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Sustainability as a Symbolic Resource at the Local Level, and Its Strategic Uses

A Study in Northern Italy

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This article focuses on sustainability understood as a source of political legitimation. I explore political imaginaries and the future as a cognitive resource among two small farming communities in Northern Italy, discussing what transformation towards sustainability means at a concrete level and how this definition may be used strategically in political negotiations to access resources. Ethnographically rooted, this study uses reflexivity and researcher's positioning as a tool to better understand the farmer's social and cultural frameworks, related conflicts, and strategies for surviving. Rhetoric and practices about sustainability establish a symbolic resource that allows gaining new agency spaces. Temporalities regimes are examined here, in order to grasp the identity-making and the self-differentiation processes among the farmers.

New Farmers in the Venice Region

Over the last twenty years, farmers on the island of Sant'Erasmo, Italy, have seen an evolution in the distribution system of their agricultural products, which has gone from mainly local distribution (through the Rialto markets in the historic centre of Venice or in Mestre) to large retail chain distribution. Faced with an ever-widening market and increased competition from other growers, farmers have lost their bargaining power. Poverty has deepened, which ultimately has forced many families to migrate to nearby localities in search of employment in coastal cities focused on tourism (Jesolo) or industry (Mestre).

This outflux of farmers has been countered by an influx of younger newcomers – and younger members of island families – who have tried to regain control over the area via new "sustainable" agriculture. Since 2016, I have studied the reconversion in Northern Italy of young people largely employed in the tertiary sector. They move to areas that are part of the primary sector, mainly agricultural (Pruvost 2013; Apostoli Cappello 2019). The initial assumption was that this increase has mainly been a response to the economic insecurity of unemployment and the lack of adequate governmental social support (Bertell 2016; Grasseni 2013). Coldiretti, the main Italian organization of agricultural entrepreneurs, confirms that the agricultural sector is currently experiencing a particularly dynamic momentum in which young people are establishing new agricultural businesses (Scoones et al. 2020), engaging with complex markets and new politics:

> In Italy there are 53,475 agricultural businesses run by persons under 35 years. This puts Italy in the lead in Europe regarding the number of young people involved in agriculture, with an increase of 9% in the third quarter of 2017 (...). The presence of people under 35 has, in fact, revolutionized work in the countryside where 70% of young companies are employed in activities ranging from the corporate transformation of products to direct sales, from educational farms to farming pre-schools for children under 6 years, but also to recreational activities, social farming (...) wellness centres in farming and the care of the countryside and even the production of renewable energies (...).[1]

The report states that an epochal change is taking place – one that has not happened since the Industrial Revolution. Now, working the land is no longer considered to be a last resort. Instead, for strongly motivated younger generations it is a new path to a

[1] http://giovanimpresa.coldiretti.it/pubblicazioni/attualita/pub/lavoro-agricoltura-al-top-per-crescita-partite-iva-14/ [Jobs: agriculture tops for growth in VAT numbers] (published September 10, 2018).

future connected with nature. Coldiretti quantified this phenomenon by stating that almost 30,000 young people in 2016–17 applied for funding from the Rural Development Programmes (RDP) of the EU to establish farming businesses.

This article focuses on the regional level of a reconversion that is global in scope; that is, social experiments in small-scale agricultural production in two different places in Italy: Bologna and Venice. My aim is to show that, at least locally, agricultural production aimed at experimenting with modes of non-extractive relationships with natural resources is creatively and transversally embodied in communities and actors (McMichael 2006). For these disparate communities I use the classical categories of conservative sovereignty and eco-socialism (Lowy 2015). Both old and new farmers claim to act for environmental sustainability. Despite ideological differences, old and new farmers move on the ground in harmony with each other, and intercept and embody the ecological expectations of a variety of urban consumer-activists. They are promoters of an ecological movement embodied mainly in locavore demand (Apostoli Cappello 2019, 2022).

In Venice, many of the actors I studied – both institutional and non-institutional – were in conflict in the same space because they had completely different and competing views on sustainability. These included the conservationist emphasis on the heritage of the lagoon and the city (including its agricultural spaces), supported by Unesco, the Italian state and to a large extent by the Municipality of Venice. The municipality, however, exercised ambiguous policies in this regard, since it had strong interests in maintaining the flow of large cruise ships full of tourists and their access to the city centre. The reasons for these differences are partly environmental (the Venetian island environment brings its own limitations, but also resources), and partly political (historical ways of thinking, self-organizing and acting have been highly regional in Italy, and continue to be).

I use a historical-political frame to grasp the ways in which the interlocutors understood their identity constructs, strategies, internal and institutional conflicts, and to situate them in local ideological genealogies (the Veneto and Emilia-Romagna Regions). This has allowed me to better understand the ways in which actors understood their identity constructs through space, time, strategies, internal and institutional conflicts (Chamboredon 2019: 223). The Bologna and the Emilia-Romagna regions have deep-rooted political histories of militancy and local institutions oriented to the left of the political spectrum. The Veneto region, where I position my ethnography, has a strong autonomist, anti-state political tradition, as well as a history of anti-institution rhetoric.

