been introduced to designate the complex processes connected to peasant neo-agriculture. Such early findings of elements of otherness and fertility with respect to the agro-food system, already in the field, allow us to _load neo-rurality with a further sense_,

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exploring its ability to take on again the role of 'primary' activity - in a strong, foundational sense - which was that of historic agriculture, a regenerative role able, in a perspective view, to introduce elements of an alternative to the socio-economic and territorial system in place.

We must explore this in order to understand which structures, cultures, relations of the ‘peasant way’ to territories can question what the modern history of industry and city has prevented the rural world to access; expressing, in this direction, sense attributions, directions, design assumptions for a structural change in general terms.

2. Neo-rurality codes: a structural interpretation of a radical makeover in economy, anthropology and territorial value

2.1 Economics of neo-rural supply chains, anthropology and ethics of the involved relationships

A crucial focus of the new rural economy can be found in the structure of the food supply chain supporting that direct and fair trade between the peasant production and an aware demand, above identified as one of its distinctive features and which represents a radical change. This is definitely a real structural change in the classical sense, since it redraws the structure of demand, supply and trade of commodities which are the very basis of every economy through practices significantly diverging from the model of technological and consumerist modernisation.

But the building blocks of this supply chain and its generative processes have, at the same time, another connotation, just as structural (in a different sense): that of a radical anthropological, social, cultural makeover, co-essential to economy, which indeed generates the whole supply chain process - to reiterate the other, non-‘economic’ (not purely economic) feature of neo-rurality.

The supply chains here considered are actually based on an independent expression of ‘social volitions’ (connected to new lifestyles and forms of self-organisation and
active citizenship) rejecting hetero-determination and the ‘global’ homologation of food commodities, expressing a food (and not only food) demand based on the need for quality of life. A demand addressed, in ‘de-intermediate’ terms, to the peasant producing ecologic and local quality goods (biodiversity, territoriality, proximity, acknowledgement, traceability).

De-intermediation is the basic relational element in defining new short supply chains. It implies the return, to the cooperative/shared hands of peasants and aware consumers, of the best part of food prices (at least 80%) usually taken from them in the ‘long supply chains’ by processing industry and large-scale distribution; but it is also the base for a knowledge and mutual awareness between different actors, as well as for a share of responsibilities in the trade of goods, through cooperative agreements and trustful credits in rules and contracts.

The anthropologic makeover on the way, therefore, ‘over-determines’ and changes economy: not only it changes the nature and structure of peasant supply according to the use value and quality of goods, it also expresses an ‘ethos’ of intersubjective relations beyond the competitive market. Principles and practices of caring, equity, shared responsibility that set up a common, traces of community. Without evocating any inappropriate image of organic communities, paths like these are rather lived and stated as expressions of ‘sovereignty’: food sovereignty, as we will say in a minute, and construction of territory as a common good.

2.2 Territorial value and territory as a common good
A further and fundamental element of structural makeover, in the neo-agriculture processes, concerns the value production for territory, meant as the body and context of those anthropology and socio-economics. Because at the core of this emerging primary activity is a regeneration of earth and territories, which is the fundamental principle of ‘peasant cultivation’, based on cyclically taking care and reproducing the living earth, the peculiar/local characters of cultivated land, with their environment, cultures, knowledge and incorporated labour:
which is the essence of producing 'territorial value'. The quality we recognise in what is produced and traded along the supply chains is just ‘territorial value’, value-added. Regeneration of territory, then, not just of the earth/nature; and ability to introduce a change factor into territorial arrangement up to the relationships to the town, to contrast the ‘urban bulimia’ of land consumption; through a return to the field of agricultural open spaces as proactive actors according their own endogenous value. In this process, territory becomes a 'common good'. A common good is not only - and not so much - the ‘territorial heritage’ considered in itself, meant as ‘a datum’ which (as it often happens at present) may be drowning or dying, but rather as remitted to the world by reopening the cycle of territorial valorisation, produced by the living labour and knowledge of social actors at work again, in those social and relational forms of 'food sovereignty' that produce 'the common'. We insist: this is what makes ‘the territory a common good’.

