

Agri-cultural resistance and local development: the cases of lavender and rye in the Susa Valley

Scienza in azione

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Abstract. *The reconversion of raw lands into productive areas through farming may be considered as a practice of resistance toward territorial policies dictated from outside. So, marginal areas are taking new meanings in the eyes of their inhabitants or of the people who decide to settle there from the city. This attitude has triggered virtuous processes of development that are part of a general rethinking of mountains, largely characterized by new creative ways of dealing with them, in terms of living and doing business in accordance to local resources. This paper will analyse the recovery of two crops – lavender and rye – in the Susa Valley. They were studied in the research project MA.S.K.A. (Marginal Areas and Know-how in the Alps), funded by Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation and University of Turin in 2015 and 2016.*

Keywords: *Italian Alps; marginal areas; new highlanders; mountain agriculture; local development.*

Riassunto. *La riconversione di terre abbandonate in aree produttive mediante l'agricoltura può essere considerata una pratica di resistenza alle politiche territoriali dettate dall'esterno. È così che le aree marginali stanno assumendo un nuovo significato agli occhi degli abitanti o delle persone che decidono di stabilirvisi dalla città. Tale attitudine ha innescato processi virtuosi di sviluppo che fanno parte di un rinnovato interesse generale per la montagna, in gran parte caratterizzata da nuovi modi creativi di affrontarla, in termini di vivere e fare impresa nel rispetto delle risorse locali. Nel seguente contributo verranno analizzati i casi di recupero delle colture della lavanda e della segale, oggetto di ricerca del progetto MA.S.K.A. (Aree marginali e know-how nelle Alpi), finanziato dalla Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo e dall'Università di Torino negli anni 2015-2016.*

Parole-chiave: *Alpi italiane; aree marginali; nuovi abitanti; agricoltura di montagna; sviluppo locale.*

1. Introduction

For a decade now, researchers from different fields have been pointing out the migrations to the uplands of the so-called "new highlanders" or "new mountaineers" (DEMATTEIS 2011; CORRADO ET AL. 2014; BERTOLINO 2014; CORRADO 2014; CORRADO, DEMATTEIS 2016). Frequently, these new settlers tend to fit into the category of neorural (MERLO 2006). But the current neoruralism seems to differ from the movements of the past because of new instances and expectations. Among them, the protection of natural heritage and the recovery of old agricultural practices, which pave the way to green entrepreneurial activities and to implementation of different forms of tourism (green, soft, 'sweet') (BERTOLINO 2014).

Based on these premises, the interdisciplinary project called MA.S.K.A. (Marginal Areas and Know-how in the Alps) has explored the social meanings of the conversion of wastelands into new agricultural areas and the collective rethinking of local development from an anthropological point of view (BONATO, ZOLA 2017).

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2. Can the Susa Valley be considered as a marginal place?

Recently, the awareness of the chances of a different development model has increased in local people and stakeholders: local heritage (both tangible and intangible) has been valued as a keystone in response to financial crisis and consumerism. As a result, new inhabitants arrived, and old residents came back.¹ The M.A.S.K.A. project focused on new agricultural practices in those alpine territories which could be defined as 'marginal' because of their distance from the main centre of decisional power. Marginal areas, though, are not only those deficient in population and forgotten by public policies, but also interstitial places where it is possible to find the best examples of creativity toward the rethinking of life in a sustainable perspective (REMOTTI 2009). The Susa Valley is an Italian alpine valley internationally known for the cross-border project of the high-speed rail (TAV). It is close to the city of Turin, in north-western Italy. For its location, it has been one of the main corridors between Italy and France since ancient times. In the twentieth century, the Valley saw firstly the construction of the railroad including the Frejus Tunnel, then that of the motorway with its massive concreting. The political struggle of this natural corridor continues today since the Valley is affected by the construction of a segment of the high-speed rail which should connect Europe from Ukraine to Portugal through Italy and France. This enormous project, supported by Italian and French Governments and also by EU, since the '80s has been facing the fierce opposition of local population, mainly because of its environmental impact on territories. As a consequence, people have begun to meet, to exchange opinions and to organize into a spontaneous movement that has taken the name of 'No TAV'.² As Armano and colleagues (2012, 154) said:

the effects of the high-speed on the environment and human health raise apprehension [...] This in a valley already crossed by two high traffic roads, a highway, a high voltage line and a railway line. But it would be a mistake to see in this struggle a simple re-edition of the environmentalist movement. Indeed, the No TAV question has been expanding to the defence of the territory, and to the protest against the global development model that presides over the 'major public work'.