Theoretical Approach to the Ethnographic Study

Anthropology tackles many problems linked to environmental sustainability, re-discussing the very meaning of the category (Brightman & Lewis 2017). Sustainability figures as a central value in the agroecological environment in Italy (Rival 2017). Hastrup has pointed to "some of the weaknesses of any abstract notion of sustainability. In the Anthropocene, all concepts and classifications are necessarily enfolded in insiders' perceptions and practices" (2017: 145). I approach the concept of 'sustainability' not as a disembodied, ahistorical and apolitical condition, but as a relational category and a bargaining ground, the meaning of which changes depending on who is claiming it and why.

In this article I focus on transitions from a critical perspective that queries the way in which the use of this term depoliticizes its real implications by minimizing unrest and conflict. "Unlike 'crises', 'revolutions' and 'mutations', that can be structural, critical or violent, transitionalist imaginaries suggest gentle, gradual and consensual change" (Loloum, Abram & Ortar 2021: 4; also Gupta 2015). This semantic blurring makes a critical anthropological approach to transitions and sustainability research difficult, but highly necessary.

My work deals with shared temporalities understood as ways of constructing space, of territorializing it (Bertho 2005). Regimes of temporality are examined in order to understand the processes of identity making and self-differentiation between local communities that I have observed in Venice and Bologna. In doing so, I will explore the future as a cognitive resource (Appadurai 2013). I analyse narratives and expectations about local time regimes, in particular the future, postulating that the fact of discursively representing the future through narrative imaginaries is in itself a way of making the future tangible and shareable, and that its shared representations provide the basis for generating the world and transforming it (Arendt 1958), acquiring the "capacity to aspire" (Appadurai 2004), and to act collectively in the present (Janda & Topouzi 2015). I explore whether the fact of seeing oneself as different from a socio-cultural point of view allows one to think differently about temporalities and therefore about the horizons of individual and collective action.

Mathews highlights the structural tensions between the urgency of focusing on a specific ethnographic case and a "long-term anthropological analysis of the processes that have produced environmental degradation and social deprivation" (Mathews 2020: 76). From this perspective, conducting ethnographic research on socio-environmental sustainability at the local level is understood here as *articulating dynamics at different scales*. This provides an opportunity to explore co-related socio-cultural conditions such as dispossession and agency alongside socio-environmental issues, which are at

the heart of several recent anthropological debates, but which use different theoretical approaches (Tassan 2021).

I strove to be reflexive as a means to better understand the social and cultural frameworks of local communities, associated conflicts and survival strategies. Our positionality is exploited here to highlight the perceived subalternity (Spivak 1988) among our interlocutors in relation to a more or less imagined institutional and academic elite. Our use of positionality also highlights, through the more relational aspects of ethnographic practice, contextual reasons for potential trust or distrust in future research.

This article proceeds as follows: I first explore the native traditional farmers of Sant'Erasmo, Venice. Then, I deepen the description of the complexity of the local agricultural context by observing a group of farmers who have moved to Sant'Erasmo to practice organic farming. This new group sees themselves in opposition to the first group due to differences in cultivation methods and the fact that the second group has not lived on the land in question for generations. Finally, I visit the source of inspiration for the second group, a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) cooperative, Arvaia, in Bologna, to highlight structural differences in the regional context. According to our interlocutors, CSA is the future of sustainable agriculture but, for reasons attributed to the political culture of the Veneto region, this desirable future can only develop elsewhere.

Methodology for the Fieldwork

Small farms in both Venice and Bologna that I visited were led by people between the ages of 30 and 40, who had tried to find economic stability by establishing themselves as farmers at the local level. In Venice, I focused on the development of small agri-food businesses in the Venetian city-system which includes the historic centre, the lagoon as well as the urban and industrial area of Mestre. Field research was based on participatory observation of agricultural work over the course of six months. This agricultural work involved the collection, storage and distribution of vegetables, as well as the sale of products in downtown Venice. I also conducted twelve semi-structured interviews. My semi-inductive approaches focused on the life-stories of key actors, six of whom I followed closely. Aware of the potential weaknesses of the biographical approaches described by Chamboredon (2019: 157–159) in rural contexts, my approach nonetheless allowed me to highlight the relationships between the individual and communal investments that shaped life horizons and economic investments in the agri-food business. I focused on the connection between actors – individual and collective – and their interests, in varied locations such as delivery sites. In the world of

micro-level agri-food enterprises that populate the island, I focused on the two most important ones in terms of local visibility in Sant'Erasmo, Venice. I also considered the debate in the local press to be a rich site of information on the subject.

