Acquacheta: a brief history of a place on the edge of urbanism

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1. Abandonment

The Acquacheta Stream is one of the first tributaries of the Montone river, which springs from the Muraglione pass (907 mt.), flows to Forlì, goes through its plain and merges into the Ronco River before Ravenna and flows into the Adriatic Sea.

The Acquacheta Valley is a wide umbrella, nestled in the Apennine Ridge, cut through by a dozen creeks; its waters flow, at first, to the Caduta Falls (the well-known waterfall quoted by Dante Alighieri in Inferno; canto XVI), then, after a longer and quieter stretch, flow into the Montone River at the town of San Benedetto in Alpe.

The territorialisation (Turco 1980) of the valley begins in medieval times; first hermit monks settle in locations which were then to become the main villages of the area. Permanent settlements and communities developed in their wake, as well as two Benedectine Abbeys: one in San Benedetto, to the north side, and one in San Godenzo, on the Tuscan side of the Sieve River, which flows towards Florence.

The Acquacheta valley, even further away, becomes in turn an area of hermitage, in the places called Romiti (nearby the plain above the Caduta Falls) and Eremo (on the south side, near the Muraglione Pass).

Since the middle of the fifteenth century, Benedectine Domains submitted to Florence’s authority and the valley was colonized by peasants who farmed sheep and wheat mainly.

In the land register of Lorena (1824), it is possible to find all settlements which have survived to this day although many of them, are now ruins, victims of a depopulation process in most rural and mountainous areas which first started in 1911 - and peaked between 1936 to 1971. Up to 1911, censuses of the local area point to a growth in population.

From a hydrographic point of view, the Acquacheta Valley ought to be considered as a single entity located in Romagna. However, the right side of the valley is dotted with a number of settlements better connected to Tuscany and San Godenzo via a number of pathways and tracks. Inhabitants of the valley would meet and mingle, especially during fairs, parties, and holidays, but they maintained that difference of identity in their discourse.1

1 From an old peasant tale.
With the Second World War, nazi-fascist armies were deployed along the Northern Apennine Ridge along the the Gothic Line. On the Tuscan side of the valley, some villages were entirely evacuated (Castagno D’Andrea), as well as several houses and villas (Moia), which were occupied by German troops. Resistance troops tended to operate in inner areas of the valley. In the night of 10th July 1944, on request of the partisan group led by Silvio Corbari, on the Lavane Mountain, a big airdrop of weapons took place. The Germans detected this activity and deployed several combat units to encircle the area. Heavy fighting ensued, and about 200 nazi-fascist soldiers died, whereas all partisans managed to escape unscathed. With the Allies reaching the Gothic Line and the withdrawal of the German forces who were intent on destroying and mining everything they encountered upon their retreat, San Godenzo was almost entirely ruined at the end of the war. Peasants come back soon after, but for few years; with the wave of industrialization, they soon left the valley definitely at the end of fifties, moving to cities or to more comfortable settlements, near towns and, above all, near the main road, by then asphalted and well maintained.

The major part of Acquacheta farms were completely abandoned, another part was bought by independent farmers who lived far away and exploited their newly acquired lands for summer pastures and wood cutting. Until the eighties some old fashioned woodcutters continued to work in the valley, mainly migrants from the South of Italy who lived in the villages and went to the cutting area by foot and transported logs using mules. Nowadays this profession has completely disappeared and timber is transported using industrial vehicles without any concern about the conditions they leave the roads in, since they do not live in the place, do not take children to the school everyday, do not mind about passing through all-weather.

During the sixties and seventies, hunters, fishermen, and mushroom pickers, were joined by sunday travellers, picnickers, barbecuers, off-road motor bikers, trekkers and ecological hikers. The arrangement of paths and a plain tourist promotion of the Dante waterfall have supported the growth of these phenomena, even if the entry of the area in the park would have severely limited all the motorized activities, as well as free camping and lighting fires, hunting and gathering.

2. Back to nature

In the April 1977, two men visited Pian Baruzzoli, called also ‘Pianbaruccioli’ and later nicknamed ‘Planba’ (Collettivo 1982, 50).

Pianbaruccioli’s story was born as an adventure: we wanted to go back to earth, doing farmers […] just to be self-sufficient. So, we went to live within nature, in very isolated places. Maybe we did it because it was difficult and we were young […] I have never understood what made sense of doing like everybody. I have never been understanding. I have always been looking for different experiences. We came back to earth because we… Since earth gives birth to people… We bet it was the best way of living, everyone with his field, his earth. “A day we will be many”; we thought.

It was the main rural settlement situated on the left side of the valley; they found there several abandoned houses surrounded by overgrown brambles and trees,
devastated roofs, with an obstructed water source and a dead sheep in the well; “one of the few habitable rooms was completely black from smoke; it has been used as drying kiln for chestnuts” (ibid., 7), but there was some hope for a relatively fast restoration. The two men pay a visit to the owner who “agrees to the houses being inhabited after so much time” (ibidem). Despite practical difficulties of living together and disputes with other owners, the Pianba Commune grew to attract youth from all over, Italy and Europe. Development peaks about in the middle of the eighties, when almost all the houses of Pian Baruzzoli were restored and repopulated (one of these through the direct intervention of the Emilia-Romagna Region) as well as two settlements located nearby (Cortecce, Trafossi) and Brigianzone for shorter periods.

