Back to the Land: Which Return? To What Land?

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1. We are living a time of crisis for both the metropolis form and the post-fordist circuit of valorization based on it. In this context, talking about a return to the land risks evoking the practical and theoretical quicksand of a consolatory lamentation rather than a necessary effort of heuristic understanding and political imagination. In Heidegger’s philosophy, the earth is “the essentially self-occluding” (2006, 31), namely that entity whose main feature is its passive letting be. From this perspective, the earth becomes the main element of a noxious rhetoric of returning to nature. Such a rhetoric presents a twofold danger. In fact, it is paradoxically able to enact a dismissal of any project of social transformation (as irremediably utopian) and a new cultural framework legitimating eco-business based on the ideology of eco-technological fix.

Although in different terms, Carl Schmitt had already individuated in the terrestrial element both the principle and the outcome of an authentically human experience: “Sacred writings tell us that man, emerging from earth, would return to earth. The earth is his maternal support, because he himself is the son of the earth. He sees in his siblings his ground-brothers, the inhabitants of the same earth” (2011, 1). To this mythical concept of the land - irreducible to technical techno-scientific mechanism - the great German jurist counters the sea, uprooted entity par excellence, irremediably opposed to ordering. Thus, on the one hand we find the land, fertile bearer of an internal measure whose result will be the rule of law: the State. On the other hand we find the sea, symbol of extreme dispersion amongst fluxes of commodities and people, whose achievement will be the realm of exchange: Society.

Schmitt was aware that such a rigid antithesis was undergoing a radical crisis. In the midst of World War II, in fact, he ends his Land and Sea as follows: “Indeed, the old nomos is fading away, dragging the whole system of redundant standards, norms, and traditions with it in its fall” (ibid., 9). What remains to establish is the form currently assumed by the land-sea dyad. Without pretending to exhaust the issue, these brief notes approach it historically and advance two strongly interrelated hypotheses:
a) the most ‘marine’ elements of contemporary capitalism - financial command, cognitive-informational dimension - are so profoundly integrated to the most ‘terrestrial’ element - agricultural sector - that it would be analytically and politically vain to isolate their respective developments;
b) although the current situation is all but idyllic and surely needs a change, the return to a more or less structured nomos of the earth is simply impracticable and, moreover, undesirable.

1 Land and earth translates the same Italian word terra. In this contribution, we will use indifferently land and earth, trying to keep together – as a multilayered unity – their agricultural and philosophical meanings.
Therefore, we will frame the *back to the land* issue from a resolutely anti-nostalgic viewpoint. To do so, we will interlace it with the theoretical reflection concerning the *production of the common/s*, namely a modality of governance which is different from both public practices and private dynamics.

2. To understand how deeply the finance-sea has penetrated the agriculture-land, it is sufficient to draw attention on the trends of food stock markets in the last decade (figure 1): as it is clear, the number of transactions has quintupled.

Yet, it is necessary to specify that the increase of transactions does not represent the main element of novelty with regard to the current scenario. After all, the link between financial tools and agriculture dates back to a relatively remote past and is justified by well established and easily understandable considerations. Since the revenue returns are collected when the products ripens, whereas the costs of production must be covered several months in advance, the financial sector plays in the first instance a credit role. Moreover, given the impossibility to know the oscillation of prices beforehand, producers and traders can preventively agree upon a contract of future selling at a commonly established price. Thus such contracts, named *futures*, also function as insurance against price *volatility*.

