



Citation: Domenico Cersosimo, Rosanna Nisticò (2021) Mobility and agricultural economies in rural Italy. Sometimes the world can be seen more clearly from its margins. *Italian Review of Agricultural Economics* 76(1): 7-17. DOI: 10.36253/rea-12823

Received: January 24, 2021

Revised: February 05, 2021

Accepted: March 23, 2021

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Mobility and agricultural economies in rural Italy. Sometimes the world can be seen more clearly from its margins

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Abstract. This study examines how the Covid-19 pandemic crises has not only modified networks and rhythms of human movement and migratory flows on both a global and local scale; yet it also has weakened the hegemony of the prevailing paradigm that considers urban densification as “the” way to achieve resilience, innovation, and well-being. While recognizing that the factors of agglomeration favouring cities and densely populated places are still very significant in our contemporary society and economy, the study critically review the notion of the unidirectionality of progress and human and economic development from the metropolis to the rest, from the city to the countryside and the mountains. Rather, the analytical challenging perspective this contribute proposes is to adopt a new approach, able to take into consideration the “whole” and the complementary nature of its parts, by bringing rural places to the centre of public and academic debate and promoting the collective awareness that the future of the entire country also depends on the civil, social, and political enhancement of internal areas.

Keywords: pandemic crisis, migratory flows, internal areas, urban areas.

JEL codes: J11, R23, O18, R58.

1. MOBILITY IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

How will human mobility change in the post-pandemic period? What will inter and intranational migratory flows be like? What direction will the regional mobility of Italians take? How will demographic movement change between cities and the countryside, and between metropolitan and rural areas?

It is difficult to accurately predict what the world will be like after Covid-19, not only because the crystal ball of social science appears increasingly opaque. As in all major systemic crises, we are dealing with a physiological “failure of the imagination”, an inability to predict how the future will be different. It is well noted that economists and sociologists are relatively good at predicting transformations and changing trends in established socio-economic systems, but they are far less equipped to predict what the world will look like after a paradigm shift. The extent, intensity, and duration of

the pandemic foreshadow a real discontinuity in society, in the trajectories of established norms, in institutional frameworks, in entrepreneurial morphologies, and in well established systems of production. As in Gramsci's "interregnum", today we are suspended between an old social order, which is becoming less and less capable of governing our collective life, and a new framework, still in its embryonic state, which has characteristics that are paradigmatically different from those that came before¹.

From the point of view of mobility, what appears evident in this initial period of the epoch shift brought about by Covid-19 is the deconstruction of the networks and rhythms of human movement and pre-pandemic migratory flows on both a global and local scale. It seems quite certain that the virus will force us to rethink the way people and businesses settle, and the relationships between densely populated urban areas and low-density regions.

The pandemic has dematerialised regions, blurred their borders, and contracted the space – cognitive or otherwise – between far and near, large and small, urban and rural. It has suppressed the multipolar nature of our lives: working in one place, having family in another, and going to the gym in yet another. It has disrupted transnational families – family units in which at least one adult member lives in a different country – and it has put at risk "ontological security", namely the sense of order, continuity, and significance in individual and relational experiences. It has broken down routines and long-established connections and has increased disorder and anxiety in the lives of individuals and families (Giddens, 1994). Formal and administrative borders have returned to the fore, not only between states but also between regions and, paradoxically, between neighbouring places and within cities themselves. At once, the virus has revealed an unlimited world that is both perfectly "flat" – porous to Covid-19 at every latitude – and also more "curved" than before, with new perimeters, new inequalities, and social, economic, and territorial asymmetries that overlap with pre-existing ones².

The international and intra-national mobility of people and goods, which collapsed dramatically in the first year of the pandemic, is very likely to remain low

in the coming years. Further indicators seem to herald a permanent drop in the magnitude of mobility flows. Airlines, forced to comply with higher safety standards, will be compelled to raise the cost of flights while reducing the number of low-cost flights. Many activities that are currently being carried out online, such as business meetings, seminars, and conferences, are likely to continue in the same vein, given the travel restrictions in place. It is also possible that the *reshoring* of companies and the workers employed by them, often from faraway regions, will increase, which will be linked with a reduction in long-distance commuting. It is estimated that internships and apprenticeships for studying and working abroad will decline and, consequently, job expectations will be higher in one's own country (Tirabassi, Del Pra, 2020).

