Story of a farming commune. 
Return to earth as a political and existential choice

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In 1977 a group of young people from Rome began to explore the abandoned territory surrounding Gubbio in search of land to occupy. The basic requirements were: "houses fit for human habitation and a bit of soil" (Sandro, interview June 28th 2010). At Easter’s dawn of 1978, a dozen people occupied a piece of land owned by the then Agricultural Development Authority Umbria (Esau) in Monturbino, with an indefinite number of supporters, mainly Roman.

The occupants had recently been activists in political groups giving them the methods and strategies to write press releases and organize public events. The local papers supported their struggle reporting that what the young people were asking for was simply some abandoned land to work in of which there was plenty (Il Messaggero, April 8th and May 5th 1978, Paese Sera, April 5th, 1978).

The local population was sympathetic: neighbors brought gifts, food, clothing, and the City Council of Gubbio invited the Esau - who had requested the peasants expulsion from the property - to sit at a negotiations table and find a solution favorable to the young occupants. The Esau workers initially showed some hostility, as they were concerned that the arrival of young farmers could jeopardize their jobs. Soon, however, the Esau workers understood that they had nothing to fear and relations improved, perhaps because they were convinced that the young Romans would not withstand the cold winter. However, the occupation started a three year period during which numerous evictions and collective negotiations took place.

From the very beginning the commune of Monturbino concentrated on mixed farming: cattle, sheep and goats made available by neighbors. Like other agricultural communes, the one in Monturbino, took advantage of the 285/77 law, ‘Provisions for youth employment’, and became a youth and agricultural cooperative called The Plow.

The early days of the commune were characterized by a continuous flow of different types of people. A few among those living permanently in the house in Monturbino were more interested in the political aspects of the life in the commune, keeping contacts with Rome and organizing meetings with local politicians to reach an agreement concerning the occupied lands. During the spring of 1978, Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro was kidnapped in Rome by the Brigade Rosse. Consequently the police searched the commune - the same thing occurred in other communes throughout Italy - and those identified as leaders were brought to Perugia to be questioned. The word spread throughout the Gubbio population,

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casting a bleak shadow on the young Romans. It took a while for the occupants to recover from this episode and come clean of any suspicion of involvement in the armed struggle.

Figure 1. Copy of an article on the negotiation between the cooperative and ESAU, April 5th, 1978, Sandro Illuminati private archive.

Between 1978 and 1979 the occupants organized events for the ‘right to land’, coordinating with the occupations of Mount Peglia near Orvieto, those of Mount Subasio in Assisi and those of Lisciano on Lake Trasimeno. On May 4th, 1978 they all went to Perugia to protest bringing their sheep with them, shouting the slogan “give the land to those who work it”. But the arrival of winter really took its toll and the first to leave were the more politically active members of the commune. The cold was too much to bear! Fortunately new members arrived bringing a new work force and
political vigor. Somehow the life in the commune maintained its equilibrium. The risk of being evicted was constant, but the farmers continued their work producing cheese, hay and vegetables.

When, after long negotiations, the municipality of Gubbio finally gave the occupants a piece of land and a farmhouse in Bellaugello, the commune (ten adults and two children that had been living and working together for three years) split up. The group’s cohesion fell apart and tensions and conflicts, which had previously remained dormant, exploded in violent fights as the external menace ended. Two groups decided to leave and occupy another piece of land. The decision, however, was reinforced also by the lack of land: the farmland granted by the Gubbio municipality in Bellaugello was not enough to support all the cooperative members. Moreover the administration didn’t keep its promise to grant additional nearby abandoned land. When the commune disbanded two groups remained in the granted land, where part of them still live today. Two other groups settled in another piece of land also owned by the municipality of Gubbio, in the Carestello area. After countless instances of eviction occupants were granted permission to stay and later given lease of the land. On April 29th 1984 an earthquake hit the area making houses not fit to live in. The communities were given pre-fabricated housing, but no money for reconstruction: the refunds were owed only to the actual owners of the property, the municipality of Gubbio. Consequently houses were never rebuilt and have since turned to ruins. Today the members of the old commune live in the countryside between Gubbio and Umbertide. Thirty years later they all agree that the commune ran well and was quite productive. Relationship conflicts were the main problem. A few years after the split up, all relationships between former members have been reestablished.

The Monturbino commune was not an isolated experiment. There were many similar experiences in Umbria at that time, of which hardly any traces remain today. Valleys and hills emptied by the agricultural exodus were revived in the seventies by the arrival of people moving in abandoned houses. Not all were communes. Many individuals and couples arrived randomly - some even from Northern Europe - to start basic agriculture. They settled in old houses, surrounded by several acres of land, which quickly became self-sufficient farms. Newcomers wanted to share their cultural, political and spiritual experiences with people with similar points of view on life, something they could not do with the local population. “We recognized each other [...] there were many meetings and parties”, says one of the witnesses, “we felt a great drive for harmony and started many projects together” (Emma, interview March 20th 2010). But discussions in those years were difficult and heavily influenced by cultural and political backgrounds. Many projects were undertaken but differences were profound and often insurmountable. One of the early eighties projects was the exchange of workdays between farms. Once a month everybody would go to a single farm that had some big task to carry out, to complete in a single day what otherwise would have taken weeks of hard work to finish. Like cleaning an entire abandoned olive grove, covered with brambles, and turning it into a productive one. Emma says: “About twenty of us worked and ate together for an entire day, it was a wonderful experience when we started out, but there were too many different ideas and after only one year it was all over”. At the end of the nineties “relationships became more mature... we started talking about more down to earth things, since the problems of those who had cows and sheep and of those who needed
someone to cut the hay were similar. It doesn’t really matter if one is an anarchist or a monarchist, we have common land to take care of.” Nowadays, when they meet, they talk about cheese, bread and what they need to do and how they need to do it. They exchange tips on how to care for plants. They understand that cultural backgrounds can be different, but they also know that they share the land they have chosen to live in and work on. Emma insists on underlining