Life is an explosion of spontaneity. As children come out then all gets composed, there is more responsibility. In so far as you are a idler it is all another life. When children arrived all became more organized. At the beginning, in the evening after dinner, we didn’t even clean the table: quickly started music. Then women started coming over, children appeared and the women got mad because the morning there were a lot of things to wash. Yes, maybe the early times were wilder in a sense, though it was wonderful!4

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3 One of the houses, nicknamed ‘House of the witches’, is a state property in public concession.

4 Interview to Gianbardo and Ulisse, in D’Acunzi 2012.
From the meeting with the old farmers and shepherds there was a good dialogue. One of them reported, in the early eighties:

*I lived from 1945 to 1948 in Bringanzone and from 1948 to 1956 at Romiti. Then I moved closer to San Benedetto. Peasant life was very tough, you youth manage to deal with it because you have another kind of spirit and you are not forced to do it for hunger. If anything, it is because you are tired of everything which immerses and conditions you* (Ivi, 6).

They have helped "enormously for us to cope with [...] difficulties and ignorance" (Ivi, 50) of the young ‘Zappatori senza padrone (Diggers without ruler);\(^5\) this was the name of the cooperative they set up for acquiring some rights on the lands and for giving a collective identity to themselves.

During some periods, especially in summer, these settlements would become overcrowded. Many visitors would come just to get a feel for the place, and even the numerous displacements of long term residents who often travelled to India, Spain, Sicily or to the North of Europe, returning after many months and in some cases even years, failed to counter this swell in numbers. Besides making new experiences, they visited other communes where they stayed for short or long time or for life. Then, the commune network was based upon this kind of exchange of people and "snail" mail as well as the AAM Terra Nuova magazine, which from 1977 began to circulate among alternative communities. The boys and girls mostly came from the working class, and had previous experience of manual work; a few of them had a school-leaving certificate but there were no graduates and university students collaborated but did not settle permanently.

Some settlers from the first group began to set up a family, to look for other houses, possibly closer to villages and services, and eventually they found them, in the region but not so close to the valley. A second group, in 1982, went to occupy an abandoned settlement (La Greta) on the right side of the valley, where a second ‘bridgehead’ directed to Tuscany (see third chapter), was soon developed.

People of the commune name themselves and tie themselves to the land, name places, rehabilitate previous names discovered from dialogues with old peasants, sometimes changing the original toponyms, sometime dubbing new micro-places created by the new context. Rural identification is different from urban codifications insofar as cartography in the former is never characterized by details equivalent to those found in grids of avenues, streets and roads. Rural identity springs from local knowledge, conversations about the past and aspirations about the future.

In December 1978 a ‘White book for the natural park of Acquacheta’, was released which aimed to disseminate the knowledge of the context, the motivations proposals of the group such as the constitution of a natural park. Eventually this occurred in 1988, under the regional law n°11, the ‘Regional park of the Romagna Ridge’\(^6\) and in 1993, with the constitution of the ‘National park of the Casentine Forests and Campigna’\(^7\). Today, half the valley is part of the park, and the other half is located in a site of community importance (S.I.C.) of the EU ‘Natura 2000 network’.\(^8\)

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\(^5\) The full name “Union of diggers without ruler, Gerard Winstanley. Land to who works it” is inspired by the movement of *diggers*, in the mid seventeenth century, led by Winstanley.


\(^7\) DPR. 12/7/1993.

\(^8\) SIC IT5140005, recognised by Regione Toscana as SIR n. 39.
The diggers faced hostilities born from some property owners and bureaucrats, but also found support from locals or public servants or judges.

During the eighties, the reflux is felt also in the valley. Initially women with babies left the commune. Since the eighties and nineties, young men and women with different needs and ambitions come to Piamba but only few people remain for a longer period of time.

Upon visiting this commune, one gets the impression of having returned to the past. The very small photovoltaic panel positioned above the house entrance of Ca’ Pian Baruzzoli and the portable stereo dating back to the eighties, do not compensate the whole effect made by diggers reaping hay with their ‘ferre’,9 spading gardens, hand-milking cows or goats, fireplaces and wood stoves with self-made mini water boilers, the odd low consumption light bulb and the time-less candles and a pedal washing machine, are of little comfort to those expecting standard of living.

Today, inhabitants of the Trafossi commune - mostly young males - are still there, and Planba, safeguarded by an old (60 y.o.) member a young couple (almost 30 y.o.) and a very young yoga guru who retreat there every summer, in a small house (called ‘observatory’ due to its position) adapted as a duni. But the human relations and the social organization practiced there are far from a return to past. This reveal the inner spiritual sense of place as well as an ascetic new kind of social ecologic living.

Sometimes new visitors arrive, generally couples, they work and experiment, but stay for a short time. Emotions elicited by the beauty of these surroundings elude description; a view over the valley from the panoramic viewpoint near the observatory, without any artificial light or noise, can lead to deep contemplation.

