On the renaissance of rural and urban life: the “Fierucola del pane” in Florence

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Thirty years ago, the “Fierucola del pane”, literally the “little bread fair”, occupied a historical square of Florence for a day. It was the first Italian market of “natural family agriculture”, where new rural settlers and sons of the last peasants, challenging health regulations and the industrial mindset, displayed the products of farms conducted according to organic principles. It was a celebration of the new peasant culture. City dwellers accustomed to supermarket flavours were astounded at this first meeting of active protagonists and clandestines of the heroic phase of organic farming. Old trades and new manual or animal-powered tools were displayed, accompanied by the songs and dances of the Elves of the Ravine, a community from the mountains of Pistoia. In the years that followed, the joy of this September fair attracted participants from all of Italy. The market became an association and was flanked by major conferences attended by exponents of ecological thought and persons practising natural agriculture and manual crafts in search of sustainable technical innovations for agriculture, domestic life and the environment. With the institution of laws that would affect the life of farmers (hygiene, organic farming, farm stay, landscape and planning), politicians and public administrators were also invited.

I asked Giannozzo Pucci, founder of the Association La Fierucola and its president for many years, about the cultural environment of this “bridge between those returning to the land and those who never left it” (G.P. 1987, 5).

GP - The Fierucola sprang from an experience of friends in the north: the fair of Rouffach in Alsace which began in 1981. Hearing about it at the house of a collaborator of Giorgio La Pira, Fioretta Mazzei, I had the idea of linking a growers’ market to an ancient rite to the earth, women and the Virgin Mary, the Rificolona festival, celebrated at Santissima Annunziata every 8th September. For the celebration, peasants come into Florence to celebrate the land. It recalls the legend of the oar in the Odyssey: on his return, Ulysses buries an oar of the ship that brought him back to land, sacrificing it to Poseidon, god of the sea. The emphasis of the fair was on bread, essential and symbolic. The first editions were vital and spontaneous. Since they were only once a year, there was no economic interest but rather the joy of bringing creative things into the square, something that disappeared from later editions. In the beginning, we did not make distinctions or selections but favoured small producers, peasants and artisans. Then came the producers: only then was it necessary to have regulations. The basic idea was moral economics, contrary to university manuals and their concept that the economy is independent of morality. We tried to select what was good.1

1 Conversation with Giannozzo Pucci and the author on 15th March 2013.
IA - I have often wondered whether you wanted to promote ecological communities of the type mentioned in the statute of the association?

GP - Ecological communities were an idea of Graziano Ciceri, one of the founders. I think it is difficult to set up a community; it requires vocation. If anything, the Fierucola was an involuntary community. The ecovillages of today are voluntary communities. To put ecological criteria into the regulations of today’s individualistic, destructive society creates a sort of involuntary community. The regulations of the Fierucola were for everyone, but rewarded those who wanted to work in a certain way. We never chose a “mark.” We avoided requiring organic certification marks. For us, the others needed a mark. We were normal, while the alternative culture consisted of industrial producers trapped in the logic of industrial agriculture, even on a small scale. This is why the translation and publication of *World hunger: ten myths* was important.

IA - *World hunger: ten myths*, published by the Institute for Food and Development Policy in 1977, and soon translated into Italian in your *Quaderni di Ontignano*, provided critical tools for resisting the impositions of global commercial powers: transformation of peasants into workers, metropolitan life as the only life-style, mass society versus convivial society, the prevalence of exchange value over utility value, in other words, “meeting the needs and desires of the community without commercial transactions, but largely through unpaid work,” as we read in the introduction, where you cite Ivan Illich (*Moore Lappé, Collins* no date, 8). The Fierucola insists on the principles of subsistence economy, local on-farm production, considered the foundation for good food production “not only for the family but also for the country” (*Pucci* 2003, 4). However, in those years, war was openly declared on peasants, “unknowing carriers of millenarian subsistence culture.”

