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Un sacrificio: Gabriele's cheese. A documentary

Abstract

This short documentary introduces us to Gabriele, his elderly father, and their shared practice of making homemade cheese. Shot in the intimate space of their rural kitchen, the film allows the viewer to take a glimpse into a father and son relationship, and the passion, tradition, and sacrifice associated with this daily practice. This documentary is part of a series that explores the mundane practices of everyday economies in the southern-Italian region of Molise through ethnographic writing, filming, and critical reimagining. The series seeks to produce 'provocative encounters' that inspire reflection, a change of perspective, and the possibility to challenge taken for granted assumptions about the world. Through these provocative encounters we aim to go beyond critical theory and inspire 'critical reimagining'. Critical reimagining seeks to make practical and tangible contributions while actively reimagining the world within a prefigurative relationship between reflection and implementation of alternatives. We argue that such critical reimagining requires engagement with difference and alternative approaches to life, which we don't necessarily find in the capitalist centers of the world, but rather within the fringes and peripheries this series seeks to explore.

Keywords: Inner areas, self-sufficiency, tradition, reimagining

QR-Code for the film



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Introduction

Cheese making. The art of turning liquid milk into solid texture. A solid texture that, depending on the time that passes, is melting on your tongue, squeaky between your teeth, or hard and crumbly in your mouth. Timing is everything in cheese making, as patience needs to meet attentiveness to the right moment: when the milk begins to

bubble, the liquidity starts to firm up, and the first crumps are showing in the milk as the ricotta is forming on the surface. Cheese is the outcome of human experimentation with biology over centuries. It stems from fermentation, a collaboration with humanity's invisible little helpers: microorganisms such as bacteria, yeast, and fungi, which convert lactose into lactic acid and produce flavors. Cheese is a product shaped by centuries of 'bio-culture' that has created unique textures and tastes enjoyed across continents.

As with many foods, over the course of the 20th century, cheese has become an industrial product, produced under highly standardized and sanitized conditions, subject to strict norms and regulations. Within factory produced cheese, biology has been contained to create a product deemed safe for mass consumption and which is expected to have the same taste each time you open a new package. Factories turn thousands of liters of milk into cheese every day, which eventually find their way to supermarket shelves and customers often clueless to the nuances of the art of cheese making. Today, you can buy your cheese in seconds without even thinking twice about the little microbes, fungi, or hands that helped make it, never mind needing any understanding of its biological processes or temporalities. Yet in a small hilltop town in a region of southern Italy that some say doesn't even exist, a father and son make their own cheese at home, every day...

Passion and sacrifice: a relationship between father and son

This short documentary introduces us to Gabriele and his elderly father Vittorio, who have been making homemade cheese for decades. Gabriele's father learned making cheese when he was a child and has continued doing so to present day. His family's passion, first passed to him, is now shared with his son. The documentary shows the father and son's daily act of cheese making: from milking the goats, to the continuous stirring of the milk and the tedious wait for it to boil, then the solidifying of the milk along its slow journey towards becoming a texture which can be molded into cheese, and eventually the harvesting of its supplementary gift, the ricotta. By documenting this daily procedure, the documentary explores the little microcosm of more-than-human interactions that involves Gabriele and his dad, their goats, the goats' milk, the cheese making equipment, and diversity of

microorganisms. At the same time, the film allows us to take a glimpse into the intimate relationship between father and son, who share not only their cheese making with us, but also the passion, tradition, and sacrifices that are associated with this warmest of bonding moments. As Gabriele tells us, making the cheese is a lot of work, just as keeping the goats, pigs, and maintaining the family's vegetable garden and olive trees. Tasks so time consuming beyond his job, that even his wife does not always appreciate him doing it. However, Gabriele carries this tradition on to honor his father, whose sacrifices working abroad helped improve their family's living conditions and build this little farm. As Gabriele says, this is not something you do simply because you find joy in it, rather 'it is something you feel inside' which drives you to do it.

Challenging the dominant framing of Italy's inner areas

Gabriele and his dad live in the region of Molise, which is part of both the so-called 'mezzogiorno' and the 'inner areas' of Italy. These areas, which are mostly made up of mountains and small hilltop villages, represent about two thirds of Italian territory but only one fifth of the population (Galderisi and Limongi 2024: 2). These regions have been affected by substantial out-migration since the beginning of the 20th century, and are often framed as areas that are 'underdeveloped' and in need of catching up with 'modernity' and its signifiers of industrialization, infrastructure, living standards, and 'modern mentalities'. The dichotomy between the North and South of Italy and the marginalization of the South has been a long and consistent theme throughout Italy's modern history, which have framed these areas as 'forgotten territories' and seemingly homogenous spaces with rigid boundaries (Kërçuku 2022). In recent years, scholars have started to question this framing and point to the need to reconceptualize these representations. Instead of understanding these areas as marginal, declining, and fragile territories, it has been suggested to rather focus on their potentialities and forms of localized resilience; and instead of seeing them as insulated and isolated, to recognize their multitude of relationships and interconnectivity with other Italian areas (Galderisi and Limongi 2024).