Soon such resistance coagulated into a broad and inter-generational movement, seeking links with other organizations concerned with the Italian territories and common goods ("No DalMolin", "No Ponte", etc.).³ It has always rejected the ascription of NIMBY syndrome⁴ as a too simplistic way to label a much more complex social phenomenon (AIME 2016, 233-235), characterised by different decision levels and the self-determination of communities.

¹ Even politics has adopted tools in response to this change. Different processes are put in places to encourage the renewal of abandoned villages, e.g.: the ERDF (European regional development fund) programming 2014-2020; the programme called SNAI ("*Strategia nazionale per le aree interne*", National strategy for inland areas) of the Italian government; EUSALP, the European Macroregional Strategy related to Alps pointed at improving cross-border cooperation in the Alpine states and reducing the gap between cities and mountains in term of accessibility, opportunities and services.

² The acronym TAV stands for 'Treno ad Alta Velocità' in Italian, which means high-speed rail in English.

³ The former opposing the (high-impact and high-risk) enlargement of an American military base near Vicenza, the latter the construction of a (high-impact, highly expensive, arduous and largely useless) bridge across the Messina Strait.

⁴ It is an acronym for 'Not In My Back Yard', a pejorative characterization of opposition by inhabitants to a new infrastructure project only motivated by its closeness to them and potential dangerousness for their territories, often with the belief that developments are needed in society but they should be placed further away.

So, marginality in the Susa Valley can be considered a state-of-mind, developed in a land which is not neglected by political interests or economic investments but that strongly claims another way to development, with a central role of local people wanting to decide about their future, without delegating to a nation-centralized politics. Therefore, the renovation of agro-pastoral activities, redefined and filled by new meanings, has become a special way to reclaim the right to choose.

3. Lavender and rye: two different crops for a renovated agriculture

The research studied the recovery of two very different plants that are re-enhancing mountain farming practices in terms of sustainability and revival of cultural know-how's: lavender and rye. The former is known today for its essential oil and its use in perfumery, cosmetics, food manufacturing, aromatherapy, and pharmaceutical industry (DEMASI *ET AL.* 2018); with the latter a less-refined flour is made, healthier thanks to its raw fibres and vitamins and a low gluten quantity (LETEY 2016a).

Thanks to its micro-climate, the Susa Valley is a good ecological niche for the spontaneous growth of lavender, which could be copiously found in the Middle and Upper Valley some decades ago. It grew spontaneously in dry and sunny slopes, as a solitary plant or in small groups. Unfortunately, it decreased dramatically after the abandon of the villages and it has been gradually overcome by brushwood.⁵



But lavender has been rediscovered since the new millennium. Today the cultivation of *Lavandula angustifolia*⁶ takes place in neglected areas characterised by terraces built with the dry-stone technique,⁷ often converted from previous crops or from vineyards.

⁵ In the first decades of the last century a local micro-economy related to lavender developed especially in the High Valley. In the municipalities of Oulx, Salbertrand and Exilles, some families became owners of alembics for distillation: this started a family business model in which local manpower was used for the harvest of lavender and other plants in order to create different fragrances and colonies that were sold both in the nearby valleys and abroad.

⁶ MEDISS project (2012), funded by MED 2007-2013 (FEDER) programme, identified *Lavandula angustifolia* as the fourth medical plant cultivated in Piedmont, after *Menta piperita*, *Anthemis nobilis* and *Artemisia pontica*, with a total extension of 17.36 Ha. Surprisingly, 51 out of 140 enterprises interviewed by the project declare a primarily official production direction. 20 of these are placed in the mountains. The first typology of commercial product sold is essential oil, of low yield (10-20 Kg/Ha, i.e. 0.6-1.2% of lavender inflorescences, LETEY 2016b) but of excellent quality. The indicative price is approximately € 210.00/Kg. The organic 'lavender flowers' have an indicative price of € 12.50/kg. But prices are affected by large fluctuations, depending on the dynamics of supply and demand (MEDISS 2012).