In Bologna, I chose to examine a cooperative that had been suggested by Venetian organic eco-socialist farmers who had been inspired by it. I used multi-sited ethnography as described by Marcus (1995) to observe the relationships and ways in which social imagination moved within what I saw as a community of engaged producers. In Bologna, my ethnography was decidedly shorter than in Venice. In 2017, I conducted two cycles of open interviews with four main interlocutors. I gathered a large amount of information in the form of autobiographical writings in blogs, articles from online magazines and interviews published online. Moreover, I had also conducted research in the city of Bologna ten years prior to this study. In Bologna I observed moments of vegetable delivery in the city, asking the buyers short informal questions. Direct observation of these sales helped me to place the cooperative's members within the political landscape and current network of city relations.

In my field research I faced significant difficulties, especially mistrust towards the world I was perceived to inhabit by those I studied, thought of as academic and bourgeois. I decided to exploit the heuristic power of these difficulties by making the anti-elite and anti-institutional attitudes emerge directly from the ethnography.

I have anonymized my Venetian interlocutors, giving the reader all information needed to understand their operation and size. It was, however, difficult to access official data on the prices of vegetables, production volumes and, above all, the observance of labour laws and the companies' tax system in the Venetian field site. For the Bologna data, I identify the name of the cooperative I studied. This cooperative explicitly strives to play a public role at local and national levels, and its economic quantitative data were publicly available on the cooperative's website.

Socio-ecological Fragility

The Venetian lagoon is an almost entirely anthropogenic territory which has been laboriously maintained throughout the centuries by hydrological civil engineering. The environment of Venice is fragile, completely artificial, and difficult to maintain, as it is exposed to both severe erosion and rising sea levels.[2] It is simultaneously experienced as a "natural" area and is presented as such in narratives playing out and competing in the arenas of regional, national, and European negotiations. The lagoon of Venice is

[2] www.atlantedellalaguna.it, Il geoportale della laguna, del territorio e della zona costiera di Venezia [The geoportal of the Venice lagoon, territory and coastal area] (accessed March 15, 2021).

a "cultural object" (Bevilacqua 1998), around which people mobilize strong symbolic resources. At the same time, the historical city annually sees a massive influx of tourists. As a result, local economic and residential landscapes have altered significantly, with a population shift[3] towards the dormitory suburb of Mestre, and a reorientation of the job market to tourism. In this process, the distribution of both food and non-food commodities have moved increasingly towards more carbon-intensive, large-scale retailers in competition with small-scale production and distribution. Moreover, high unemployment on the lagoon islands and the high cost of land have further triggered depopulation and abandonment of agricultural land. Dispossessed island communities (Levien, Watts & Hairong 2018) are increasingly poorer and dwindling as their inhabitants move to the coastal towns of Mestre or Jesolo, looking for work in the massive tourist industry. Yet the aquatic role of the territory is valued by both the local population and tourists over its more or less consciously hidden terrestrial role, which is dedicated to agriculture. The regime of discourse surrounding the lagoon is sturdily anchored in the local imaginary (Menez 2013). It is also mobilized in conflicts between groups and by institutions for leveraging access to economic resources, fitting in the interpretative framework of a "natural environment" and an entirely constructed sustainability.

As many local interlocutors (NGOs, professionals, journalists) of the explorative phase of my study stated, small, sustainable businesses in the Venetian lagoon facilitate climate change mitigation and adaptation. Peasant agriculture results in sturdy and sustainable growth, suggesting that it has the best potential for meeting food sovereignty largely because it has the capacity to produce (more than) sufficient good food for the growing world population and can do so in a way that is sustainable (Van der Ploeg 2014). Small local agri-food activities shorten supply chains, are created by locals, and employ local workers, and, finally, match the aspirations towards sustainability held by younger generations.

In a concrete sense, small farms on the island distribute their products by boat and create agri-food related jobs in the city for locals. In so doing, they guarantee the conservation of the lagoon islands' environment by ensuring its daily upkeep.[4] The lagoon is increasingly being abandoned by local communities, that is, by those people who are responsible for its daily maintenance in the face of widespread erosion, or who

[3] As reported by ISTAT, Instituto Italiano di Statistica, especially the annual demographic and territorial reports (www.istat.it, accessed March 15, 2021). I also used a number of historical series published by the Venice's Statistical Office, as well as the 1871–2020 population's table (https://www.comune.venezia.it/it/content/serie-storiche, accessed March 15, 2021).

[4] See VIMINE Life Project (http://www.lifevimine.eu/en/index.php).

at least point out any major damage to the authorities. The farmers I studied in the lagoon area believe their daily work involves carrying out the precious task of meticulous observation and constant reparation of the island coastlines. Therefore, I have focused on identifying those economic systems that allow the lagoon's inhabitants to remain on their islands, working in non-industrialized farming. For my interlocutors, sustainability is concretely embodied by their presence in the lagoon environment, as agents of a daily maintenance that is, according to them (and also according to my observations), the only way to keep the lagoon ecosystem in balance. Thus, ecosystem sustainability here is anthropic and involves human daily engagement. Additionally, the practices described here radically reduce the carbon footprint of foodstuffs by creating spaces to shorten food distribution chains. "Remain on the island" is the emic meaning given to "sustainability", in other words, its final aim. By sustaining the environment, local communities improve their social capital and develop new opportunities for agency.