In this sense a sort of ‘territorial sovereignty’ is created as well, beyond the private or public ownership of soil: a re-appropriation of space/environment through practices of shared productive use and free trade paths, experiences of knowledge and responsibility.

Such economic, social, relational, territorial forms (mentioned above and explained here around two central nodes) are ongoing processes and possibilities for radical/structural makeovers; and express the neo-rurality codes it contains inside and projects beyond itself, as signs of a different vision of civilisation.

3. Historical roots of future: modernity codes at question

These codes of neo-rurality, therefore, propose a horizon of sense and a scenario of future that put the ‘life worlds’ and their ‘reason’ at the core: the ‘communicative reason’ and the ‘care’ in feeding the living beings and regenerating earth and environment.

These codes are radically ‘other’, as seen, from the codes of modernity, or rather, from the prevailing forms of the modern which gave shape, at its different stages, to the development model of urbanisation sprung from the industrial transformation - a model based on the ‘dictatorship of instrumental rationality’.

In fact, in establishing this model, agriculture has always been the fundamental - and succumbing - element of contradiction. The rural role of generating territories, developed in the long, slow time of history, has been denied, marginalised and submerged in the ‘short centuries’ of speed and power of that dominant process; to the point they determined an extinction of people, of culture, of the whole world of rurality and its territory.

To answer the question placed at the beginning of this ‘exploration of sense’ of the new peasant way, it is now clear the value of this reappearance of rural to history, in new forms with an old heart, in the present, post-Fordist stage of utmost extent of that dominant model - but, at the same time, of its utmost degradation and foretold death; in front of the crisis of its hegemony, anyway, the chance opens for a possible route of ‘re-beginning’ (still in a ‘weak form’, but already deep and lively in social practice and in our culture) partly in progress, as an announcement of a different scenario for the future.

Neo-rurality codes reproduce also, in this context, the dispute about the codes of modernity that was already expressed at some stages of formation and growth of the industrialist and Fordist urbanisation; and now re-open that contradiction as a need for a vital option of sustainable design for the destiny of humanity and the living territory.
It is useful to recall the various options in the field in two essential moments of formation and consolidation of modernity; with reference to territorial issues, in particular, which represent the crucial stakes, now and then.

The first stage concerns the foundation of industry in the eighteenth century England and the relationship with the process of enclosure and privatisation of the ‘commons’ (the shared agricultural land), a process supporting that early industrialisation in history, ‘freeing’ from earth workforce for the industry and promoting urbanisation and the consumption of parceled land.

A first step, therefore, in the process of liquidation of agriculture and its historical role of government and care of soil. A step that we now see as taken in reverse, in the opposite direction of neo-rurality codes, in the process of reconstruction of ‘territory as a common good’.

The second one refers to the ‘Fordist’, mature stage of arrangement of the industrial work and the social and territorial structure itself, in the construction of dwelling and services for the urban and metropolitan human, who, in the pre-Nazi decades of the twentieth century, defines its rationalist and functionalist codes based on serial/industrial production of standard products (from a spoon to a city).

A claim for a universal, unambiguous definition (and administrative treatment) of human needs and the provision for them, in pre-defined and always valid types, which was first developed by a few excellent laboratories: from the school of ‘Bauhaus’ and ‘CIAM’ (International Congresses of Modern Architecture) up to the rules of functionalist urbanism and to the ‘machine à habiter’ by Le Corbusier.

In that systematic theory - and consistent practice - territory becomes soil, a platform crossed by the functional paths of products, a set of ‘things’ understood as merchandise; and agriculture becomes agro-industry at high technological rate to increase the production of commodities.

Remember, however, that the definition of this interpretation of modernity was openly contending, in those years, with other experiences and divergent theories, other lines of modernity.
As the experience of Deutscher Werkbund, preceding Bauhaus in opening a relevant dispute on technology between creative crafts and industry.

Or represented for example by the 'culturalist' currents in architecture and urban planning, in relevant cases of urban design based on local cultures and peculiar characters of territories.

As in the case of Amsterdam, typical of this 'other line' of modernity for the highly local culture enclosed in its school of architecture and in the work of Berlage, and for the ability in governing lands and water basins as well.