If those are the reasons for futures to exist, it is legitimate to wonder why the prices of agricultural raw materials have registered a schizophrenic trend between 2006 and 2012 (figure 2). In 2006-2008 prices have almost doubled, just to drop to initial values in the course of 2009 and peak again in 2010. At the time of writing (March 2013) prices have settled a little lower than their historical peak. Obviously, such an impressive volatility needs to be explained through a complex set of causal factors: the increase of global population - and hence of global food demand; global warming and the consequent increase of the frequency of extreme weather events; the rapid development of BRICS; the increase of production for biofuels, whose effect is a reduction of arable land for food production (*Mitchell* 2008). Nonetheless, as economist Riccardo Moro rightly points out, all these factors account for an *increase* of food prices and cannot explain the sudden *decrease* occurred in 2009. Moro’s hypothesis, which we entirely share, is that the absorption of agriculture in financial market has reached a turning point such that the destinies of stock markets (especially the Chicago Exchange) and food prices are inextricably bound.
This turning point is to be located in the transformation of the insuring-role originally played by futures. In fact, financial deregulation as practised in the last decade (but silently under way since the mid-1970s) has entailed the entry of new actors in the market arena, and the consequent metamorphosis of big agricultural traders into financial operators. Once contracting parties of futures have no interest whatsoever in the product which is supposed to be the object of negotiation, it is evident that the specificity of the commodity-food decays. Then, futures become just a form amongst many of derivatives, namely those financial tools whose value depends on another asset, called underlying. Thus, in theory, when the price of an underlying asset X increases, also its derivative should increase; and the same would happen in case of decreasing prices. What Moro’s analysis clearly highlights, however, is the inversion of the causal link between agricultural futures and derivatives. Although, in abstract, the latter depend on the former, the deep deregulation performed by neoliberal capitalism has de facto subordinated the former to the latter. Figure 3 shows the isomorphism between the trajectory of agricultural derivatives (graph on the right) and that of food prices (graph of the left).

As for the dimensions of such an inversion between futures and derivatives, it is here sufficient to recall Alberto Rocchi’s words: “It is calculated that in Chicago the volume of existing contracts is 46 times the wheat production of the USA, and 24 times their corn production” (2012, 64). We witness here what Christian Marazzi has properly defined “overproduction of self-referentiality” (2008, 19) performed by financial markets. He also refers to “the intrinsic uncertainty which characterizes them,
an uncertainty based on the blurring of the dichotomy between real and financial economy, between the inside and the outside of the global economic system” (2011, 47). It is important to add to these lucid reflections a last element: the essential instability which marks contemporary processes of financialization is not an accident, a side effect, an anomaly. To the contrary, such instability (and the arbitrariness which necessarily accompanies it) is today the pillar of the monetary governance of the global economic system. To sum up: if Schmitt’s land is today traversed by the sea, this is not the outcome of a tragic fatality. Rather, it is the result of a form of capitalist development based on an ever more intensive exploitation of knowledge (e.g. the key role of biotechnologies) and on a pervasive financialization of governmental practices (e.g. the fundamental function of rating agencies in the Eurozone crisis).

3. We have seen how a return to the land conceived of as a leap backward, as the replication of a putative golden age, can not be implemented since an ‘uncontaminated’ land does not exist any longer (even assuming, and that is doubtful, that it had once actually existed). The penetration of financial logics into the very consistency of the earth has made it irreducible to bucolic visions based on a fantastic, ‘pure and happy’ rurality: peasants and sailors, order and chaos melt into a zone of indistinction constitutively exposed to the circuits of valorization.

Nevertheless, the impossibility to go backwards along the paths of capitalist development does not appear as the only reason to criticize the political project of which such a ‘return’ is predicated. In fact, we find it undesirable even more than untenable or impracticable. Although it is certainly true that the relations between agriculture and capitalist valorization have been marked by violence from the very beginning - about the expropriation forced onto peasantry between the Seventeenth and Eighteenth century, Marx writes that it “is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire” (1990, 875) - just as true is that all epochal processes of transformation are invariably characterized by a profound ambivalence. After all, Marx himself notes that capitalism produces a freedom which is juridically formal but, at the same time, materially real. In fact, primitive accumulation is configured as “the historical movement which changes the producers into wage-workers” and, as such, also represents “their emancipation from serfdom and from the fetters of the guilds” (ibid.). Similarly, what Eric Hobsbawm defined “the death of peasantry” (1994, 289) in the course of the Twentieth century, should be considered as simultaneously forced industrialization at a global scale and as revolutionary transformation of social cooperation, whose consequences are a general increase in working classes’ conditions and an extraordinary process of mass education. Taking into account that since 2009 more people worldwide live in urban areas than in the countryside, one might think that the death of peasantry is more evident than a few decades ago. Yet, paradoxically, peasant social movements are today alive and well, running original, widespread and often successful campaigns. How is that possible? Our impression is that the answer is located in the new rurality theorized and expressed by radical organizations such as La Via Campesina or the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra. In particular, the multidimensionality of the concept of food sovereignty - based on the co-presence of social, environmental and generational justice - shows the distance of new peasant movements from the pastoral ideal of pre-capitalist, rural civilizations (ANTENAS, VIAS 2009).