GP - Yes, we emphasized subsistence and sale for the real Market (not the global market), involving a direct relationship between buyer and seller. The Fierucola is guided by this relationship: an example is Duccio Fontani, who dried herbs as requested by a client, and this became his main production for decades afterwards. In the 1950s, you didn’t hear the word subsistence in universities. There was no consideration or respect for a peasant culture made of gestures and authority, where everything relates to the family farm, the most suitable dimension for conducting many different activities, including crafts. We were not proposing the past, but there are dimensions, such as diversified activity, that are part of human nature. Awareness of the war on peasants by the institutions and the political world came gradually.

IA - The Fierucola always set farm polyculture against industrial monoculture, manual work against mechanisation, and following the intuitions of Gandhi (1973, 203-213) and Illich (1971), even literacy. According Gandhi, the idea that intelligence develops exclusively through reading is completely false. Education from books must be supplemented or replaced with apprenticeship: “True development of the mind begins with teaching the apprentice why a certain movement of the hand or tool is nec-

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2 The regulations are published sporadically in the Fierucola association newsletter (*La Fierucola. Lettera di collegamento tra gli iscritti all’associazione*). Number 19 (1994) was entirely dedicated to the topic of “minimum rules” and the ideas or needs that caused them. However, the reader is reminded that “This collection of all the rules so far established does not exclude the possibility of future changes, even radical ones.”
The freedom of peasant illiteracy and the equivalence of apprenticeship to academic qualifications is often invoked in the association's publications (La Fierucola 1987, 8).

**GP** - Gandhi's idea that the "hand of man counts" is revolutionary. Thus Gandhi vindicates the Luddites at the dawn of industrialisation, which was paid in human blood and was based on the principle that human life was worth less than machines. The Luddites preached that the house, the loom, work, the fields, the vegetable garden and pastures should be close together. They were genuine defenders of humanity and representatives of a rich and diverse culture, skilled and competent not only in agriculture but also in crafts and trades. Their lives were expressive without writing and interpreted the signs of nature. In preindustrial society, popular culture was prevalently oral: it was verbal but rarely written. Only when one can no longer rely on one's body is it necessary to resort to the written word.

**IA** - Lanza Del Vasto, founder of the Community of the Ark, also had a strong influence on the operation and philosophy of the Fierucola. For example, the Proposal for a nonviolent society – Elimination of classes: from ideological superstructure to immediate possibility (Quaderni di Ontignano). This article brings together the provisional results of work of the Community of the Ark that was seeking to "follow the teaching of Gandhi in the heart of this world", criticising the idea of State, salaried labour and political parties. It was a radical criticism of classical capitalism and also of Marxist capitalism.

**GP** - I became acquainted with the ideas of Gandhi through the work and interpretation of Lanza Del Vasto. The Community of the Ark was a genuine forge of messages and made a deep impression on exchange of knowledge and work practices, among which farming with animal power, stone mills and architecture were important for us here in Italy. I can think of other community experiences in Italy, such as the community in Val Chiusella. Initiation has never been required for the Fierucola, though it is true that some initiation happened through direct and detailed knowledge of exhibitors, their life-styles, methods of production and being put to the test.

**IA** - In the newsletter to members, you claim that the Fierucola is "extra-territorial in place and time with respect to the laws of the State" (Pucci 1987, 12), a call to civil disobedience, always present in the markets and cultural products of the association. What have been the relationships between the Fierucola, the institutions and politics?

**GP** - We were able to organise the Fierucola because the Councillor for Social Security, and therefore hygiene, was Fioretta Mazzei, founder of the association. The Green Party helped in the period 1984-87 through economic contributions and patronage, which made things easier with Florence Council. After that we had no more contributions from any institution or party. As far as hygiene is concerned, in parallel with the

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3The more recent Charter for the renaissance of rural areas lists "the right to be illiterate" among the natural rights of peasants, namely "the right to live and communicate by means of an oral culture regarding everything that concerns the local countryside and its practices. This right implies that it is forbidden to impose obligations such as writing, the use of electronic devices or certifications of any kind in regard to farming. In regard to indigenous people this means that it is illegal to exact from them written documentation attesting land property rights, as their use of it since time immemorial must suffice" (Berry et al. 2008, 173; see also Commissione per il futuro dell’alimentazione e dell’agricoltura 2009).
market we also promoted meetings and conferences on this topic, inviting officers of the local health authority to talk to us. When the sale of unpackaged products was outlawed, we decided to sell bread as “furnishings”, publicly declaring our madness.\(^4\) Criticism from the institutions, omnipresent in our cultural environment, was summarised in a book by Giorgio Ferigo, an officer of the Hygiene Office, who subjected legal restrictions for small producers to evidence-based procedures.\(^5\) The book Certification as Torture (Il certificato come sevizia) was published in 2003.

