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The Border: Resisting Monocultures in Central Italy

Abstract

A new border divides the rural peripheries of central Italy, a border between those seeking to safeguard a varied agricultural landscape and those hoping for easy money. According to the 'Italy Hazelnut Plan', 20,000 hectares of new hazelnut plantations are planned in central Italy alone. However, the globalization of the agricultural model based on large monocultures represents a problem of global dimensions and is described by Donna Haraway and Anna L. Tsing as 'plantationocene': Monocultures of this size accelerate climate change, impoverish local economic fabrics and pollute soils and aquifers. This documentary portrays a group of people trying to resist the multiple effects of monocrops, building alternative economies and buying land to remove them from the sphere of influence of multinational companies.

Keywords: Plantationocene, Italy, Resistance, Rural spaces

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Introduction

‘Listen, listen! Now they’re coming. They come again to spray pesticides. I have to run.’ It was one of the hottest days of the summer of the year 2022. The air stood still around us, while the inclement sun seemed to burn the endless rows of small hazelnut trees. Everywhere, the land was dry and dusty. Up to that very moment, I was sitting relaxed with Claudio on the terrace of his newly renovated beautiful country house. However, the idyllic setting was ruined by a view a few meters beyond the garden. Endless rows of monoculture hazelnut groves stretched out behind a large flat plateau. The lines apparently reached all the way to the horizon, silently, uniform, and or-

derly. Claudio seemed agitated. ‘And they have no permission to do so. They are criminals,’ he added. ‘Go and see! I’ll run inside, otherwise I’ll end up back in the emergency room.’ From afar we could hear the noise of a tractor; little by little the noise became more intense. At that precise moment I felt a strong shiver, a shiver due to the awareness in which for the first time I intuitively understood the severity of the conflict between different ways of understanding the relationship between man and plants, one focused on maximizing profits and another way focused on respect, on the valorization of the wild world. Claudio is not alone: a growing literature in anthropology and neighboring disciplines demonstrates how everywhere around the globe, the impact of the systematic introduction of monoculture leaves profound marks on local life, both human and non-human (cfr. Chao 2022; Grossman 2000; Hetherington 2022). These are developments that pose clearly a threat to the environmentally sustainable future of the planet. But, what kind of sustainability are we talking about?

Based on long-term engagement with the politics of transparency of small-scale farmer movements in central Italy (Koenlsler 2020, 2023), I carried out ethnographic research between 2021 and 2023 with the aim to investigate different narratives around the social impact of the introduction of new plantations and monocultures in central Italy, in this documentary I present emblematic ethnographic cases of resistance against the increasing challenge of monocrops, conceived widely as an unsustainable form of agriculture: those who decided to buy additional lands to ‘protect’ their home, those who didn’t succeed and those who became environmental activists, and those who did both. Following an initial exploratory phase to determine the dimension and forms of environmental activism in relation to the introduction of new monocultures, in a second stage I carried out five in-depth and long-term case studies, three of which are present here. Beyond the specific situations of these cases, these forms of resistance practically allow an understanding of a broader transformation of the relationship between citizens and the environment, between humans and plants. However, most ethnographic fieldwork has been carried out with those who see industrial agriculture as a problem for a sustainable future. These are dynamics already known in other regions of the world: On the one hand, this is a conflict studied at a global level around the incessant expansion of contemporary agribusiness which incorporates and standardizes more and more land, communities, and biodiversity spaces. On

the other hand, this conflict allows to understand the effects of the modernization and globalization in the countryside.

Nature and Humans

In a wider perspective, the issue of monocultures leads to an ideological conflict on how to imagine the relationship between nature and human beings. Does the opposition to monocultures concern the defense of the material sources of our human life? Or, is it worth to protect biodiversity for its own sake, for the common destiny of plants, animals and humans alike? The more abstract question is here: How is our ecological awareness changing? My ethnographic research on monocultures in Italy can be considered in a new light by drawing on Alain Touraine's (1988) reworking of the Marxist notion of central conflict in contemporary societies. While in Karl Marx's original conception the central conflict expressed materialist tensions between the different social classes (the owners of the means of production and those who sold their labor), for Touraine and the research strand on so-called 'new social movements' that he inspired, the central conflict in late capitalism evolved towards identity dynamics: These identity dynamics gave rise to a culturalist turn of the most visible and incisive forms of mobilization.

From this perspective, it becomes possible to explain why the workers' movement, centered on demands for the redistribution of resources, has lost ground compared to feminist, indigenous and queer movements. All of these movements mobilize around collective identities rather than material claims. In other words, we are witnessing a different way of understanding the complex link between collective identity and political claims: the recognition of a collective identity is itself the object of the claim, giving rise to sometimes contradictory processes between claims of rights and affirmations of cultural identity. Furthermore, Alain Touraine, using the example of the ecological movement of the 1980s, showed that many of the contemporary demands that present themselves at first sight as materialist, would in fact be predominantly of a culturalist and identity type.