the enormous importance of the place you live in, which is what ultimately really unites people. The problems we have here, the clay soil, the piedmont climate, these are the things that our daily lives are made of, not a series of political issues… the things we talk about are the things human beings have always talked about and this is what makes you feel that in a community, important things like having enough food or good neighbors and friends who love you.

The prevalent mind-sets that guide these people, even those who have settled in very remote places, are the need to live in a community built on strong personal relationships and the willingness to live attuned to nature’s own rhythm. Obviously, especially in the first phase of the settlements during the seventies and eighties, some of their neighbors were still old peasants who lived on sharecropping farms. Relationships with local peasants were generally characterized by collaboration and openness. The residents of the valleys, in which would-be peasants moved in, took care of their own needs and had the knowledge that the newcomers tried to acquire. The local people were the living custodians of the peasant lifestyle and culture.

They didn’t only teach us the skills but also a different way of dealing with life […] a whole way of living that was really far from ours. At first, coming from the city, this kind of frugality seemed almost ridiculous, but slowly we understood how important it was to cherish everything: the terms, the equipment, the expertise and the stories of the native populace. It is somewhat ironic that people had to come from Rome, Bologna, London, and the rest of Europe, to learn this ‘native’ behavior, while the actual natives were on their way to Milan to enter a consumer society […]. We are very grateful to all our teachers. Unfortunately many of them are no longer with us (Emma, March 20th, 2010.)

Newcomers learned their craft working along with local farmers and Sardinian shepherds, who live with their flocks on the nearby hills after a previous migration. The old peasants helped the new ones get acquainted with the history of the territory. And now that these teachers (the term ‘maestro’ is still being used today) are no longer with us, the new peasants can carry on their legacy through their work. They learned the necessary skills to labor the land and continue to use them in daily and seasonal work, even though they have introduced a number of innovations regarding the use of renewable energy.

The know-how seems to have passed on effectively after more than thirty years of neighborly relations and the newcomers have become responsible for the land on which they live, ensuring the circle of life. This is the spirit with which those who aspired to a more natural lifestyle have come and continue coming. These people link their presence – at first unfamiliar – to the local ecological cycle, granting its continuation by mixing simple techniques with more complex ones based on the use of local renewable resources.

Studies on the subject as well as the people involved speak of return movement to describe a migration from city to the country based on a moral and political choice. The
definition of this return as a movement gives the understanding of the magnitude of the dream these people shared. The term *return* is used to describe the retrieval of something that previous generations had left behind in order to enter the consumer civilization (Cardano 1994). “Back to the land” means choosing an *economy that sustains life* whose production is based on the ecological cycle (Shiva 2009). This is what the people involved in this *return movement* have done and continue to do in the heart of the capitalist western world. They make their choice based on a different point of view of the dominant development model. This is not simply restoring an agricultural model that is no longer effective. They are actually searching for a new model. From the start their dream moved them away from the social injustices of the traditional patriarchal rural society. However, they drew what they believed to be useful from the past. Their goal was to counteract the progressive deterioration of the environment and of human relationships. Thereby, adopting a non-capitalistic development model. The countryside proved to be the perfect place to experiment with new forms of labor and cohabitation. It allowed to “fill the gap between our ideals and everyday life” (Commune Uripia 2001, 4).

These individuals put their ideals into practice day by day, even though some claim to have moved away from political activism before relocating to the countryside and no longer focus on ‘political issues’. They are trying to build an alternative productive and social model, by mixing rural tradition with contemporary urban culture (Willis, Campbell 2004). The peasants adopted Ivan Illich’s ‘subsistence economy’ which is a *predominant way of life in a post-industrial economy in which people reduce their dependence on the market, by implementing - through political action - an infrastructure where skills and tools serve primarily to create value in use* (Illich 1978, 84).

References

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Abstract

The paper reports the experience of a farming commune founded in the late seventies in Umbria. After a brief historical reconstruction of the events leading to the birth and development of the commune, the analysis focuses on the social and economic background in which it was born. It focuses on the relationship that young commu-nards have with the old local peasants, custodians of the rural culture of their share-
cropping families; but also on their correlation with a new generation of peasants coming, like them, from the excitement of student protests that characterized city life at the time. After tracing a regional network of solidarity, which continues to the present day, the article closes on the individual and collective choices that a community takes to stay out of the consumer society by putting into practice what Ivan Illich called subsistence economy.

**Keywords**

Farmer communes; peasant cultures; territorial networks; subsistence economy; solidarity.

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