⁷ Terraced landscapes, from mountains to islands, enjoy renewed uses that save it from weathering. Their recovery brings to multifunctional activities, from education to tourism (BONARDI, VAROTTO 2016).

Left to right: **Fig. 1.** Dry-stone walls and lavender. The mountain terraced landscape is enhanced by the restoration of agriculture and by cultural events such as walks into the lavender camps; **Fig. 2.** The hand-made harvest of lavender in July.

The ethnographic research has proceeded with the documentation of the whole production process – from the hand-picking during July and August to the distillation with the alembic – in the agricultural farm “Il Brusafer”. It was founded in 2014, following organic farming methods.⁸ Nowadays, “Il Brusafer” is the only handmade laboratory in the Valley, managed by one of the co-founders and his wife. The other people who grow this plant give their own harvest at this farm or turn it out directly with household alembics as a very limited production. The know-how the farmers hold, although modernized, remains the one reported by older people as ethno-botanical researches show (MATONTI 2015). Its uses range from hand-made cosmetics (essential oil, soaps, creams) to flavoured foods (biscuits, infusions, jams, honey and cheese).



Fig. 3. Lavender flowers before the distillation in alembic in the Brusafer farm laboratory.

The recovery of lavender is not just a nostalgic look at the past or a simple money-making revival of a local know-how (BERTOLINO 2017). First of all, it shows a new discovery of the ancient way of living in the Alps, based on a cooperative contribution among farmers, and on multifunctional activities.

Some oral testimonies collected during the research gave an idea of what today is the agricultural practice in the Susa Valley. The main goal is to recover fallow fields in order to create new economic activities linked to the natural local resources and history and, at the same time, restore the landscape and enhance tourism. About this, in 2014, lavender was the focus of a land art project made by Michelangelo Pistoletto, called “Third Paradise”. This project established the implantation of 11.000 lavender plants on the *Giasset*, the grassy slope of the Fortress of Exilles, and involved local farmers, the Forestry office of Unione Montana Valle Susa, the municipality of Exilles, the Eco-museum of the Territory and the Educational Department of Castello di Rivoli - Museum of Contemporary Art.⁹ The bloom in July attracts tourists and visitors, while the flowers are harvested by local farmers, helping to increase the production.

Briefly, today the cultivation of lavender allows to:

- I. recover neglected lands and prevent hydro-geological risks;
- II. diversify farmers’ income, both with products and with the related educational activities;
- III. develop a new tourism based on attraction of the landscape, as shown by some local and national initiatives.¹⁰

⁸ Before the beginning of the farm activity, “Il Brusafer” has been an inn with rooms for 9 years. Today, the cultivation of different crops and vegetables, the creation of a shop and the accommodation show virtuous link between agro-pastoral chains and cultural tourism. This is an increasingly evident trend in mountain areas (BARBERA ET AL. 2019, 41).

⁹ See <<https://www.vallesusa-tesori.it/en/eventi/dettaglio/2015/04/18/terzo-paradiso-exilles>> (05/2021).

¹⁰ As an agronomic research conducted in the Susa Valley and in other two valleys of Piedmont Region underlines, “lavenders of West Italian Alps disclosed a great potential for the development of a valuable local product” because of their performances at high altitudes (DEMASI ET AL. 2018). An economic study on the impact of lavender multifunctionality could allow to quantify the related market. Unfortunately, figures and data are still really poor (Mediss, 2012). During the last few years,

Rye (*Secale cereale*) differs from lavender because it has always been a cultivated plant. Belonging to the family of cereals, it is particularly resistant to poor soil and cold. For this reason, it was the most used cereal for the cultivation of high-altitudes fields. When rye was mixed with wheat, the product was then called 'Barbarià', from which a dark bread can be made. In the popular imaginaries, the black bread has always been associated with the 'poor' food of mountainous areas: as we actually know, rye mixed with wheat flour allowed instead to get a rustic but very healthy bread.