Due to the economic and employment crises that are also unfolding in foreign countries, it is reasonable to expect that many Italian citizens who had previously emigrated will return to Italy, especially those employed in low-skilled jobs, above all in the food and drink sector. Employment problems are all the more serious in advanced countries that provide poor insurance coverage for workers, particularly for younger people who have been resident outside Italy for less time and are employed as informal and unprotected workers: an incentive for them to return to their homeland, often permanently. Students studying abroad are also returning to Italy, especially from Romania, Australia, and the USA, while it is estimated that around 100,000 Italian nationals have already returned from all parts of the world due to Covid (Tirabassi, Del Pra, 2020). On the other hand, the Italian economic crisis, which threatens to be more severe than in many other European economies, is likely to result in large numbers of Italian workers migrating abroad to countries that have greater employment opportunities, thereby counterbalancing the number of people entering the country.

2. A COUNTRY ON THE MOVE

The deep economic and social changes for which the pandemic crisis is responsible will also inevitably have consequences on the processes of inter and intra-regional mobility in Italy.

Although long overshadowed by emigration abroad, internal migration has been a constant throughout the history of Italy³. Population movement has marked the

¹ For a comprehensive review of a possible post-Covid-19 world, cf. Aa.Vv. (2020) Cersosimo, Cimatti, Raniolo (2020).

² Thomas L. Friedman describes the contemporary world as having become more equal, i.e. "flat", in his book *The World is Flat* (2005). In his opinion, globalisation has closed the gap (or levelled the playing field) between developed and emerging countries, mainly due to the spread and ubiquitous presence of the Internet and related technological innovations that have helped to break down cultural, logistical, and temporal barriers between countries. For an alternative interpretation (*The World is Curved, Not Flat*), cf. McCann, (2008).

³ For a concise reconstruction of internal migrations in post-World War II Italy, see Colucci (2018) and the bibliography cited therein. For a long-term interpretative analysis, from the classical to the contemporary age, see the *Annale della Storia d'Italia* Einaudi, edited by Corti and Sanfilippo (2009).

country's post-unification evolution. Outgoing and (to a lesser extent) incoming mobility was significant in economically underdeveloped and rural areas, in spite of the widely accepted view that these were inhabited by settled mono-cultural communities.

For a long time, this movement almost exclusively involved spatially confined rural-agricultural areas due to the heavy economic and occupational dominance of agriculture, the low level of mechanisation, and the poor condition of the transport infrastructure (in 1951 about 40% of jobs in Italy were in agriculture; today this percentage has fallen to 5%). Transhumance, mountain pasturing, and seasonal crop peaks, especially at sowing and harvesting time, routinely attracted armies of labourers, mostly generic workers, from neighbouring regions, or those that were not too far from the centres of demand. From the Murgie and the Bari coast to Capitanata in the province of Foggia, from Ciociaria to the Agro Romano just outside Rome, and from the hills and mountains above the Po Valley, thousands of workers migrated for several months in the year, leaving tangible and lasting marks on the social structure of the regions they moved to, such as working methods, folk and craft traditions, and forms of social, trade union, and political conflict (Gallo, 2012). The impact of this migration, therefore, was not limited to the network of agricultural production alone: through the exchange of experiences and reciprocal cross-fertilisation, it also had a strong influence on the way that both migrating workers and the local population engaged with and experienced the world.

After the Second World War, these seasonal migrations linked to agricultural cycles gradually declined, but they did not disappear altogether. Meanwhile, other forms of migration in rural areas had emerged, such as the transfer of families to land expropriated and reclaimed by the Agrarian Reform, from one side, and the increasing number of people moving permanently to cities, from the other. Due to the gradual waning of the phenomenon of land parcelling linked to the Agrarian Reform and especially to the ever-increasing use of mechanisation in the Italian countryside from the 1960s, seasonal agricultural mobility has tended to disappear or to become concentrated in a few areas, with different types of people involved, above all foreign workers.

