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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Peasant Culture and Intellectual Environmental Activism:
The Legacy of the Italian Resistance and Contemporary Spaces of Activism

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the degree
Doctor of Philosophy

in

Literature

by

Ilaria Tabusso Marcyan

Committee in charge:

Professor Pasquale Verdicchio, Chair
Professor Page duBois
Professor Amelia Glaser
Professor Jeff Haydu
Professor Stephanie Jed

2016

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2016

DEDICATION

I would like to lovingly dedicate this work to Paolo Tabusso, my father, who was a partisan in the Italian Resistance. I am not aware of his exact role during that period in the Piedmont mountains of Canavese, but I know that his courage and actions, however great or small, alongside the thousands who participated to the Resistance, made a distinct difference. This research work has helped me to vividly imagine what it might have been like to be present in those mountains, and what agonies, as well as blessings, my father might have experienced.

EPIGRAPH

... sembra che la storia non sia che un enorme fenomeno naturale, un'eruzione, un terremoto, del quale rimangono vittima tutti, chi ha voluto e chi non ha voluto, chi sapeva e chi non sapeva, chi era stato attivo e chi indifferente. E questo ultimo si irrita, vorrebbe sottrarsi alle conseguenze, vorrebbe apparire chiaro che egli non ha voluto, che egli non è responsabile. Altri piagnucolano pietosamente, altri bestemmano oscenamente, ma nessuno o pochi si domandano: se avessi anch'io fatto il mio dovere, se avessi cercato di far valere la mia volontà, il mio consiglio, sarebbe successo ciò che è successo? Ma nessuno o pochi si fanno una colpa della loro indifferenza, del loro scetticismo, del non aver dato il loro braccio e la loro attività a quei gruppi di cittadini che, appunto per evitare quel tal male, combattevano, di procurare quel tal bene si proponevano.

- *Antonio Gramsci*

... it would seem that history is nothing more than an enormous natural phenomenon, an eruption, an earthquake, of which everyone is a victim, those who may have wanted and those who did not want, those who knew and those who did not know, those who were active and those who remained indifferent. The latter, the "indifferent", feels irritated. He would prefer to avoid the consequences, to make it clear that it was not his doing, that he is not responsible. While some whine pitifully, and still others curse obscenities, few ask themselves: if I had only done my part, if I had only tried to make my will known or given advice, would what happened, have happened? But no one, or few, blame their indifference, their skepticism, their not having lent support and acted with those groups of citizen who, in order to avoid that evil, fought for that good that they proposed.

- *Antonio Gramsci*

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I also want to acknowledge the invaluable encouragement received by Stephanie Jed. Stephanie's specialization on women's studies has helped me to fashion my first chapter and sharpen my reading of Renata Viganò's novel. Her scholarly experience and advice have often offered me instrumental hints on how to approach my readings and research. Our shared interest in food has given me the good fortune to teach one of her summer courses on the politics of food, and I will be always grateful to her for her generosity in sharing her scholarly knowledge and experience with me. I also want to take this opportunity to thank Stephanie for connecting me with professor Dianella Gagliani, through whom I learned about the Istituto Alcide Cervi and Archivio Emilio Sereni, pivotal sources for my second chapter.

My special gratitude goes to Page duBois, with whom I feel very fortunate to have worked. Her astonishing wide range of knowledge has helped me over the years to configure my theoretical background and has given me the intellectual tools in adapting my research. Page's encouragements, advice and support throughout my PhD program have been a constant and reassuring point of reference.

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the last period of my writing to think of my work from a broader perspective, beyond the Italian social, economic and political reality which I analyze in my dissertation. His feedback has motivated me to continue to expand my research and explore possible connections between Italian peasant culture and global movements related to food.

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The Museo Alcide Cervi and Istituto Emilio Sereni have been my main points of reference for the completion of my chapter two. I want to thank

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Revelli about my research, it soon became evident that Antonella and I shared many interests in common. Her availability, knowledge and work have been a constant point of reference since 2013.