9 Name given to scythes in Romagna.
The territorisation process is declining it would seem, however it is no longer threatened by owners or authorities; the group has managed to acquire lands and formalize its relations with institutions, its presence is stable and well rooted. In addition, many women have given birth here. Children of the first generation of settlers are adults now and have taken different directions in life. Some former inhabitants of Pianba look for explanations about its future, but that is another story, too recent, still impossible to tell.

3. Back to the territory and the regeneration project

In 1982 a group of boys and girls, many of them from Lombardy, Emilia or Veneto, moved to La Greta. They were slightly younger than the first members. They initially occupy and restore the ruined house. Eventually, at the end of the nineties, the house was acquired by the couple who still lived there. From the original group, after a pioneering phase, some couples are formed, new households gradually move to houses closer to villages; in a similar way as happened to Pianba. La Greta’s location means that the most of its inhabitants are attracted towards San Godenzo and its valley.

In 1985, in the Romiti Plain, an international Rainbow gathering took place. It is a outdoor event which lasts several days, with lots of seminars and opportunities to talk about old experiences or new projects. Some inhabitants came out with the intention to set up the association ‘Rainbow for Acquacheta’ which, since 1986, aims to repopulate the valley in accordance with nature conservation principles through ecological education and practices. The aim was also to promote agreement with local authorities in order to organize cultural events and ecotourism opportunities. In the following years, a cooperation with the former park authority was activated for environmental education meetings and exhibitions but after that no important initiatives followed.

At La Greta only one couple remains, joined sometimes by young single men or women, who cohabit for a few years. Wood, goats and cheeses, garden and medicinal herbs, fruit and berries jams, leather and felt handcraft: a mix of activities, managed within the hou-
sehold rhythms, in order to ensure the sustainability of this family, who have fostered two children who are now nearly twenty years old.
The back to the past is less evident here than at Pianba, solar panel equipment is minimal but enough for lighting requirements, there is a personal computer, television, and other small appliances. Farm machinery have more recently started to replace the horses who were used in the early years for towing ploughs as well as for hauling materials and timber, for digging earth and snow, and for the production of extra electric power when needed. Off-road vehicles are used to leave the commune for services and trades; San Godenzo, the nearest village, is 40 minutes away. The advent of mobile phones, since the nineties, means that it is possible to communicate at distance even there, and, with a lot of patience, some bytes of data can be downloaded from the Internet.

A new household settled at Eremo in the year 2000. It is a couple from Emilia who has restored the houses, filled the stables with cows and goats, and prepared some rooms for rural tourism.

Proposals for the construction of a new big industrial wind farm along the main ridge (Men- gozzi 2013) were introduced towards the end of the first decade of the 2000’s. All of these households were united in opposing such plans through collective action. From their discourse about perceived threats, the territory is referred to as ‘ours’.

In the last decade, two young couples came to Corniolo and Abetella. They settle in their new land with in a ready-made wood house and begin to collaborate with La Greta’s household - under the name of Rainbow for Acquacheta - for a project concerning the sustainable regeneration of the valley. In 2013, the project is almost completed; its main aim is to empower the conditions of

territorial safeguarding, considering the repopulation of the mountain the most effective action of protection for the landscape and biodiversity, improving the ecological, social, economic and political environment, as well as local authorities, San Godenzo villagers, Acquacheta Valley users, with the aim of return to the farmer, the role of territorial caretaker. A small scale farmer as promoted by the project, who operates in accordance with
environment friendly cultivation methods and a minimal use of machinery, is vital in the battle against cultural degrade and abandon (ASSOCIAZIONE 2013, 13).

The association buys new land hectares, which partially renames. The project envisages to proceed with small scale farming and the restoration of ruins and pastures, arrangements and planning for environmental activities and structures for nature watching, and ecological tourist camping. Restoration criteria focus on the reuse of old material and striving to recreate original forms as faithfully as possible, but at the same time endorse self-construction methods which, as the first floor is completed, may lead to the use of wood, straw-bale, shingles or earth roofs, therefore not necessarily stone walls and shingles (given the scarcity of that material and construction difficulties). Furthermore, the authors ask the public domains be “entrusted to a collective management for the fulfillment of food self-sustainability and new rights of responsibility for a rural regeneration” (Ivi, 20).

References


Abstract

In the historical narration of territories, the relationship between space and its communities is put in the first place. Its geographic character places it in a marginal position compared to the main social processes. The environmental conditions and social interpretations which have transformed it from Benedictine settlement to partisan resistance, and into ‘eco-sophical rural communes’, characterize it as a spatial reserve of sense, both ecological and cultural. Today, its inhabitants propose projects aimed at repopulating the area, which have to endorse this vocation, extending the cultivated surfaces according to self-sufficiency ecological principles, and setting up light structures to enhance people coming and visiting experiences through ecological observation, trekking, and temporary eco-camping.

Keywords

Territorial narrative; marginality; sense reservoir; repopulation; ecology.

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For example, some plots were called “Lorien’s fields”. Similarly to other communities (e.g. Community of the Elves) they are inspired by literary myths, in particular picked from Tolkien’s fantasy literature.