The island of Sant'Erasmo, called "the garden of Venice" since the times of the Serenissima (the Republic of Venice, 697–1797 C.E.) has been devoted to agriculture for centuries. Measuring 3.2 square kilometres, it is the second largest of the lagoon islands, is part of the municipality of Venice and is inhabited by 723 people. Small farms here are managed and in many cases also owned by people between the ages of 30 and 40 who try to find economic stability. My research involved two agri-food enterprises (Apostoli Cappello 2019, 2022). The first was family-based and politically oriented towards the Northern League party (a sovereignist[5] right wing party). This farm's practices used integrated control techniques (Altieri 1995) and maintained a minimum income to allow for the worker's survival, whereas the second farm was an organic one, inspired politically by eco-socialism and structured on previous friendships.

"We are not organic"

In the spring and summer of 2016 on the island of Sant'Erasmo, my key informant C. was the head of the largest agricultural enterprise on the island. Aged 39 and son of a farmer, he was educated at the tertiary level. Born and raised in Sant'Erasmo, he lived with his wife, also native to the island, and their 9-year-old son. C. inherited the land and business setup from his parents, but he profoundly transformed them from both a production and a business point of view, devising a completely new way of selling and

[5] An ideology in which native social groups such as ethnic groups aim to take back control and preserve political independence from external agents such as global institutions.

distributing his produce. In trying to shorten the distribution chain of his products, C. uses the online sale of vegetable baskets that he personally delivers downtown.

C.'s farm was a family-run business in which C. and his family (his wife and, to a lesser extent, his son) were involved full-time. In addition, C.'s brother and wife as well as several cousins also lived on the farm, close to each other and close to the fields. They were all natives of Sant'Erasmo and said that "sons of peasants have ruined the island, forgetting the value of agriculture" by "bending to the wishes of large horticultural chains" that have exploited them economically.

In 2004, C. created a cooperative focused on the "Violet Artichoke of Sant'Erasmo", a prized variety of artichoke whose cultivation requires particular salinity and great soil drainage, characteristics in which Sant'Erasmo excels. The violet artichoke's flower buds, called *castraure*, are only found in Sant'Erasmo for a very short period (10 days a year) and are a sought-after delicacy. C.'s cooperative involved several other farmers on the island, but C. held the successful community leadership role. He had motivated his companions on the island and had defined a trend. He has also tried to evade the control of the globalized distribution chains that he calls "globalization", and has implemented a sales technique that aims to stop the erosion of islands and salt marshes and lessen the devastating chemical impact of industrial agriculture. He was one of my interlocutors who argued that their agronomic techniques (integrated control described by Altieri 1995, a practice that minimizes the use of chemicals) are less polluting than those of industrial agriculture based on the intensive use of pesticides. Moreover, proponents of integrated control claim a much lower environmental impact in terms of CO_2 emissions by their distribution chains (based on small private boats) than the "Apulian tomatoes arriving to Venice by truck" after having travelled 800 km or more. As C. explained,

> We go on here only because we became sustainable. We are not organic, you can't do that here. But we do integrated farming, which means putting eggshells in the ground like my grandfather used to do. If it was up to my father, Apulian tomatoes would eat us. But I didn't want to go and be a waiter in Jesolo, so we invented this stuff here [he shows me the artichoke's fields]. The future is this stuff here, I explain it to my son, he comes here to help me, he's learning. (C., Sant'Erasmo, July, 2016)

"Integrated control" was presented as part of a discourse of opposition to the industrial agriculture that structures land use in the Veneto hinterland. This approach rejects practices with a high environmental impact such as intensive use of chemical fertilizers or techniques that contribute to soil erosion. For C., as for many other inhabitants of the island, the constitutive fragility of the lagoon's sandy terrain excludes intensive agriculture, because the earth and the ecosystem cannot structurally support it.

From this point of view, the fragility of the soil and ecosystem represent a guarantee of produce quality. C. often stated, "we are not organic, but we are sustainable". To explain the quality of the methods used, C. elaborated:

> We are not organic [farmers] because it is impossible [here C. refers to the strict and specific rules of organic farming related to plant health] and we use some chemical pesticides, some plant protection products, only when they are useful, as these are things we eat, that I feed my son too... Less and less land is being cultivated because the old people have abandoned their houses and farms, and developing housing is too expensive in Sant'Erasmo [from a farming point of view].

Environmental-friendly production strategies were seen to guarantee the material survival of the island's farmland. According to C., only later was an ecological narrative developed, in a process mirroring that of the downtown's consumers by "city eco-dudes that (...) don't know what they are talking about".