Unexpectedly meeting Carlo Petrini has been one of Piedmont's most generous gifts, one that I am honored to include in these acknowledgements. Petrini's instrumental encounter has given me a new perspective on the Slow Food and Terra Madre movements. I met Petrini accidentally during the presentation of his book *Zuppa di latte* at the annual book fair in Torre Pellice, in 2013. Since then we have enjoyed a warm and fortunate correspondence that has resulted in the interview presented in the appendix of this dissertation.

Dulcis in fundo, I would like to honor my spiritual Master and family. I humbly bow to my spiritual Master, Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, whose constant presence and guidance has bestowed the many blessings received in my studies, support from my professors and connections made while doing my research. Her spiritual message and endless engagement in the world are an extraordinary source of inspiration for my studies, research and personal life.

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Chapter 2, in great part, is forthcoming in *Approaches to Italian Culture and Literature: The Denatured Wild*, a volume of ecocritical essays edited by Pasquale Verdicchio and to be published by Lexington Books by August 2016. I am the sole author of the article.

Parts of Chapter 4 have been accepted for publication and are forthcoming in *Landscapes, Natures, Ecologies. Italy and the Environmental*

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“Landscapes in Between. Environmental Change in Modern Italian Literature and Film”. By Monica Seger. *The Goose* (ALECC-Association for Literature, Environment, and Culture in Canada), Volume 14, issue 2, 2015.
<http://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol14/iss2/21/>

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Peasant Culture and Intellectual Environmental Activism:
The Legacy of the Italian Resistance and Contemporary Spaces of Activism

by

Ilaria Tabusso Marcyan

Doctor of Philosophy in Literature

University of California, San Diego, 2016

Professor Pasquale Verdicchio, Chair

This dissertation uses an interdisciplinary approach, in order to contribute to aspects of Comparative Literature, Ecocriticism, Cultural Studies and Food Studies, as well as to make two important contributions to Italian Studies. First, to Italian literature of the Resistance which, although well established within Italian studies, has received surprisingly little attention with regard to the influence of peasant support in the success of the Resistance during World War II. Second, my ecocritical approach represents a relatively new specialization within Italian Studies, an approach that considers the ways in which human actions are strictly related to, and dependent upon, the natural environments in which they take place.

This dissertation offers also a reinterpretation of the concept of the organic intellectual as proposed by Gramsci, so as to better understand the relationship between peasants and the progressive Italian intellectual class that emerged after WWII. I conclude that after WWII, conversely to what Gramsci claims in his famous essay, *The Formation of the Intellectuals*, peasants create their organic intellectuals.

My reading proposes a more active vision of the peasant, and offers to Italian Studies, Comparative Literature and ecocriticism new instruments by which to interpret peasant culture and tradition. Through the authors presented in my chapters, I highlight a mode of thinking, a culture in terms of peasant tradition, and a way of more specifically valuing the often-clouded relationship between humans and their natural surroundings. By analyzing these authors, I determine the methods by which the Resistance and peasant traditions left a

legacy, clearly present in contemporary forms of activism, which are related to food and agriculture. To this purpose, I considered it fundamental to use an approach that would encompass both theory and practice in which peasant culture, concerns of sustainability, and the recent forms of activism related to farming, food, and environment are all related and interconnected.

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world in which people are increasingly disconnected from their surrounding and natural environment. It is fairly common, especially in the cities, to see people walking and crossing the street while texting on their cellphones, or, as I heard participants commenting during my last summer seminar at the Istituto Emilio Sereni, to hear children believing that milk comes from a carton. Although technology gives us the opportunity to improve our life standards and gets us closer to people and places physically distant, on the other hand it takes our attention away from the space and places that surround us, and what these places comprise. Furthermore, in more general terms, it looks as though humans, do not take into consideration that, although we may be the most intelligent and advanced living beings of this planet, we are also and most importantly, intimately connected with all the other humans and non-human beings. In retrospect, it is from these simple and maybe elementary deliberations, combined with my maturing personal environmental sensitivity, that my dissertation research project takes inspiration.