The great Italian internal migration of the first twenty years following the Second World War is largely attributable to the rural exodus, in particular to the depopulation of the Apennine mountains and hills, albeit to varying degrees in different areas and in different periods. The specifics of this extraordinary internal

mobility, in addition to its intensity⁴, are twofold: it was mostly a permanent migration and a migration to urban centres, especially in the North. While in the first half of the 1900s internal movement was mainly seasonal or temporary, as well as usually over a short to medium geographical range, from the 1950s onwards, it became increasingly common to leave one's place of origin and to transfer permanently, often to faraway areas: from rural zones towards the lowlands, from the countryside to the city, from the North-East to the North-West, from the South to the North, from the "bone lands" (*terre dell'osso*) to the "pulp lands" (*terre della polpa*), to use Manlio Rossi Doria's evocative definition (1958). The demographic and economic "desertification" of rural areas was linked to the rapid expansion of urban and metropolitan agglomerations. The rural population distributed among scattered houses and micro-hamlets (which represented about a quarter of the national population at the beginning of the fifties) dwindled. Concurrently, there was a rapid population growth, initially in the larger cities and their outlying areas with the development of Fordism and the economic "miracle" and, subsequently – in the years of the rise of industrial districts and the "Terza Italia"⁵ period of development – also in small and medium urban centres.

In Italy, as elsewhere, the intensity and direction of internal emigration flows are physiologically connected to economic development, and to the "natural" tendency of workers, and often of their families, to move from areas with low opportunities for stable employment to areas that offer greater and more diverse, open-ended opportunities for permanent, protected employment with higher wages, as well as improved living conditions. The "dysfunction" at the heart of the Italian capitalist development model, experienced more profoundly and for longer than anywhere else, lies in its regional polarisation; the concentration of economies and wealth in limited areas of the country, almost all in the North, which has led to the cumulative phenomena of demographic agglomeration, a concentration of industrial growth and well-being in certain places and, conversely, a decline in others. The result is a country that is at once too "full" and too "empty", made of congestion and rarefaction, of gains and losses⁶. The southern stretch of the Apennines is the area that best typifies this depopulation over 70 years of

⁴ During the twenty-year period between 1951 and 1971, about six million Italians were living in a geographical area other than that of their birth (Bonifazi, 2013).

⁵ For an essential overview of Terza Italia and the industrial districts, see the pioneering works of Bagnasco, (1977); Becattini, (1987); Fuà, Zaccchia, (1983).

⁶ For an analysis of the "full" and the "empty" in Italy today, cf. Cersosimo, Ferrara, Nisticò, (2018).

the Italian Republic: a severe “desertification” of people, economies, skills, communities, and essential public services, which has led to local societies becoming asphyxiated, fragile, and vulnerable. This depopulation has been exacerbated, intentionally or otherwise, by public policies that failed to adequately counter both territorial and social inequality and that were intended, at best, to mitigate any imbalance through actions and interventions of a compassionate nature, offering only compensation for disadvantages or simply emergency measures.

In the first twenty years of the 21st century, internal migration has not diminished, but its protagonists have changed. Mobility between areas is, in fact, increasingly being fuelled by the movement of the foreign population⁷. Due to their lack of regional roots, their lower average age, and their preference for moving shorter distances, foreigners show a more marked rate of mobility than Italians. This is evidenced by their frequent changes of residence which, in recent years, have accounted for practically all increases in the total number of relocations (Bonifazi, Heins, Tucci, 2014). The most recent trends in the internal mobility of foreigners are particularly interesting because they show signs of a new direction in migratory flows: no longer only from the South to the Centre-North, from agriculture to industry, and from the countryside to the city, but also from the Centre-North to the South, from industry to agriculture, and from one mountain region to another mountain region, with interesting repercussions for transformative, social, and economic processes, and for life prospects in the migrants’ destinations. During the nineties and the early years of 21st century, many migrants were attracted by job opportunities in the small and medium-sized factories of agglomerations in Lombardy, Veneto and the rest of the North-East. Following the deep post-2007 recession, which led to a widespread economic crisis and the decline of many small business areas, many people were forced, often with their families in tow, to return to precarious, seasonal, and poorly paid jobs in the southern rural areas (Perrotta, 2014)⁸.

⁷ Since the 1990s, immigrant labour has gradually replaced the native Italian workforce in most labour-intensive agricultural work and also in numerous less skilled jobs in industry, construction, and the service industry. For more information on the trends of foreign migration in European rural areas, cf. Joint Research Center, (2019), while for an up-to-date picture of immigration in Italy, with particular reference to agriculture, see Zumpano, (2020).