In the last century, though, peasants used to move to the low-land factories (or to the winter-ski industry), and farming activities were left back so rye almost disappeared. In addition, the knowledge around the ancient varieties of cereals were neglected as the current food industry has sacrificed biodiversity for the benefit of a bunch of more productive breeds.

However, thanks to the recent re-evaluation of the Italian food culture¹¹ as well as the implementation of new agricultural ways – as the synergistic or the biodynamic ones – rye and other ancient grains are now rediscovered by local farmers.

Around this, cultural associations are mixing agricultural practices and philosophical principles. "Principi Pellegrini - DiVangAzioni" is an association operating in the Low and Middle Valley, inspired by Masanobu Fukuoka's handbook *The One-Straw Revolution* (2009), published in the '70s, and by Emilia Hazelip, the founder of synergistic gardening. Some years ago, this association launched the project "Ingraniamo" for testing ancient cereals varieties on small private plots. People involved in this project have the opportunity to meet and exchange knowledge and ideas; many of them jointed another project called PASO ("Progetto Autoproduzione Sementi Ortive"), for the autonomous production of old seeds. Although it is more complex than other grains because of the difficulty in tracking down old varieties due to the disappearance of their germinal power, the recovery of rye fits into these dynamics.

Another place of experimentation is located in Cels, a hamlet in the municipality of Exilles. Here, there are several rye growers. As elsewhere in the Upper Valley, rye was once diffused far and large due to its use in rotation with potatoes; now it is been taken back again by local people interested to ancient varieties. One of the experimentations regards a variety of rye from Valtellina, a valley in Lombardy, protected by "Pro Specie Rara" (a Swiss institution that deals with old varieties). It is particularly suitable for the construction of traditional roofs because of the height it can reach (up to 2.20 meters). Despite the rye roofs tradition is not native of the Susa Valley, it is possible to find it in other areas of Piedmont as in the Maritime Alps. Here, the presence of the Nature Park of the Maritime Alps and the Eco-museum of Rye has already allowed the revival of rye production, both as food (for bread and beer) and for architectural purposes. The interest of the Park for the presence of this variety in the hamlet of Cels allowed a fruitful collaboration with local growers in order to test different forms of sustainable architecture based on rye as ecological element.

as for the *vendage* in September, more and more 'harvest festivals' have been organized in July by farmers and cultural associations. People can harvest lavender in the private fields of the producers and know more about the plant and their use. Some of these festivals have been organized since 2017 in Venaus with the collaboration of the municipalities while Il Brusafer has hosted a travel package organized by "CamminareLento" (<<http://www.camminarelento.it>> (last accessed: November 2020).

¹¹ See e.g. "Slow Food International", an organization founded in Italy in 1989 to prevent the disappearance of local food cultures and traditions.



Fig. 4 and 5. Modern alembic at work. The distillation cycle starts with the flowers heated, in order to produce oil and distilled water. Both are placed into a 1lt bottle. They are separated only after some days. The essential oil is put into small size bottles.

Moreover, in Cels, the flour produced from the most common variety is used for bread self-production or is conferred to local bakers who are experimenting with different mixed flours for bread, biscuits and local typical products such as 'Goffri', very slim wafers filled with jam, honey or cheese that are knowing a revival during local festivals.

The real need of farmers is to understand what was made in the past and what can be done now, with the modern scientific knowledge. As it is clear from the interviews, farmers know that agricultural production must recover what there was before modernization but with some technological innovation, the so-called retro-innovation (STUIVER 2006). As a farmer said:

personally, I think it is very important that agricultural production will recover what was previously, before globalization, because it was healthier and more respectful for the Earth. I believe that modern agriculture has depleted soils and even farmers. But here, there is a new cultural wave that gives a greater attention to an equal system of farming, also for a short food supply chain.