Since 2020, we have lived in a town in Molise for extended periods of time, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. As part-time residents as well as scholars and researchers building an alternative,

university-level education project, we have become part of the local community. During this time, we have collected in-depth auto-ethnographic data, including participant observation, qualitative interviews, and video material. Despite the negative representations of inner areas and the manifold difficulties and challenges of everyday living we have undoubtedly encountered, we have found these rural spaces to be rich in their very own way. Far from being uniform and homogenous, the current rural lifestyles in Molise are highly diverse and multifaceted – reaching from gifting and favor economies, to socially imposed indebtedness, to a cultural system we have termed ‘clientelistic neoliberalism’. Within this social order, people are (loosely) divided into two kinship based factions, where collaborative gifting and sharing are encouraged within one’s faction, while a hyper-individualistic, neoliberal and profit maximizing logic is applied outside one’s faction.

These local and traditional systems have been joined by a recent influx of diverse groups, where ‘new age’ spiritualism, permaculture movements, and foreign (future) retirees and expats intermingle. As we argued elsewhere, what we can find in this region are both overt as well as more subtle forms of ‘quiet’ resistance to capitalist ways of life, which are increasingly imposed upon people and communities throughout much of the ‘Western’ world (and beyond) (Weldon and Sippel 2024). At the same time, while new groups of people have recently moved to Molise, small but strong communities have persisted, whose members are holding on to many of their customs, traditional ways of life, and self-sustaining practices. As represented by the protagonists of our documentary, Gabriele and his father, we find complex value systems, which upheld locality and local customs, family heritage and traditions, as well as intergenerationally transferred norms, moralities, and hierarchies.

‘Provocative encounters’: going beyond critical theory and towards critical reimagining

Through this documentary – which was filmed during a summer field school we organized in summer 2023 for German students – and the mundane act of homemade cheese making it shows, we seek to challenge our viewers’ understandings of ‘modernness’ and ‘backwardness’. In times of the multiplying and increasingly interconnect-

ed crises that humanity is facing – e.g. climate change, the ongoing pollution and destruction of the planet's ecosystems, increasing global inequalities, expressions of geopolitical power, wars, and conflicts – such stimulation seems timely and necessary.

Common responses to these crises have been state and capital led efforts to regain control and restore order by applying technological, market based, and/or authoritarian means. Yet, why should we reapply the tools from the same 'modernity toolbox' which has brought about these crises in the first place? Perhaps it is time to find a different toolbox, one that holds different, unexpected, and yet to be explored or rediscovered tools. As Arturo Escobar (2020, p. 27) writes, we 'cannot emerge from the crisis with the categories of the world that created the crisis (development, growth, markets, competitiveness, the individual, and so on).' What if we turned these assumptions upside down, and instead considered the domination of Western perspectives and their implementation as the main reason for the current crisis-laden state of our world, rooted in the modern conceptualization of human beings as exceptional, atomized, and superior to other non-human entities? What would we find in those allegedly underdeveloped, depopulated, and abandoned areas not just across the globe, but even within Europe's own inner peripheries that could help us reimagine different ways of moving forward as a global society?

This documentary is part of a series that will explore these questions in the region of Molise through ethnographic writing, filming, and critical reimagining. What this series seeks to produce are 'provocative encounters' that inspire a moment of reflection, a change of perspective, and a possibility to challenge assumptions about the world too often taken for granted. These ethnographic encounters should serve as a little window into the many existing ways of doing things differently; of engaging with life in another way; of valuing other things in life and implementing other lifestyles. Importantly, we do not intend to suggest that within the practices we are showing lies a 'recipe for the future' – it is not our intention to suggest we should all be making our own cheese, have goats, or become peasants. Such a reading would indeed be a misunderstanding. Rather, by showing such everyday practices of what people are doing – and exploring their motives and intentions within these – we want to inspire questions, reflection, and open up space for reimagination.

What do our everyday practices look like, and what do they entail? Why do we do things the way we do them, where did we learn them, what traditions are we keeping alive (or not), and where do we find deeper meaning within our everyday practices? What role do values play within our daily practices, where do they stem from, what feelings do they imbue, and what are they grounded upon? And, upon such intimate self-reflections, is there something we would like to change, to do differently, to reimagine?

Through the provocative encounters this series seeks to produce, we are ultimately hoping to move beyond critical theory as the current cornerstone of academic activity and inspire what we term ‘critical reimagining’. Such critical reimagining goes beyond critical theory, as it does not satisfy itself with criticizing the state of the world or our lives, but it seeks to make practical and tangible contributions to actively reimagining the world within a prefigurative relationship between reflection and implementation of alternatives. Instead of suggesting ready-made, prescriptive, ‘one-size fits all’ type solutions, we envision critical reimagining as a never-ending process of collaborative prefiguration. Such critical reimagining requires engagement with difference, and alternative approaches to life – alternatives that we don’t necessarily find in the capitalist centers of the world, but rather within the fringes and peripheries this series seeks to explore.

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