When the Past Prevents the Future

Evident in my fieldwork were tensions inherent in the construction of work-based identities (Gorz 1988; Weber 1989; Chamboredon 2019). These identities were based on comparisons between a canonical, idealized past and a personal past that strove for social redemption. For the islanders, the future was uncertain, their sought-after socio-economic emancipation was unstable, and the hope that future generations would continue their parents' occupation was strong, to the detriment of incorporating higher education that would be easy to access but was considered a waste of time. Many of my interlocutors explained that the prohibitive price of arable land made it inconceivable to imagine expanding their activities and yet satisfy the demand for their products in an economy of scale. Some producers wanted to build places to process food or turn their buildings into lodges and holiday farmhouses. The future was seen to depend on the administrative goodwill of institutions experienced as unfavourable and imagined by agri-food producers as entrepreneurial projects such as the expansion of business into eco-tourism related activities and the construction of infrastructural buildings to agricultural products that could expand the range of production activities.

Problems have been generated by the "heritage" status conferred on the entire territory of the Venetian municipality. As D., a young new-farmer from Mestre[6] explained, "St. Mark's Square and the vegetable gardens of Sant'Erasmo are considered the same thing in terms of landscape and architectural constraints", with consequent restrictions on constructing, for example, new buildings. In the absence of such a

[6] See "The future is not possible here" later in this article.

status, the farm projects could have connected producers, buyers, and eco-oriented tourists more tightly. In addition, almost all the producers I met would have needed more workers but did not have the means to pay for employees. As a result, they worked "15 hours a day", said C., falling into the self-exploitation described by Galt (2013).

Islanders explicitly stated that they felt they were being assimilated into the city only through its prohibitions. They lived with the perception of an oppressive state, and were aware of being on its insignificant outskirts. All the interlocutors complained about the lack of schools, the lack of roads and the limited infrastructure and services available in the island's city centre. V., a resident of Sant'Erasmo, told me that residents are considered "of the land" because of the island's agricultural vocation, in a context in which "water ennobles" (referring to the marine vocation of Venice) and "the land is poor and for the little people".

One episode that occurred during my fieldwork served to exemplify my relationships with elites and the institutions of my interlocutors. I was the object of several attempts by my interlocutors to co-opt me. Indeed, knowing my political empathy for environmental issues about sustainability in agriculture – as I had presented myself – during the fieldwork on Sant'Erasmo, some informants openly offered me money to write a paper focused on their own sustainability that was favourable for them, so as to legitimize them and their entrepreneurial projects with the Mayor's Office (building sheds to process agricultural products and facilities for tourists) on the island. They saw me as a consultant. Each time I declined, they reacted in a way that is highly revealing of their attitude towards academia and scientific research. Ironically, though I was a precarious researcher, I personified "the academic world", seen to go hand by hand with bourgeois thinking. This was one of the fundamental fields of tension that played out in the lagoon. Reactions by persons I studied were that academic work was fundamentally useless. V., one of my most important informants among the producers of Sant'Erasmo, began to complain about "idealists" like me that work at the university and "have no links to the real world". What emerged in many informal exchanges was that the persons with whom I spoke did not direct their children towards university studies because this was seen as an obstacle that would prevent them from having a "real" future as farmers. I interpreted this rejection of specialized knowledge as the anti-elite reaction of a community that felt itself subordinate in terms of social class, and it is significant that a vehicle of potential social mobility such as university studies was perceived as violating an emotional attachment to the land.

These farmers have a conflicting relationship with the urban world and with visions of the future that clash with theirs. During my fieldwork, V. explained his outburst by saying that his son wished to go to university, but that he did not understand that a tertiary education would never bring him money or a solid future. V. would have preferred

his son to invest in the business because that was where V. saw the only possible way to make a decent or better living. A similar case was C.'s son R. who, though much younger, was considered by his father and others to be a future agricultural entrepreneur. R. contributed to the family business and was taught responsibility through play. V. considered this kind of education to be the best and seemed to have experienced his son's decision to opt for tertiary studies as a personal defeat and a betrayal.

These interlocutors' visions for the future were shaped by a tangled set of intergenerational relationships (with their sons) and economic development projects for themselves and for the island. The future they imagined excluded higher education as a possible added value and, more generally, was a future that excluded existing institutions as possible resources upon which to draw. This was embodied in the idea that children would become producers themselves in the future.

"The future is not possible here"

V. suggested that from an economic point of view, non-native, neo-rural producers could afford to make entrepreneurial choices that were not necessarily profitable, since these young people were driven by an idealized picture of rural life. V. considered these ideals to be typical of city inhabitants who are, to a certain degree, ecologists. V. did not attribute a value to organic agriculture and when he spoke of it, he referred to those who practice it on the island as being naive. In reference to certain organic farmers, he underscored that they were in his view "children [they are almost 40 years old], from the city [they come from Mestre], naive [they have degrees but not in agriculture], and are obviously so rich that they can afford to go organic", that is to say, according to C., they do not earn "real money" from their work.