Or in the early stages of the complex and local/environmental work of Ernst May (in the Nidda Valley for example), who also was a luminary of rationalist housing in Frankfurt.

And don’t forget especially that in 1924, simultaneously with the rise of functionalism and the unfolding agro-industry, Rudolf Steiner (a philosopher who also produced 'heretical' architecture) held his seminars that founded biodynamic agriculture, based on regenerating earth, closing local cycles and rejecting any technological domination.

The roots of another interpretation of the modern, subjugated at that time (but not always losing: the water Amsterdam and work of Berlage are still alive, and organic farming has guarded Steiner’s message), re-emerges now, in different terms, for the present and addressed to the future, and calls into play the stakes of an alternative scenario, based on the reason of lifestyles, on an ecological and local approach, on the production of territorial value.

Peasant neo-agriculture and its relational context represent the matrix of it, the seed sown in the field and already fertile; just an option, a growing person who is now living a process of consolidation in its social autonomy, with elements of separateness maybe necessary to even guard and activate its codes and instruments; which, however, seems destined to a transformative interaction with other, prevailing ways of practicing agriculture and with public policies; up to eventually acquire a ‘constituent’ ability for a further, new rurality of overall impact.

Issues open to dialogue.

(1) A single note on the character of this ‘vision’ and its dialogic references.

A ‘vision’, this one in particular, adopts a discursive form which is very different from that of a scientific essay (both analytical and theoretical) and, in particular, does not use its bibliographic tools and specific quotation mode in indicating its reference texts.

Of course, every vision implies reference to research materials as well as descriptions of cases and on-field experiences. This vision does it while respecting the nature of its argument, broadly cultural rather than scientific and descriptive: its approach is interpretive and aims at drawing scenarios, communicating narratives. Therefore it refers to contexts and cultures rather than to particular texts, to schools and lines of thought rather than to individual authors; it actually interprets researches and tends to ‘give sense’ to processes.

This kind of reference is clear at the final points of the writing, on schools and cultures confronting in the construction and critique of modernity codes in relation to the role of agriculture. But it is also in the first and second part when it recalls the (scientific and experiential) sights allowing us to read neo-rurality codes.

On this, there is a more direct reference to materials in the journal and to the Territorialist Society reflections. In particular, the dialogue is addressed to the analysis of agricultural forms in place ‘after modernisation’: to Van der Ploeg’s vision or Bocchi’s essay, more explicitly, and to the research they are based on. But even to Magnaghi’s
vision and in general to the essential elements of territorialist research; which in turn refer to the founding approaches of SdT on issues like the relationship between agriculture and “Territory as a common good” collected in the book of the same name, which also contains a contribution by the author of this vision. Who can then avoid, in addition to other quotations, a specific self-quotation of his own, by referring to that collective text and to what can be found, on his contributions about neo-rurality, in the reviews choir of the journal.

Even the experiential knowledge recalled in the vision refers to materials from the observatories under construction in SdT and other similar materials in the journal; in particular to those proposed for SdT Seminar on the “Return to earth” that correlates with this first issue of the journal, and integrates it with contributions which are there discussed in further planned meetings on field.

A dialoguing approach of this vision, then, finally flowing into the dialogue/interview with Ermanno Olmi hosted in the journal; a meeting with a profound wisdom and a dense experience of art expressing the memory and the present value of peasant life and ways.

Abstract

Moving from the observation of a change taking place in the way of cultivating, defined as ‘new peasant agriculture’; and placing it in a relational milieu, lively and (inter)active, that tends to completely redefine the (social, institutional, economic, territorial, landscape and cultural) perception of rural world, this ‘vision’ interprets it as the first outline of a ‘return to earth’ path, where we can read plain signs of a possible reappearance of the historical role, authentically ‘primary’, of earth and agriculture. The effort to grasp what, in addition to the transience of parallel worlds, is generating this seed, today beginning to bear fruit, opens then a broad view (both in the diachronic and the synchronic sense) that tries to encompass the ‘long history’ of agriculture, its roots in time - past and present - and its projection towards a viable future.

Keywords

New peasant agriculture, perception of rural, new primacy of agriculture, crisis, longue durée.

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