⁸ Southern agriculture, in rural areas but also close to metropolitan cities, would therefore confirm, even in recent years, its historical role as a “sponge” to soak up the “surplus” workforce in “central” areas, even if this often involved marginal workers and unskilled and manual labourers working in temporary or illegal jobs. For a regional analysis of foreign immigration as a significant factor in the latest internal migration, cf. De Filippo, (2020).

Despite the great recession, and the fall in employment opportunities in the most dynamic areas of the North, the historical migratory flows of southerners towards the North have not stopped nor even reduced⁹. Compared to past decades, during which the impetus for mobility was closely linked to the employment variable, more recently there has been an increase in the proportion of individuals and families leaving the South for reasons connected with the quality of life, in terms of the availability of communal social services in their destinations. Not surprisingly, the most attractive areas have been Tuscany, Emilia Romagna, Umbria, and Trentino, which have a dense and high-quality social and civil infrastructure. Another phenomenon that has not diminished is long-distance commuting, i.e. movement for work or study which, before the pandemic, consistently involved more than 1,000 individuals from the South who transferred daily from South to North and vice versa. Mobility within individual subnational districts, in particular between provinces in the Centre-North, has increased.

Another persistent, unidirectional movement is that of southern students enrolling at universities in the Centre-North. For a long time, about 30% of enrolled students from the South (around 30,000) have chosen to attend universities further and further away from the South every year, due to the greater availability of scholarships, the quality of life in cities, the quality and variety of the training on offer and, increasingly, the better prospects of postgraduate employment and higher pay. This long-distance mobility from South to North for higher education (more than half of those enrolled leave the South to go to universities in Emilia-Romagna or further north), in addition to weakening the university system in the South, often deprives it of students with great potential, which results in a huge net flow of financial resources (estimated at more than one billion euro per year) from the South to the Centre-North in the form of taxes, rent, and transport costs (Cersosimo, Ferrara, Nisticò, 2016).

The most scandalous and unsustainable movement of people, however, concerns medical patients. For some time, every year an average of between seventy and eighty thousand patients from the South have been admitted to health facilities in the Centre-North as outpatients, i.e. for medical problems less complex than those requiring a stay in hospital, often making very long journeys to do so (Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna, and Tuscany). Incoming hospital admissions from the

⁹ Teachers are a category of southern worker who have continued to move in great numbers to the Centre-North in recent years, cf. Colucci, Gallo, (2017).

Centre-North are, on average, around twenty-five thousand patients, so the annual net figure to the detriment of the South is about fifty thousand hospital admissions per year. Apart from the smaller regions, which show a certain propensity to attract patients from neighbouring regions for some specific specialisations – although only Molise has a very slightly positive balance – in all the other southern regions the flow is almost all one-way. The net imbalance in mobility spikes at -27% in Calabria and -23% in Puglia, while positive values of about 9% are recorded in Tuscany and Lombardy and 7% in Lazio and Emilia-Romagna (Cersosimo, 2020). The outgoing flow of patients evidently has negative consequences for private and public expenditure and introduces management diseconomies for the southern institutions while presenting those in the Centre-North with economies of scale, thereby exacerbating regional disparities both in efficiency and effectiveness.

3. LOOKING AT ITALY FROM THE MARGINALISED AREAS

The “mixing” of social geography brought about by the incessant internal movement of Italians and foreigners is in conflict with the notion of Italy as an irreducibly dichotomous country, crystallised into juxtaposed and binary social and territorial segments: the lowlands as an attractive and dynamic place of wealth, and the mountain regions and Apennines as a place of poverty, exodus and relying on social subsidies; intensive agriculture on an industrial scale as the only path to efficiency, and small-scale and niche farming as sub-optimal and vestigial practices; the speed of urban daily life as an icon of modernity and innovation, and the low intensity of rural life as a sign of backwardness, if not archaism. This stereotypical representation ignores the polycentric character of the country, concealing the fact that Italy is a country of “rugged” diversity, an extensive catalogue of microclimates, crops, woods, landscapes, traditions, foods, dialects, music, local human constructions, and continuous mobility: the unique charm of the many faces of Italy in each place (Barca, 2016; Bevilacqua, 2017). This polarised representation also neglects the attractive pull of the mosaic, underestimating the interdependence of the parts: the security of the lowlands depends on taking systematic care of the hill and mountain regions; the health of the cities depends on the quality of the forests that surround them; production and urban services are affected by the consistent and systematic flow of commuters from the hill and mountain regions (Bevilacqua, 2007). These are very different but interconnected

worlds, and for this very reason, profound imbalances in one part reduce the social and economic sustainability of the entire system. Depopulation and abandonment are not only bad for the rural areas, but for Italy as a whole. The geography and directionality of human and economic networks are not immutable and do not become fossilised over time; on the contrary, they co-evolve systematically, without determinism or any pre-defined paths.