Based on the interlocutors' stories, I decided to contact the two 35-year-old "boys", owners of the only organic garden in Sant'Erasmo. My main interlocutor was J., whom I usually met in the centre of Venice because, as he explained, he was leaving the company. D. dealt mainly with communication and was, at that time, at loggerheads with J., who dealt mainly in production. There were four people in the business at its outset but, over time, work relationships had gradually deteriorated. D. blamed disputes over the farming activities. In fact, at the time of my meeting, this company was failing.

I also interviewed the farmers who owned this company previously, in 2016. They were from the industrial town of Mestre and had settled in Sant'Erasmo in 2015. They had founded the cooperative due to being "long-standing friends", with a common path of eco-socialist activism behind them (Apostoli Cappello 2022). Since their student days, in fact, they had militated against the "MOSE" (*MOdulo Sperimentale*

Elettromeccanico, a moving dam-like system) and against the entry of large cruise ships into the city. They had pursued higher education and after a decade or so, had been professionals in precarious jobs. They had now become recognized organic farmers on the island of Sant'Erasmo, working with colleagues in downtown Venice.

D. had a degree in communication sciences and J. had a secondary school diploma from a school specializing in technology. The initial funding to start the company came from their parents. Like the problems experienced by C. and V., the owners of this organic business claimed to have spent a lot of time trying to be accepted by the island's population, something they said had not yet fully succeeded. D. and J.'s company had a very substantive social capital: the two entrepreneurs' local contacts were varied and allowed them to promote their business. Among these contacts were members of the Venice *Biennale* Foundation, owners of famous small restaurants in the city, journalists, artists, social collectives, student associations and academics. Their activities had a fair amount of visibility; they won a prize awarded to young farmers given by Coldiretti, they organized parties and regular markets in the centre of Venice and, they said, the demand for their vegetables was greater than they could supply. They could not expand because of legal restrictions related to the use of land designated as cultural heritage.

When asked why he chose to go into farming, J. said, "Before there was only job insecurity. Now there is even [salary insecurity] but there is pleasure and socialization." J. mobilized as his first argument an economic and existential rationale related to work and the perceived lack of a future intrinsic in the precarious working conditions he experienced in his previous urban life. He contextualized his assertion by saying, so as to differentiate himself from the other Sant'Erasmo farmers, that "we want to enjoy the land and not work like crazy", explaining that sustainability is for him the political path to a harmonious management "of lifetime with the rhythms of nature". However, my observations showed that the working hours of the interlocutors in this company, like those of the other farmers on the island, were around 15 hours per day.

J.'s colleague D. told me that "through the rediscovery of a relationship with nature we aim to build something". In fact, from J.'s and D.'s point of view, dedicating themselves to an activity explicitly claimed to be sustainable, at both a social and an environmental level, was a way to establish themselves as known and recognized actors at the local level. In analysing the life stories of these producers, sustainability was their key to projecting themselves into the future by carving out an active role in the future, at least at the local level. This choice also allowed them to become part of a politically active network that, as we will see, goes beyond the municipal borders of Venice, and reaches as far as Bologna.

J. told me that their goal was small-scale farming. In fact, the main workers involved were only D. and J. with the help of some seasonal volunteer workers and other occasional collaborators chosen on the basis of friendship and cultural affinity. The enterprise cultivated a few hectares on rented land. The 15-hour workday was mostly aimed at paying this rent, in a dynamic of self-exploitation. J. claimed to practise "small-scale agriculture that is attentive to the balance of the land and based on its natural cycles", and production "aimed at self-consumption and direct sale" destined for the centre of Venice, to which they delivered their produce by boat weekly.

Like other producers on the island, D. emphasized that one of the main problems for their business was the lack of EU agricultural insurance systems aimed at very small farmers to mitigate their production risks. He spoke, as did J., repeatedly of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), a system that involved the sharing – by consumers subscribing to the company – of the risks involved in supplying vegetables. In the CSA model, consumers ideally become entrepreneurs together with farmers, and share their business risks. In concrete terms, shareholders meet on a yearly basis to decide how much to invest to cover the finance production costs. In this way, the cooperative workers benefit by knowing their budget in advance. The investors, for their part, receive vegetables throughout the year. CSA involves the collaborative governance of agri-food companies and reinforces the preferences of the citizens of Venice for civic participation and small local markets. In D.'s and J.'s opinions, this would have been the only system capable of overcoming the problem of lack of insurance, and they told me that they were inspired by a well-established reality in Bologna, namely the agricultural cooperative Arvaia. J. and D. told us "we try to stay within these networks so as not to feel alone, to share problems". But they did not believe that their consumers in Venice could engage in a CSA dynamic "because there is no culture of these things here. We are individualists, in the end. We are in Veneto."