Being aware that the process of primitive accumulation does not refer to a mere historical occurrence but to a ‘normal’ mechanism of the capitalist mode of produc-
tion that needs to be ceaselessly performed (Mezzadra 2011), we will now attempt to read the back to the land issue affirmatively, namely in a non-consolatory way. What is fundamental is to frame our point of view starting from the political subjectivity expressed by global peasant movements, and in particular from the new centrality of the nexus labor-land they articulate (Borghi 2012). More specifically, it is important to stress the social generality claimed by these movements: as argued by Silvia Pérez-Vitoria, such claims "are not corporative [...] Currently the most crucial problems of our planet are addressed by peasant movements" (2012, 58). From the fight against climate change to the improvement of working conditions, from the preservation of ecological equilibrium to the reduction of imbalances between cities and countryside: the peasant specificity encounters the struggle of the 99% of Occupy and shake the weak routine of business-as-usual. Thus, a double movement takes place: on the one hand, the heterogeneity of rural labor multiplies itself in the myriad social formations which populate the global scenario; on the other hand the peasant movements tends to organize a convergence with other radical actors on the basis of a common critique to the colonization of the living as operated by financial mechanisms. How to keep together, in a revised perspective of back to the land, these two aspects? In a preliminary way, we advance a hypothesis according to which the study of the common/s might enrich both theoretically and politically the idea that the liberation of rural subjects can occur through a return to the earth. In fact, the common in its singular form designates a comprehensive management of social life which is alternative to public and private dynamics, whereas the commons in their plural forms name the conflictual element that opposes expropriation in the most diverse situations. The reflection on the common/s is today particularly rich (amongst other sources: Hardt, Negri 2009; Mattei 2011; Chignola 2013) and it is impossible to review it in the present context. For our purposes, however, it is sufficient to emphasize its most important element, namely the productive character of the common/s. In fact, the common/s is not a natural given; rather, it originates form collective praxis of social struggles at every level. It follows that the back to the land issue refers, from the perspective of the common/s, to the virtuous co-presence of a twofold temporality. On the one hand, the reversibility of negative historical processes (e.g. uncontrolled spread of the metropolis form, increase of environmental degradation, worsening of the democratic deficit, etc.) allows for a selective recuperation of some aspects of past peasant civilizations. On the other hand, the opening towards a future horizon opens up a contested space for the social experimentation of new forms of rurality. To conclude: if back to the land means creating a place consciousness (Magnaghi 2005), which in turn expresses a struggle for self-government and a refusal of heterodirection, than our conviction is that this land should be the product of the common/s, and this return the starting point of a time to come.

References

Abstract

We are living a time of crisis for both the metropolis form and the post-fordist circuit of valorization based on it. In this context, talking about a return to the land risks evoking the practical and theoretical quicksand of a consolatory lamentation rather than a necessary effort of heuristic understanding and political imagination. Against this possibility, through an analysis of the progressive financialization of agriculture, we will show how the idea of a pure and pre-capitalistic rurality is problematic. Finally, we will develop the “back to the land” issue affirmatively, by connecting it to recent studies concerning the production of the common/s.

Keywords

Financialization; Agriculture; Land; Common/s; New Rurality

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