**IA** - The question of natural hygiene (or the “hygiene of small local family production”) has been a central theme of the Fierucola since the beginning. In one of your articles entitled “To Humus sapiens”, you describe contemporary society as that of “maximum dirtiness […] resulting from momentary perfect cleanliness”. You give the example of the Tetrapak, hygienic packaging that is impossible to dispose of after use. In such a situation, you assert the need to “proclaim the viability of natural cycles, relative cleanliness and washable dirtiness” (Pucci 1987, 13). In 2003 you invoked “free competition between bacteria”.

**GP** - Yes, but competition between bacteria must be guided. In traditional production, the highest food quality is achieved by free competition between pathogenic and beneficial bacteria, with the systematic supremacy of the latter. This is natural hygiene. Industrial hygiene, on the other hand, is continually updated for the purpose of profits. The government cannot keep up with industry and its continuous updates: thus farmers have lost their freedom to do good things handed down by tradition.

**IA** - The Fierucola presented measures to end the war against peasants\(^6\) and to enable a universal return to the land at a conference in 1987. There were many proposals on different scales: rural communal areas for those wishing to farm, direct sale by craftsmen but not entrepreneurs, VAT exemption for small rural outlets, liberalisation of water mills, tax exemption for traditional organic farmers, paying laid-off workers for land maintenance work, restoration of civic uses and freedom of apprenticeship. What happened to these requests?

**GP** - The measures were a list of wishes and in many cases remained so. The Fierucola accompanied work in certain directions and helped some families to live from their farms. In some cases, such as the seed question,\(^7\) we realised years later that we were all intellectuals. We launched messages that needed years to mature. We thought that ideas should find legs in the institutions, which were not yet discredited as they are now, even though they reflected economic boom culture. The Greens, too, formulated objectives completely at odds with their scientific training. The institutions

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\(^4\) On the madness of farmers “as a representation of the ecological alternative without mediation with dominant forms of madness” see Berry 2008.

\(^5\) Ferigo formed the EBP (Evidence-Based Prevention) working group (Ferigo 2008, 184).

\(^6\) The Measures for rural life and non-entrepreneurial trades and crafts (La Fierucola 1987, 7-8) were drafted for the Fierucola conference of 5th September 1987.

\(^7\) G.P. is referring to the Seed Fierucola (for exchange of seeds) that originated not long after the first Fierucola and is still held every February. Despite his pessimistic comments, the seed question was important within the association and for its external relationships, for example with botanical gardens and research organisations.
and politicians regarded us as lively children. Now with Grillo’s followers it is the same. They are proposing our ideas from back then, but against a different cultural background. With regard to civic uses, a topic amply discussed in the Fierucola bulletin, we claim that if there is no population, there are no civic uses because there is no cultural life. Human dignity is only restored if the country chooses autarchy. One day I met Paolo Grossi, author of Another way of possessing, a fundamental text on civic uses and collective property. He told me that the nature of civic uses is the nature of revelation, a paradigm quite the opposite of science. Only then did I realise the distance between scientific nature and nature as revelation.