Regional and European funds for the support of agriculture do not constitute, for these micro-entrepreneurs, a real source of funding. In fact, as they explained, funds are disbursed only in proportion to the size of the land that is cultivated. This mechanism obviously rewards crop-growing on an industrial scale. D. told me that in 2016 they received only € 314 in European funding. Yet in the summer of 2016 his company, as well as those of C. and V., suffered huge damages due to a severe drought. They lost much produce and consequent income but were insufficiently compensated by insurance. In D.'s view, insurance companies follow the same size-based logic used for European funding: "If you are too small, you do not even want to get insured."

Following Political Inspiration: CSA in Bologna

In 2017 I carried out a short series of observations and non-structured interviews at Arvaia, the Community Supported Agriculture-oriented cooperative in Bologna, which is similar to Sant'Erasmo and Venice in terms of size and distance to the city centre. But the actual situation in Bologna was very different. Institutions and industry in the city of Bologna conspicuously supported, if not directly invested in, a cultural climate that aimed to attract mass international tourism by highlighting food and its production.[7]

The historical context in which Arvaia arose offers an understanding of this phenomenon. Bologna and the Emilia-Romagna Region have historically been "red", that is, they have had left-wing political leanings.[8] Communist Emilia-Romagna, as documented in Kertzer's (1980, 1988) pivotal works, has a deep-rooted political history of militancy and local institutions oriented to the left. In fact, it is in this region that the CSA model arrived in Italy, has developed and still thrives.

In this left-leaning context, the Arvaia cooperative was established in 2013. The cooperative rents 47 hectares of land owned by the Municipality of Bologna. This land is in Borgo Panigale, about 7 km from the historic town centre. The cooperative pays an annual fee of € 24,000 to the Municipality. Its members claim that the choice to rent the land reflects both a pragmatic and a political necessity. This land is in this way "saved" from speculative building construction and its public use is safeguarded through its redevelopment as a "food park". The cooperative was created to cultivate only organic and "farm to table" produce (Lamine 2012).

When compared to my Venetian interlocutors whose economic and political perspectives were local, the founders of Arvaia had more cosmopolitan life experiences and were inspired by the Jardin de Coccagne[9] in Geneva and the Gartencoop[10] in Freiburg (CH). The worldviews of these Bolognese interlocutors have therefore been guided by successful models with which they were personally familiar. The Swiss experiences are examples of a CSA model already present and consolidated in the United States (De Muth 1993; Mc Fadden 2004). In this model, producers and consumers share the risks and benefits of the agricultural enterprise in a context within which agricultural products are not subject to market dynamics. Like many urban agricultural experiments, such as

[7] The "FICO" (*Fabbrica Italiana Contadina*), the Italian Farming Factory, is a huge "food" theme park of recent construction in the city that embodies this orientation perfectly. Its name is a play on words where "fico" in Italian means fashionable or attractive ("cool" in English). In this context, even a small, militant agricultural cooperative benefits from public and private investments to promote the image of a "City of Food".

[8] The Veneto Region, on the other hand, has historically been governed by the Christian Democrats, followed by the Berlusconi centre-right party and currently by the Northern League.

[9] http://www.cocagne.ch/

[10] https://www.gartencoop.org/tunsel/

those in Transition Towns and others described by Cabannes (2012), the participatory mechanism claimed by the members allows them to escape the capitalist logic of market production, since CSA does not aim to obtain profit but simply to cover production costs. The cooperative website of Arvaia reports some figures that help us to understand the quantities produced, which were impossible to reconstruct for Sant'Erasmo.[11]

The level of education of those involved in the cooperative was generally high, which distinguishes this group from some actors in the Sant'Erasmo context (e.g. C. and his family). One of the founders is an agronomist, others are educated in the field of technology, one of the sales representatives is a biologist and, finally, the person in charge of communications (who showed me the farm) had a degree in archaeology.

Beyond these qualifications, however, it is important to underscore that in Bologna I found collaboration with academics and EU-funded projects. Arvaia's members showed interest towards me, as a researcher with whom they were openly willing to engage. Arvaia also hosts trainees from the Faculty of Agriculture at the University of Bologna.

Arvaia's producers emphasized that what inspires them is the wish to recover control over the means of food production. They emphasized both the importance of food sovereignty and the need to withdraw from the industrial dimension of intensive cultivation. Several founders had gained experience with the Campi Aperti (open fields) association which is part of the Genuino Clandestino (genuine clandestine) network, an association that promotes the unregulated practice of informal self-certifying produce as "organic" and "natural", claiming the need to simplify the supply chain through the elimination of certifications subject to laws (Mattioli 2013; Koensler 2018).