Perversely, Covid-19 has thrown the notion of modernity based on localised excellence and the primacy of the metropolis into crisis, forcing an increase in critical rethinking, even on topics that had significant weight in the construction of this model of “modernity”; it has thrown doubt on the sustainability of the prevailing paradigm that considers urban densification as “the” way to achieve resilience, innovation, and well-being for all. In other words, doubt seems to be spreading about the notion of the hegemony of the large urban aggregates over the rest of society, or rather about the unidirectionality of progress and human and economic development from the metropolis to the rest, from the city to the countryside and the mountains. Many are now openly appealing for a reversal of the previously dominant direction, hoping for an intensification in the flow from the city to the countryside, from areas of high population density to those that have become sparsely populated, from large to small, from concentration to residential dispersion. Some have arrived at the revelation – occasionally romantic and naive – of villages as “ideal” places for life projects, with a denser network of human relationships, feeding economies that are less obsessed with short-term profit, yet more circular and less dissipative; these are places which cultivate innovators and innovation and which, in turn, nourish collective well-being and a high quality of coexistence, but which also have widespread participation in any public decisions taken¹⁰.

On the other hand, recent phenomena and forecasts seem to point towards a change in the dominant directional paradigm, or at the very least, towards the loss of its hegemonic grip. The most obvious trend is that of the “forced” increase in remote working, which is expected to continue to affect a high number of workers, even in

¹⁰ It is surprising, but also encouraging, that “starchitects” of the calibre of Stefano Boeri and Massimiliano Fuksas have come to support residential dispersion and a reduction in urban living in favour of the expansion of small villages, as a response to the pandemic. On the many implications of the spread of Covid-19 for the relationship between cities and rural areas, cf. Fenu, (2020). Regional and social case studies and the potential for a new way of “re-inhabiting” places in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic are analysed in depth in the recent special issue of the journal *Scienze del Territorio*, (2020).

the post-pandemic era, and which will make it possible to permanently establish, for the first time in such a widespread form, the physical separation between office, shop, factory, meeting place and site of supply. It is therefore very likely that a significant number of workers who have returned to their municipalities of origin due to Covid-19, of whom many are obviously in the South (Svimez, 2020), will end up staying permanently in their places of birth, with significant repercussions not only for the flow of mobility but also for the local economies and communities that they have left behind and to which they have returned. Albeit on a smaller scale, social and economic multiplicative mechanisms similar to those experienced during mass emigration from the South to the North of Italy could be activated, but this time in the opposite direction. Moving in the same direction, national and regional public programmes and policies are planned, aimed at encouraging the permanent relocation of families to rural areas, especially families of young people with small children who are no longer able to afford the growing costs (economic or otherwise) of life in the city, or who feel the need to connect with nature and live a more modest lifestyle, in search of a “slower” and more profound day-to-day existence¹¹. It cannot be ignored that the environmental crisis will increasingly fuel a demand for “high ground”, i.e. cool locations where it is foreseeable that people will have to live, in the coming years, for several months of the year (Mercalli, 2020). Phenomena more closely related to the marketplace are also contributing to enabling people to live and do business in rural areas. As is well known, the increase in household incomes means that, once essential needs have been met, the consumption of diversified, personalised and discretionary goods increases, resulting in a segmented range of markets, each one characterized by small and typified production batches. In this context, the demand for food products with certain intrinsic attributes, such as a specific place of origin, unique flavours, symbolic and aesthetic attributes, or nutritional content, has grown and is forecast to continue expanding (Lancaster, 1971). This also opens up opportunities for the agricultural economy and other small-scale businesses in areas that have been considered marginal until now, such as inland areas.