Humans' disconnection from the natural surrounding is a relatively recent phenomenon, more evident in the so-called first world. It can be traced, historically and culturally, through the process of industrialization and the movement of people from the countryside to the city. Yet, the questions that guided my research were not directed toward the process of disconnection in itself, but toward the social group that, being most connected to its environment,

can help to inform and understand what we have lost in environmental and cultural terms. My research focus has consequently turned toward peasants and their world, as they are the social group that best represents, in the western world, humans' connection to the land and natural environment.

My dissertation, *Peasant Culture and Intellectual Environmental Activism: the Legacy of the Italian Resistance and Contemporary Spaces of Activism*, uses an interdisciplinary approach, in an attempt to contribute to aspects of Comparative Literature, Ecocriticism, Cultural Studies and Food Studies, as well as to make two important contributions to Italian Studies. First, to Italian literature of the Resistance which, although well established within Italian studies, has received very little attention with regard to the influence of peasant support in the success of the Resistance during World War II. Second, my ecocritical approach represents a relatively new specialization within Italian Studies, an approach that considers the ways in which human actions are strictly related to, and dependent on, the natural environments where they take place. Through the authors presented in my chapters, I highlight a mode of thinking, a culture in terms of peasant tradition, and a way of valuing the often clouded and underestimated relationship between humans and their natural surroundings. Considering peasants as the social group most connected to the land and the surrounding landscape, I argue that it is possible to trace a trajectory from the literary and historical traditions of peasant cultures to contemporary forms of social, intellectual, and environmental activism. To this purpose, I considered it fundamental to use an approach that would encompass both theory and practice

in which peasant culture, concerns about sustainability, and recent forms of activism related to farming, food, and environment are all related and intertwined.

Through the analysis of the texts and the reading of the authors presented in my chapters, I re-evaluate and re-interpret the concept of the organic intellectual as proposed by Gramsci, so as to better understand the relationship between peasants and the progressive Italian intellectual class which emerged after WWII. I also conclude that after WWII, conversely to what Gramsci claims in his famous essay *The Formation of the Intellectuals*, peasants create their organic intellectuals.

Gramsci writes, “Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together within itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function, not only in the economic, but also in the social and political fields.”¹ These concepts constitute the fundamental principle of the organic intellectual. Gramsci refers to the new professional roles that were emerging at the beginning of the twentieth century in Italy, those such as the entrepreneur or the industrial technician. He later specifies that the organic intellectuals “are for the most part ‘specializations’ of partial aspects of the primitive activity of that new social type which the new class has brought into prominence”². Gramsci recognizes not only the continuing transformation and

¹ Antonio Gramsci, “The Intellectuals” in *Selection from the Prison Notebooks*, edit and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 5.

² Ibid, 6.

evolution of social classes, but also how they constantly originate their own new intellectual elaboration of their functions within society.

Yet, in his essay, Gramsci does not acknowledge peasants' ability to represent themselves. He writes, "Thus it is to be noted that the mass of the peasantry, although it performs an essential function in the world of production, does not elaborate its own 'organic' intellectuals, nor does it 'assimilate' any stratum of 'traditional' intellectuals, although it is from the peasantry that other social groups draw many of their intellectuals and a high proportion of traditional intellectuals are of peasant origin"³. As the translators of this edition, Hoare and Smith, have noted, Gramsci here is referring mainly to professions like lawyers or priests, who may have peasant origins, but once they become "intellectuals" no longer recognize their peasant origins. On the contrary, according to Gramsci, and in line with Marx's revolutionary interpretation of the working class, the proletarians would be able to create intellectuals who represent, belong and remain such within their own class. In contradiction to this stance, albeit in limited and particular situations, through my analysis of Alcide Cervi and Nuto Revelli's texts, I demonstrate that after the experience of the Resistance, the development of organic intellectuals can indeed be traced among peasants.

It has to be noted that *The Prison Notebooks* and *The Formation of the Intellectuals*, written between 1926 and 1937, during his imprisonment, is influenced by the Marxist interpretation of peasantry, and by the repressive politics of Mussolini during his fascist regime that considers the working class as

³ Ibid.

a threat and the peasants as a mass easier to control and manipulate. Although Gramsci does not foresee WWII and the active role of peasants in the Resistance movement, I argue that his ideas, by introducing a more practical aspect of the function of the intellectual, propose concepts key to understanding the renewed attention of the intellectuals of the post-war toward peasants, the and contemporary forms of intellectual and environmental activism.