Nowadays, small farms managed by young people try to generate income through local and short chains. The benefits are at least three:

- I. the consumer pays the same price as for buying products in the large-scale retail, with the surplus value of a direct relationship with farmers;
- II. the farmer is able to obtain a fair price;
- III. local agriculture allows the conservation of territories, reducing hydro-geological risks and with a direct benefit for the landscape.¹²

¹²The entrepreneurial organization of local farms in the Susa Valley fits with two aspects underlined by a recent study on the Piedmont mountains (BARBERA ET AL. 2016). They are family business models, with a significant importance for self-consumption, and direct management of selling channels (in which face-to-face relationships with costumers are preferred). Products quality plays an important role in the creation of an additional value, balancing small production and increasing price. However, sometimes the familiar business model refers to very small farms in which agricultural activities are residual for income generation.

People of the Susa Valley try to avoid the past mistakes when old varieties were seen as a product of poverty, and hybrids as a symbol of progress. Particular attention is given to some issues in agriculture such as GMOs. A strong criticism is addressed to industrial scale monocultures. Great efforts are made in order to build new ethical rules in food production.



Unsurprisingly, there are some examples of collective organizations that insist on a new economy, not only in food industry. Among these “ETINOMIA” (Ethical entrepreneurs in defence of the commons) and “Genuino Valsusino”. The first one was founded by a group of entrepreneurs, farmers, artisans, traders and professionals in order to restore quality economic relations, overcoming the logic of consumerism. The second one, which involves farmers and artisans, was born as part of a larger movement called “Genuino Clandestino”.¹³ People involved in “Genuino Valsusino” help each other as in a community in order to give the same respect to all local products.

The self-organization model can also be found in the past, when the working life was organized through *corvées*. These were community rules that also guided social and cultural activities. Even now many agricultural activities are developed collectively.

4. Agriculture between social practices of resistance and innovation

Marginal areas are now involved in a new project looking for sustainability. Different farmers contacted during the fieldwork gave an evidence of this interpretation: the mountain is considered a unique environment to be protected, where human actions are moved by desire to create beauty, recovering uncultivated areas and preserving natural resources.

Human care about the landscape (ATZENI 2011) refers to new responsibilities of people toward all living beings. This responsibility assumes collective and organized connotations in the Susa Valley: the already mentioned associations as “Principi Pellegrini - Di-VangAzioni”, the growers from Cels, the movements “Etinomia” and “Genuino Valsusino”, the artistic project of the “Third Paradise” are only a few examples.

¹³ “Genuino Clandestino” started in 2010 as a communication campaign to denounce a set of unjust rules, which equalize small farmers’ products to big food industry ones, making them outlawed. For this reason they claim for building an autonomous market (see <<http://genuinoclandestino.it/chisiamo/>> - 05/2021).

Fig. 6 and 7. After the harvest in August, rye is threshed and winnowed in order to separate the grains from the chaff. Here, a demonstration in the old-fashioned way with ancient machines during a festival organized by the Natural Park of Maritime Alps and the Ecomuseum of the Rye in Valdieri (Gesso Valley - province of Cuneo).

As pointed out by Dematteis (2015, 109) we have “territorial innovation” when a new set of relations between inhabitants and territorial goods emerge. This can affect objective elements (natural environment, primary resources, landscape, cultural legacies of the past, the provision of infrastructure, facilities and buildings, etc.) but also subjective ones (i.e. the accumulation of experiences and the shared knowledge which form social, local and institutional capital). This is what is happening with the recognition of the multiple functions of agricultural systems (*ibidem*, 113) which combines culture, landscape, and local heritage.

As for lavender and rye, the functions pointed out in the territorial innovation process are:

- I. a productive function: the rediscovery of ancient uses of plants and crops and the implementation of long and short networks and of a strong cooperation.
- II. a regulatory function, the balance between agriculture and hydro-geological risks;
- III. a conservative function, the survival of the biodiversity and the maintain of the terraced landscape;
- IV. a cultural function, use of the landscape and historical heritage for educational and recreational purposes. Artistic uses. New tourisms.

Final remarks

The case of the Susa Valley emphasizes a new ecological awareness: the above-mentioned practices and projects refer to the great cultural value of local landscape in terms of ‘weak anthropisation’ and of non-polluting practices. The recovery of marginal alpine areas shows a multifunctional approach: it may therefore be triggered by a recovery of agro-pastoral activities and of environment, as niche tourism, handicraft production, or traditional products. As pointed out by Lancerini (2005) these factors characterise “slow territories” which are only apparently marginal.

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