It would be unrealistic to consider these signals indicating a reversal of established trends – as weak as

they are – as signs of a structural crisis of the urban-centric model, both on the cultural and representative level and on a political level. There is no doubt that cities and metropolitan agglomerations will continue to play a decisive role in terms of social, productive, and civic innovation and creative vitalism, even after the pandemic. The factors of agglomeration that favour cities and densely populated places are still very significant in our contemporary society and economy (Viesti, 2016a). We are not facing the decline of the urban. Rather, what seems to be in crisis is certain supposed linearities of the transpositional processes in play (from the city to the rest, from the large to the small, from the centre to the periphery). This challenges us to adopt a fresh point of view, to take into consideration the “whole” and the complementary nature of its parts.

To fully appreciate the rich variety of the Italian regions, it is necessary to “change one’s point of view”, to take a different stance, to take into account all the “bones” and the “marrow”, the multiplicity of landscapes, agriculture, arrivals and departures, the complexity of productive and entrepreneurial configurations, the equally vital coexistence of “hi-tech” and “gradual” innovation linked to different contexts, the isolated urban innovators and those in the mountain villages, the hidden connections between the mountains and the plains¹². There will be no future for Italy’s rural areas without a change in outlook and narrative stance, if we do not simultaneously take into account movement and countermovement, departing and remaining, escape and nostalgia, abandonment and return, de- and re-countrification (Cersosimo and Donzelli 2020; De Rossi 2018; Teti 2017).

4. A NEW HUMAN AND AGRICULTURAL FUTURE FOR RURAL AREAS?

For centuries, agriculture has been widely practised throughout Italy in the inland hill regions and in the foothills and mountains, much more so than in the lowlands, where it was – until relatively recently – plagued by malaria, which held back residential development and impeded work on the land (Bevilacqua, 2015). The

¹¹ The most recent regional experiment took place in the Emilia-Romagna Region, which sent out an invitation to families, for parents or individuals under the age of forty, who were interested in relocating to a mountain municipality in the region, allocating them grants to enable them to buy or renovate a home. For literary works on the slow pace and depth of life in the rural Apennines, see Nigro and Lupo (2020).

¹² On the complementary aspects, flows, connections, and socio-economic and recognition-based interdependencies of the so-called “metro-montani” regional systems, see the recent articles (and the bibliographic references contained therein) by Giuseppe Dematteis, Federica Corrado, Filippo Barbera, Giacomo Pettenati, Maurizio Dematteis and Daniele Cat Berro, published in *il Mulino*, Edition 6, November-December 2020, pp. 956-1002. On the need to reconstruct the relationship between the city and the biospheric and anthropic context in order to achieve a new form of urban living, cf. Magnaghi, (2020).

depopulation and decline in productivity of rural areas is a post-World War II phenomenon, a consequence, in particular, of the emergence of the Fordist production model based on standardised mass production and industrial gigantism and, from an institutional and regulatory standpoint, on the “compromise” between state and social forces at the central level. It was only then that the idea spread, including in agriculture, that there was a single “best” way to achieve productive efficiency, which lay in the large-scale model, standardization of production, and the imperative of the accumulation and maximisation of profits.

The spread of the Fordist paradigm dealt a fatal blow to the agricultural economies of rural areas: not only the smaller and more marginal ones in the highlands, but more generally to Italy’s “peasant backbone”, the anthropological and socio-productive *genius loci* of Italy until the 1950s (De Rita, 2017). Agricultural practices in the hill and mountain regions are, on the whole, structurally dismissive of the new production paradigm and deeply impervious to the linearity and rigidity of the Fordist system. An agricultural enterprise in a rural area is constitutionally a multifunctional enterprise, an irrepensible further stratification of activities designed to tackle the physical challenges of the land, the natural fertility of the soil, and the poor infrastructure, and to overcome human and climatic constraints (Henke, Salvioni, 2008; Henke, Povellato, Vanni, 2014). These are not typical businesses but rather a microcosm of agricultural cultivation and production. They have a symbiotic relationship with nature, providing social and ecosystem services, preserving and protecting the soil and the agricultural landscape, preserving biodiversity, and ensuring clean air and water; businesses with a sense of self-imposed limits. In short, an organic blend of the production of goods and public good, of products for the market and positive socio-environmental external effects, of food commodities and non-commodity goods and services. These are not just “simple” business hubs aimed at maximising the financial capital invested but, more often than not, “life projects” aimed at enhancing the capital of tacit multi-layered knowledge: the family workforce, business reputation, and attachment to a particular land, a particular place, and a particular community (Becattini, 2015).