In a more abstract sense, my documentary therefore asks to what extent we can notice in the forms of resistance against the spread of monocultures the emergence of a new, different shift in the coordinates

of the central conflict towards a less identity-based and more materialist dimension. I will delve into forms of activism apparently characterized by a new ecological sensitivity of identity which could be described as ‘pro-biotic’ and which presents itself as opposed to a mentality of governing nature which could be described as ‘anti-biotic’. In a very schematic way, the criticism of the development model based on hazelnut monocultures is generally considered as part of a mentality in which humans seek to dominate nature, mainly through technical-scientific procedures. Many of the opponents of monocultures at the center of this research, however, could be considered as part of a ‘pro-biotic’ turn, the expression of an attempt to build another relationship with nature, an ideally more horizontal and more inclusive relationship (Lorimer 2020). In line with the criticism of the notion of central conflict in Touraine, it should be considered that it is a scheme that overshadows multiple nuances between the two positions, but which nevertheless allows us to analyze the tension between the identity and materialist dimensions of the main claims. Following Brubaker’s (2004) warnings about the flaws of ‘groupism’, the subjects at the center of this research, obviously, are not to be considered as representatives of a specific class or social group to be imagined as somehow circumscribed, for example elitist environmentalists, but ethnographic experiences like those of this documentary allow us to consider in depth the identity and materialist dimensions of forms of activism.

Jamie Lorimer (2020) describes the ‘probiotic turn’ as the emergence of an ideology that places at the center the value of a multifaceted, colorful and wild world in which every living being is ideally respected as such. The probiotic breakthrough is at first sight clearly opposed to an ever-increasing standardization and uniformity of plants and people in gigantic human and biological monocultures managed hierarchically. In the wake of his interest in the posthuman, Lorimer identifies new forms of ‘microbiotic citizenship’ in Western countries which indicate the emergence of an ecological approach that distinguishes itself from the environmentalisms of previous generations. While the environmentalism of the 1980s and 1990s placed the protection of the environment for the survival of man at the center of reflection, probiotic awareness is based on a decentralization of the human and therefore on concepts such as non-linear but self-regulating systems, complex balances, and multilayer feedback. In a sense, these are concepts that reflect the ontologies around the idea of Gaia,

as they have been revitalized by Donna Haraway (2016), Bruno Latour (2017) and others. At the same time, the probiotic turn resonates well with post-humanist theories.

In short, according to these approaches, the tension between pro- and anti-biotic concepts and visions could indicate an ideological shift that divides more and more areas of life, from hospitals to nurseries, from fields to offices, from social media to elections. On the one hand, there is the demand for a healthy life, a life imagined as closer to the wild: a rich probiotic world, and a notion of the good life as something at times distant from economic wealth and techno-scientific progress as imagined in common sense. On the other hand, the idea of development based on techno-scientific knowledge plays a central role in the resolution of many problems of contemporary life; and many of those who defend a pro-biotic outlook rely on anti-biotic aspects. In other words, in many people's worldviews, both outlooks intersect. The anti-biotic narrative defends the achievements of modern agriculture that manage aligned monocultures, kept alive thanks to plant protection products, precision agriculture or other technical or biomedical tools. At the same time, the pro-biotic narrative may in other realms affirm the role of biodiversity as the main way to safeguard the balance of the planet. Pro-biotic thinking relies on good microbes; anti-biotic thought highlights advanced tools to kill harmful microbes. Despite the hybrid elements of pro- and anti-biotic outlooks, this polarity constitutes the ideological layers of new societal conflicts.

As Lorimer himself specifies, the forms of emerging ecological consciousness linked to the affirmation of probiotic citizenship cannot be contained in a unitary trend; they are characterized by numerous internal tensions and contradictions, but they have in common their focus on presumed or real excesses of antibiotic purity in the Pasteurian sense. What is left out by Lorimer is the question of whether this transversal conflict is predominantly about identity, for example in terms of the search for collective recognition, or whether it also concerns the distribution of resources, for example the safeguarding and sustainability of the planet as a common resource. This documentary highlights the return of material 'pro-biotic'-concerns that cannot be reduced to the struggles over collective identities as assumed in the 'new social movement'-paradigm. At the same time, the documentary shows how anti- and probiotic elements may intersect and how they are far away from constituting two clearly distinguishable worldviews.

This indicates an interesting shift in the environmental imagination that still needs to be explored in-depth, but also the fluidity of the boundary between pro- and antibiotic worlds: this, like many others, is a ‘fluid border’.

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