Arvaia produce is distributed weekly by bicycle to eight fixed points in the city. In addition, two fixed markets are hosted weekly in informal squatter areas, called CSO, *Centri Sociali Occupati*, which I have described in an earlier publication (Apostoli Cappello 2017). CSO are militant, counterculture squatted urban spaces, here in particular I refer to the Vag61[12] and the Làbas[13]. Here, produce is sold to non-members of the cooperative. The community of members includes students, pensioners, professionals, and workers. The cooperative is also socially active in organizing parties, festivals, training courses

[11] In Arvaia's production year 2017–18, each shareholder received about 5.9 kg per week at a cost of €15.50, which amounts to a total distribution of 58 tons of vegetables. There are 450 members of the cooperative, most of whom adhere as a family unit (i.e., the whole family is the CSA subscriber and consumer). Approximately 150 shareholders benefit directly from the vegetable produce. The cooperative is run by seven permanent and a varying number of seasonal workers.

[12] Acronym of Via Azzo Gardino, n. 61, the first address of the CSO in Bologna.

[13] Name inspired by the French expression "là bas" and mixed with the Italian word for workshops, "laboratory".

on issues related to food and agriculture, days of practical participation in agricultural work to manually weed or gather produce, as well as an educational farm open to schools. Above all, however, it is through its regular assemblies, called to approve budgets and plan production strategies, that the community experience is shaped and consolidated.

Conclusions

In this paper I have compared organizational attitudes between two neo-rural micro-farming communities. I interpret the rise of sustainable micro-food productions as a response first to the economic insecurity of unemployment and the lack of adequate institutional social support in Italian society. These two problems have directly affected several generations in Italy. By converting to the primary and productive sector in regions thus far mainly devoted to the service sector, people between the ages of 20 and 40 have created new types of work for themselves. These young adults all hold qualifications of various kinds, often advanced degrees, and come from diverse political cultures. Many new micro-farmers feel that environmental sustainability is ethical, economic and an added value capable of enhancing their socio-political status and valorizing their products. The Venetian community was not able to gain a communal and cooperative form of enterprise that could be successful in retaining coherence and expansion, and they were disappointed, looking at actors in Bologna who had managed to achieve this. The lack of insurance schemes for small-scale agri-businesses as well as heritage-related laws preventing urban change and development have been major barriers to sustainable agri-food business development in the Venetian area.

In Bologna, those involved in Arvaia were highly educated, cosmopolitans, and possessed consistent social capital compared to those in Sant'Erasmo. In Sant'Erasmo, my research, even if openly oriented towards improving socio-environmental sustainability, was considered a "bourgeois waste of time", and both local and European institutions were perceived by inhabitants as distant if not hostile. In Venice, heritage-related issues led by Unesco and diverse levels of government also prevented the land use that would have allowed my interlocutors to project themselves as actors with agency in a future temporality.

My analysis of the situation in Sant'Erasmo should be read in the context of a strong autonomist, anti-state political tradition, in which anti-institutional rhetoric has long been present in the Veneto (e.g. Diamanti 1996; Dematteo 2008). In this rhetoric, the desire for spatial closure within a boundary of protective autonomy does not seem to favour the appropriation of an emancipatory future. Such an emancipation seems to require an openness to socio-economic and cultural models coming from other regions or countries that are felt to undermine the sovereignist perspective of Veneto

autonomism. The main aspiration of families living on this island was to emancipate themselves from the yoke of institutions, as described for other European contexts by Mamonova and Franquesa (2020).

By contrast, the Arvaia cooperative was inspired by a strong cosmopolitan imaginary. I hypothesize that spatial imaginaries, their openness or closure, are strongly interrelated with the abilities of neo-rural micro-farming communities to project themselves and their business and political activity into the future.

Even if my study did not set out to explore the aspect of gender, this issue arose spontaneously and offered an additional dimension of understanding. Indeed, the role of women was pivotal in the areas of logistics and finance in Sant'Erasmo family-run businesses. For example, women took care of collecting the orders placed online, forwarding them to production, and preparing the bags to be delivered to each buyer. However, their work was completely cash-in-hand and not formally recognized by men nor claimed by women themselves, who presented themselves as wives. In Arvaia, on the other hand, women held management positions that were fully recognized by the cooperative.

Arvaia in Bologna enjoyed the integration of its sustainable agriculture activities into a structured community support framework guided by shared political visions with consumers. The company was supported by militant aspirations that enabled them to share an ideological grid and values capable of structuring a common historical imaginary, together with higher levels of education and a local political culture in which municipal and regional institutions actively supported environmentally and socially sustainable productions.

In conclusion, I consider the negotiable role of sustainability to be a decisive factor from both a symbolic and economic point of view. Each of my interlocutors had his or her own idea of sustainability and wielded it strategically in relation to other actors. In this article, I have analysed its discursive use by considering it as a resource for negotiating access to resources at the local level by communities. The imperatives faced by the farmers I studied were *economic*, that is, surviving in their own territory through agricultural activity; *political*, aimed at affirming the existence of a generation with peculiar political sensibilities within the public sphere; and *ecological*, that is, taking as their banner sustainability understood as harmony between man and the environment. In this sense, the rhetorical and the agricultural practices around sustainability constituted a symbolic resource that allowed some actors to gain new spaces of agency. Sustainability can thus be considered as a source of political legitimization.

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