As is well understood, the growth of income and collective well-being in the “glorious thirties” during the Fordist era progressively undermined the power of the mass production plant and its social pretext, and the hegemony of the factory in the construction of the physical and “biopolitical” space. The initial, decisive blows came from the workers, who fought against the inflex-

ible rules of the factory regime from within, those rules that resulted in alienation and stress, as well as the subordination of human workers to machines. In addition, the forces that resulted in this disintegration were the classic market forces: increased household incomes, once essential needs were satisfied, were increasingly spent on diversified, personalised and discretionary goods. In this way, the mass market gradually broke down into a “mass of markets”, each one characterised by limited and typified production to cope with an increasingly segmented, unstable, and capricious aggregate demand. Globalisation’s obsession with the standardisation of products and logistics and distribution services has contributed to fuelling, amongst the affluent classes and the more well-informed segments of the population, a demand for distinctiveness and speciality, for goods and services customised and calibrated to satisfy particular, individual requirements.

For several reasons, therefore, new windows of opportunity have opened up in recent times for niche products and specialities aimed at satisfying differentiated demands, and for goods with high added value in terms of creativity, healthiness, distinctiveness, and symbolism. At the same time, growing segments of consumers are turning away from generic food products and demanding goods which, in addition to fulfilling their intrinsic needs, also satisfy other desires linked to nutritional, environmental, historical, location-based and intangible content and symbols. If a wine produced on a certain hillside, in addition to being a good, organic wine, comes from vineyards planted on terraces with dry stone walls that protect the valley below from the risk of rockfalls and landslides, it will enjoy a surplus of symbolic value which, if appropriately promoted, could result in a higher monetary value being placed on the product.

The agricultural sector in rural areas is potentially able to seize these new opportunities offered by the emergence of new forms of market, characterised by an exchange of goods with added relational, reputational, environmental, organoleptic and safety values. Agriculture in hill and mountain regions is intrinsically a specialist, unique, small-scale activity. Farms in these areas have mostly been atomised, often well below the minimum threshold for economic sustainability. It is therefore an unavoidable choice for these agricultural businesses to focus on high-value products with a specific and recognised “personality”, just as it is, more often than not, necessary to create multipurpose farms with a wider focus in which agricultural productivity is only one component, albeit an important one, of the family’s income and employment. Equally important is the

adoption of “short” distribution channels that are loyal and close to the consumer, engendering empathy and trust between the latter and the producer. Direct selling has historically been one of the ways to shorten the distance between the farmer and the consumer and, at the same time, reduce pollution and avoid long distribution chains that take away value from the producer.

The most suitable crops for rural areas, and those that have the aforementioned special characteristics, are above all high-quality fruit and vegetable products, in particular those belonging to the genetic varieties typical of the extraordinary biodiversity of the Italian hill and mountain regions (apples, plums, chestnuts, almonds, vines, olives, peaches, hazelnuts, beans, peas, tomatoes, peppers), which have been put at serious risk by the increased area of land that has become wild due to depopulation and abandonment. This also includes crops that can be grown using the traditional practice of “agricultural promiscuity”, for example, olive trees and apples mixed with cereals and vegetable gardens, and various other combinations. Rural areas can produce products with a higher intrinsic quality than those offered by industrial processes; they have superior flavours and freshness, and are healthier, too. They also have the advantage of geographical proximity and are the age-old species and cultivars that best meet the modern demand for food and sustainable agricultural ecosystems that are beneficial to human health and the environment (Bevilacqua, 2011 and 2018). This, therefore, is far from a return to past practices, to the agriculture of our great-grandparents, to a bygone “golden age” that is no more.

The agricultural recovery of rural areas is not to be achieved by appealing to nostalgia, by looking to the past, turning back the clock to the age of the plough and rural poverty. On the contrary, it will be all the more credible and lasting the more it makes use of innovative techniques and methods, the creativity and technology of the present combined with that of the past: innovation is not always synonymous with the new, nor with recently devised techniques or technologies. Sometimes innovation in agriculture comes about by adapting and re-contextualising traditional (retro-innovative) techniques, such as reconsidering *synergistic farming* practices; these are based on the biodiversity associated with polyculture and its conservation through the self-fertilising of wild land thanks to hedges, the grassing of fields and an absence of ploughing. There are also various forms of *circular agriculture*, focused on the reuse of biomass to produce fertiliser compost, the use of solar panels on buildings, houses, and stables to produce energy, rainwater collection systems, and building dry stone walls with waste stone. These methods would be con-