IA - You dedicated an issue of L’Ecologist italiano, that you direct, to “nature as revelation”, or as Goldsmith writes in the introduction to the issue, to “the intrinsic wisdom of ancient knowledge and religiosity” and to “cosmic or ecological theologies that were once the basis of our respective traditions but which we have now largely lost sight of” (Goldsmith 2007a, 10; see Goldsmith 2007b). There was lively reflection on all this in the Fierucola circle. The association bulletin published a passage by Illich that analysed and described the transformation of water into H2O, from an element charged with symbolic force to a chemical substance, a mere vehicle of hygiene (Illich 1985 and 1987). With regard to science’s “disdain for mystery”, in the preface of a basic text of neoagriculture, The one-straw revolution by Masanobu Fukuoka (1980), Wendell Berry explains a cornerstone of Fierucola thought: the defects of scientific reasoning “reduce life to what we know and assume that what we don’t know can be ignored” (ibidem, 14). As in the case of civic uses, the ascientific nature of which you recognise, the Fierucola regarded the topics of land use and landscape with interest. In the second newsletter to members of the association, Fukuoka’s Italian seminars were published in episodes, including the lessons at Ontignano and Preganziol in 1981. The seminars dealt with return to the land, a topic given much space in this first issue of the journal of the Società dei territorialisti/e.

In 1986, the bulletin mentions the concept of bioregion and “catchment-area awareness”. In 1987, much space was dedicated to the struggle of the priests of the Vara

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*This claim is sustained by publication of interviews with Beppe Grillo on ecological topics from national newspapers in the Inventario della Fierucola, a magazine that appeared between the 1990s and 2000s in connection with the activity of the association.*

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Figure 1. The “Fierucola del pane” (“Small bread fair”) in Florence, SS. Annunziata square, as represented in the first cover of La fie-rucola. Linking newsletter among the subscribers, winter 1985-1986 (drawing by G.P. Degl’Innocenti).
valley against Provincial laws regarding land use and landscape. Application of the Galasso law was the first true invasion of town planning into the management of farmland and forests, namely rural life. In 1999, again in Liguria, the Fierucola backed the march promoted by don Sandro Lagomarsini for renaissance of the Italian countryside. What consequences for the rural areas and landscape came from these awareness-raising campaigns?

**GP** - There was no direct affect on the landscape. The campaign was a very long-term investment that affected the life of several country families defended by the association.

**IA** - The Fierucola statute states that an aim of the association is to make metropolitan and over-urbanised areas relatively more human and self-sufficient by promoting their conversion into villages and suburbs with city agriculture and vegetable gardens. The *Quaderni di Ontignano* published a basic text for many town planners, *Villaggio e autonomia* (Village and autonomy) by Gandhi, and the newsletter published *Charter for the Reconstruction of the European City* by Léon Krier (1986)….

**GP** - Krier’s Charter then gave rise to the complementary *Charter for the renaissance of rural areas*, written with Vandana Shiva, Wendell Berry and Maurizio Pallante (cf. **Berry et al.**, 2008; **Berry**, 2008). This, too, is part of the same provocation, but occurred years later.

**IA** - So the Fierucola was not solely concerned with rural areas, but also explicitly addressed city dwellers, the peasant rear guard that left the land and became proletarian, and small urban artisans. City resistance on the part of manual crafts and trades and urban know-how was even considered a necessary condition for the renaissance of rural areas: “The reconstruction of the territory must be defined in a strict physical and legal separation city and countryside” (Krier 1986, 19). This antithesis was also heard in the teasing verses sung by Florentine children on Rificolona night, when the city streets filled with country people carrying coloured paper lanterns: “La mia l’è coi fiocchi! La tua l’è coi pidocchi!” (My lantern has bows, yours has fleas).

**References**


Abstract

The market known as "Fierucola del pane," literally the "bread fair," began in the early 1980s in Florence. It is the first Italian growers' market dedicated to family-scale natural agriculture and non-entrepreneurial craftsmanship. An association of the same name promotes meetings and conferences on ecological topics, such as biodiversity, organic farming, hygiene of local production, ancient trades and new instruments, farm stay accommodation, local seeds and grain, specific laws and taxes to protect natural growers and craftsmen. The cultural activity of the Fierucola is inspired by the principles of Gandhi, Lanza Del Vasto, Illich and others. It has produced important documents in favour of a return to the land and the resistance of urban crafts and trades, including the Charter for the reconstruction of the European city (1980) and the Charter for the renaissance of rural areas (2008).

Keywords

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