

### **"We are the food Talibans". Building sustainable food systems in the Italian Western Alps**

The Italian Western Alps have historically been characterized by very peculiar food systems. Influenced by their geographical verticality and by their hinge position, their dwellers have practiced a long lasting "culture of interaction" (Salsa 2009). The Maritime Alps, in particular, have been the crossroad of goods and people, marking the toponymy of the passes. The salt route and the anchovies routes, through which sea-origin valuables were introduced into the Padan valley, are an example of this history of movement. It is also the ecology of the alpine space which heavily influenced this in-motion food system, since the altitude determines the species growth: organized into production belts, inhabitants of the highlands would exchange food altitude products with middle and lower dwellers, triggering an interdependence system. Rye, barley, potatoes and dairy products from high altitudes would be exchanged for wood, chestnuts and corn from lower belts, and with wheat and fruits from lowlands, guaranteeing not only the survival of the population but a varied diet, nutritionally sustainable.

The XX century heavy depopulation of these vertical food systems, led by an inurbation and industrialization drive, has condemned the mountain to a peripheral role, downplaying its centrality in the urban-rural production and consumption system. Indeed, what and whom was left from such population hemorrhage became a symbol of underdevelopment and backwardness, condemned to isolation.

However, this demographic trend has been reversed in the past years (ISTAT 2001-2011), thanks to a new flow of inhabitants, formerly known as amenity migrants (Moss 1996): migrants by choice, by force and by necessity (Membretti, Kofler & Viazzo 2018) these new dwellers are re-inhabiting the highlands through new foodways, shaping a new social environment.

In particular, the migrants by choice, namely young urban dwellers with high social, cultural and economic capital, are playing a crucial role in practicing sustainability, by opening agri-tourisms, organic small scale farms and livestock and niche cultivars. "We are the Talibans of food" effectively stated an interlocutor, on the one side self-acknowledging his strictness in conceiving and practicing agriculture and feeding his clients, but also proving a missionary zeal in spreading the new eco-ethics of sustainability. Embracing very contemporary driven production choices, such as herding goats rather than cows because "Italians are getting more and more lactose-intolerant", most of these new dwellers are practicing new strategies of interaction with the ecology and the social environment. While migrants by choice have the means to start up activities, migrants by force and by necessity (asylum seekers hosted in structures waiting for their visa permits and foreign residents who moved to the highlands in search for a cheaper cost of living) are playing a crucial role in allowing the feasibility of the mentioned projects: they are indeed the labor force.

Thanks to this trend inversion, the mountains are slowly reappearing on the press with titles such as "migranti. Accoglienza diffusa: nelle aree alpine funziona meglio che in città" (lit. "Migrants: spread reception: in the alpine setting it works better than in the cities"); "una migrante Etiope fa rivivere le montagne Italiane grazie alle capre" (lit. "An ethiopic migrant gives the mountains a brand new life thanks to goats"); "i migranti salvano le nostre montagne" (lit. "Migrants save our mountains"). Proving a reversibility of the food systems and of the development paradigms which have characterized the food production/distribution/consumption choices of the XX century, many of these the new mountain dwellers' projects prove that new social, environmental and food production sustainability strategies are possible. And they are made possible not only by the presence of the outsiders but also, and above all, by the acknowledgment of an interdependence: between human collectivities, between the human collectivities

and the non human ones (Latour 2006), between highlands and lowlands and between rural and urban centers.

The ontological turn characterizing of the anthropocene has indeed re-directed the attention to nature as a collectivity to which human beings belong as one species among many others: mushrooms (Tsing 2017), animals (Viveiros de Castro 2017), plants (Mancuso 2018). Although the relationship between what in the West is considered nature and what is considered culture might be reversed as compared to other areas of the planet, the interdependence between these collectivities is indisputable, and the most fragile ecological areas, such as highlands and lowlands, prove to be privileged observatories.

The here proposed presentation aims at addressing the virtuous sustainable practices put in place in the Maritime Alps. By analyzing diachronically the alpine foodscape and the interconnections between the ecology and the social organization of the communities, the paper will shed light on the multiple nature of food sustainability: environmental, ecological, social, nutritional.

Drawing from ethnographic data recently collected, the critical aspects of a highland development and wellbeing will be tackled, and examples of virtuous projects will be provided in order to give some examples of efforts to implement food production and consumption practices in sustainable directions. Final remarks will address broader theoretical questions: is sustainability universally definable? Given the multiple nature of sustainability (social-ecological-nutritional-environmental) will we have to reframe it into sustainabilities? Is a sustainable diet a direct outcome of a sustainable production?

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