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Extended Abstract

**Re-peasantization strategies: Potential catalysts for dietary sustainability?**

## Introduction

In light of the global challenges faced by a rapidly growing, urbanizing population (Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations [FAO], 2017), how to eat sustainably continues to hold a central place in governance rhetoric and policy debates. Adding complexity to the matter are the now well-acknowledged socioeconomic, nutritional and environmental flaws of the industrial agro-food system (FAO, 2017; Hinrichs, 2012; Sage, 2012).

Since the peak of agricultural modernization in the 1950s, structural changes in farming have reconfigured mechanisms of food supply and demand. Farmer autonomy has been compromised, as farmers have been “squeezed” amid vertical value chains (Marsden, 2003; Ploeg, 2018). Meanwhile, global dietary patterns have altered, comprising a growing share of cheap, meat-heavy, calorie-dense, processed and convenience-based foods (Hawkes, Harris, & Gillespie, S., 2017), with direct implications on the prevalence of diet-related disease (WHO, 2017). Characterized by *distanciation* (Buttel, 2005; Sage, 2012) and opacity (Nicolosi, 2006), the industrial food system promotes a consumer society detached from primary production (Goody, 1982) and encourages a “placeless foodscape”—commodity-like food removed from its socio-spatial context (Morgan, Marsden & Murdoch, 2006). Yet, micro-initiatives have emerged in different contexts, demonstrating resistance to conventional production practices and developing socially innovative models that invite a different consumer choice.

In Europe, the 1990s was marked by a notable wave of re-peasantization—a conceptual framework introduced by rural sociologist Jan Douwe van der Ploeg to mark the emergence of a mode of agriculture that emphasizes farmers’ agency and sustainability (Ploeg, 2008). At the time, the countryside was undergoing notable changes—a new rural development paradigm was instilled, encouraging farmers and policy-makers to re-imagine rural space beyond agricultural productivity. Also, changing consumer habits generated the “quality turn”—an intensified demand for environmentally-conscious, traceable and healthy food (Goodman, 2004).

Using a qualitative, field-based two-case design, this study explores the manifestation of the re-peasantization phenomenon in two small farms in southern Italy. Each farm’s operational logic, including its practices, strategies and pursued objectives, as well as its social networks were analyzed. The purpose was to evaluate the extent to which these practices reflect the proposed framework, and discuss their potential to cultivate more sustainable forms of consumption. Both farms selected for study are characterized by diverse agricultural and non-

agricultural practice (e.g.: tourism, territorial valorization, education). The first, NOTEdi, is a farm and agricultural enterprise located in Giarratana, a village in Sicily's southeastern Ragusa province, that produces and sells saffron and other wild aromatic and officinal plants. Metafarm, the second case, is a cultural association and "social food lab" located in the village of Montepertuso in Campania's Amalfi Coast, that offers a culinary-rural experience called "gastronomic trekking" (GT), where visitors are invited to forage, cook and eat wild foods.

## **Methods**

The researcher spent just under one month in each farm collecting data in-situ. Using a semi-structured, open-ended interview guide, a total of 26 face-to-face interviews took place including 6 group interviews and 20 one-to-one interviews. Key informants provided most of the insight into the farms' respective function and structural organization, though the data was not limited to their perspectives. People involved in the farms' social networks were also interviewed. Data collection combined four methods: descriptive field observations, face-to-face interviews (in one-to-one and group formats), documentary information and audio-visual documentation. All interviews were transcribed by the researcher. Data for each case study was examined and analyzed separately.

## **Results**

Findings from the two case studies have pointed to a clear operational logic guiding each farm's motives, strategies and social relations. By grounding their activity in internal human resources and natural resources, reliance on external inputs and expertise is minimal, and by consequence, environmental and economic costs are limited. The interviews underlined the importance of place ecology, namely soil fertility and climate, as favorable to the activities' success. While central to the production practice, territory (the rural space and the people tied to it) is also essential for consumption purposes. What fundamentally distinguishes one case study from the other is that Metafarm is consistently in direct contact with the consumer of their "product"—place-based storytelling, foraging and eating are equally relevant to the GT experience. NOTEdi, on the other hand, is not always present to tell their story to consumers—rather, product packaging, labelling and direct contact with shop vendors all contribute to indirect value communication. Nonetheless, they both seek to promote alternative, non-industrialized types of consumption.

For Metafarm, the tourism-dense setting of the Amalfi Coast contextualizes GT as an activity that defies the classic tourism formula typically favoring a transient form of consumerism. By using a combination of storytelling, foraged and locally sourced ingredients, walking, and cooking vegetarian dishes, Metafarm proposes a more sustainable form of tourism and consumption that values the place's rural traditions. Interviews with visitor-consumers revealed a heightened awareness about foraging as a low-resource activity that can be practiced in their own context. Group discussions also fostered reflections about what it means to “eat local” in a context of mass-tourism, and about food quality and dietary habits in their own countries. In NOTEdi's case, interviews with shop vendors and observations with consumers underlined a purchase interest not merely motivated by the product's high quality, but also by a desire to support an independent youth initiative that values the territory, a sense of community, and sustainable cultivation practices. Consumers are also encouraged to plant saffron bulbs in their own gardens and are taught about the culinary and dietary benefits of the dried herbs.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

This study contributes to the documentation of contemporary rural realities in Italy, while highlighting the potential repercussions that re-peasantization strategies may have on consumer dietary practices. Recalling that sustainability is a contested and socio-spatially determined term (Ankeny, 2012; Buttel, 2005; Hinrichs, 2012), contextual specificity plays a crucial role in shaping farmer motivations and strategies, and a desire to promote sustainable consumption.

Both cases demonstrated a strong degree of resource mobilization (both immaterial and material) and diversification, strategies that often fosters greater autonomy and self-organization (Marsden et al., 1993; Ploeg, 2008). Taking on pluriactive roles, Metafarm and NOTEdi can be discussed as socially innovative cases that seek a contextually divergent way of practicing and communicating food and agriculture-based activity, one that typically deviates from social norms and works independently from state-led bodies (Bock, 2016). The types of consumer markets sought by both cases can be described by the notion of shared value—the role that markets can have in addressing a societal problem (Porter & Kramer, 2011). In this way, a product (whether a food-based experience or a food product), embeds a web of social relations, of territory and place history, as well as cultivation methods, that can generate greater awareness about and promote practices reflective of sustainable diets.

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