sidered “virtuous” farming techniques. Agriculture in the Italian hinterland needs few or none of the accepted innovations that were designed for the fertile lowland areas: intensive farming based on the capitalist obsession with “short-termism”. Rather, what is needed is “slow” innovation which looks far ahead, carefully calibrated to meet the essential needs of farmers and residents, adapted to the characteristics of individual places, generating opportunities, new grassland and agricultural crops, and all the things that promote sustainable interaction between human activity, the environment, and social justice (Barbera, Parisi, 2019).

Innovation can also mean research and the element of surprise, the curiosity required to escape from a rut, because sometimes, as Michel Serres (2016) puts it, “innovation sneaks up on you like a thief in the night”. This is also why the hill and mountain regions and their agricultural economies need young people, curious youngsters who want to reconnect with nature and with “gentle”, patient rhythms of life. This rebirth cannot be entrusted exclusively to the increasingly rarefied garrisons of experienced farmers and their tacit knowledge. New life is needed, new protagonists, new arrivals, an influx of those people with the desire to live in rural and mountain areas (Varotto, 2020). Above all, this will require new and more incisive public policies: in order to make more land available; to increase the supply and quality of essential services such as schools, healthcare, transport, and digital connectivity; to ensure adequate citizenship standards for residents; to encourage local economies and entrepreneurship; to support community cooperatives; to facilitate the reception of immigrants and new residents. Policies that focus on people and their needs, rather than outside interventions. The “Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne” or SNAI (National Strategy for Inner Areas) is a good example of *place-based* policy, because it at once links, in each place, the dignity of daily life with economic development, education with business, and health with entrepreneurship, while rejecting the ideas of economic determinism that consider the quality of citizenship to be a variable dependent on the level of development¹³. The SNAI is, above all, a policy to encourage and support internal areas, to make them possible and sustainable from a civil standpoint, but also to activate and mobilise their productive potential and new local economies, healing and reactivating public assets through the “living labour” of local people.

¹³ For the “theory” of the *place-based* approach, see Barca (2019), and Barca F., McCann P., Rodríguez-Pose A., (2012). On the national strategy for rural areas in Italy, see, among others, Barbera (2015); Barca F., Carrosio G., Lucatelli S., (2018); Lucatelli S., Monaco F., Tantillo F., (2019).

Seeds of agricultural rebirth in rural areas are widely visible. Fortunately, the hill and mountain regions have not yet been indiscriminately degraded, nor become areas of irreversible depopulation, or even areas of undifferentiated decline. In the Italian hinterland there are resilient areas and individuals who have reacted to the economic and demographic crisis and have adapted and reconfigured their economies and markets, especially those that depend on tourism. But there are also those who have opted for active resistance and gone toe-to-toe with the physical and civil hostilities affecting them (Corrado, 2013; Dematteis, 2011 and 2018; Dematteis, Di Gioia, Membretti, (2018); Membretti, Viazzo, Kofler, 2017; Teneggi, 2018). As can be seen, albeit in isolated and spontaneous forms, there has been an insurgence of repopulation driven by an assortment of people: new-bourgeois, new “mountain dwellers”, “molecular” neo-farmers, economic immigrants or refugees, citizens “fleeing” the metropolis, young native Italians who have decided to harness local resources in innovative ways, and those returning, disappointed by the low quality of urban life and motivated to build a more natural and supportive, less consumerist life for themselves. We have also seen the emergence of community cooperatives, experiments in which the members are both the producers and consumers of the goods and services they have created collectively: the beginnings of a heritage of micro-subjectivity which, if recognised and cultivated, could be decisive in changing the civil and socio-economic perspectives of the people living in rural areas, and in Italy as a whole.

The indispensable condition for the rebirth of rural areas is to bring them back to the centre of public attention, to promote the collective awareness that the future of the entire country also depends on the civil, social, and political enhancement of the hill and mountain regions. The depopulation of the villages and highlands will not stop unless the debt of gratitude towards the Apennines, the Alps, and all Italy’s other hill and mountain regions is recognised. The rural areas will not attract inhabitants and agricultural economies without the persistent regeneration of suitable public policies, aimed primarily at healing the wound of civil deprivation that marginalises them.

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