The decision to focus my dissertation research on the Italian Resistance during WWII, and the literature of the Resistance, has historical and cultural implications. The Resistance represents the breakpoint from over twenty years of fascist dictatorship in Italy, and establishes an important moment and opportunity of encounter among individuals coming from the most disparate social, economic and cultural strata. Peasants, considered historically and culturally a world apart, separated, hard to know, understand and relate to, for the first time opened their homes and world to the Resistance movement and people. Writers like Ugo Foscolo, Giacomo Leopardi or Gabriele D'Annunzio, who supported ideas of a national culture and were traditionally isolated in their "Ivory Towers", are replaced by a new generation of more engaged intellectuals. Italo Calvino, Cesare Pavese, Elio Vittorini, Primo Levi, Carlo Levi and many others, by participating in the Resistance, introduce a more socially and politically involved image and role of the intellectual. The above-mentioned writers enrolled in the Communist Party and represented the new generation of leftist authors who, as

Asor Rosa points out, express the necessity “to enhance the social function and popular content of the literary and artistic activity.”⁴

In 1964, Italo Calvino writes an updated version of the preface to his first book published in 1947, *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*. This preface includes several observations useful to understand the connection between the literary movement of neorealism, the literature of the Resistance, and the authors I present in my dissertation. Regarding neorealism Calvino writes, “We thought of ourselves as descending from a line, or rather a triangle, of literary models – Giovanni Verga’s *I Malavoglia* (*The House by the Medlar Tree*), Elio Vittorini’s *Conversazione in Sicilia* (*Conversation in Sicily*), and Cesare Pavese’s *Paesi tuoi* (*The Harvesters*) – which was to be the starting point for all of us, working with our own local lexis and landscape.”⁵ Neorealism is not a school with a specific direction, but a spontaneous cultural movement, “many voices combined”⁶ that, through literature and cinema, aims to denounce through their stories the social distress of poorer classes, both during and soon after WWII.

Verga is the first intellectual reference because he knows, according to the new generation of writers, how to combine popular content with high style, and social research of authentic human environments with “aristocratic beauty”⁷. *Verismo*, the literary school of the 1800s in which Verga is a main illustrative

⁴ Asor Rosa, *Scrittori e popolo. Il populismo nella letteratura italiana contemporanea*. (Torino: Einaudi, 1988), 128.

⁵ Italo Calvino, *The Path to the Spider's Nests*, trans. by Archibald Colquhoun, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998), 10.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Romano Lupérini, *Il Novecento, apparati ideologici, cento intellettuale, sistemi formali nella letteratura italiana contemporanea*, (Torino: Loecher, 1985), 376.

writer, has, as its main characteristics, the use of an impersonal style, and the introduction in the written language of words and expressions from local dialects. The linguistic aspect of *verismo*, indeed, is one of the elements recuperated by neorealism.

The Harvesters is the most naturalist novel of Pavese⁸. Its narrative and linguistic style, based on short and essential dialogues, serves, as previously mentioned, as a point of reference for the literary movement of neorealism. Although the attention of the new generation of writers is directed toward the social aspect, Calvino notes that, “for us the problem appeared to be entirely one of poetics, of how to transform that world which for us was *the* world into a work of literature”⁹. The content, “the urge to graft an ideological message on to the story”¹⁰, needs to be expressed in the best form possible, “that of immediate, objective narration both in terms of imagery and language”¹¹, confirms that for the neorealist authors, the art of writing is a careful and sought after combination of extra literary motivations and style. Additionally, Calvino’s words introduce another important aspect of neorealism, and more specific to the literature of the Resistance, the attention to very local realities, and stories, in order to express general ideas and address more universal problems.

Pavese and Vittorini are representative writers of the cultural and intellectual transformation of the “new realism” developed in the thirties, and the

⁸ Ibid, 582.

⁹ Italo Calvino, *The Path to the Spider’s Nests*, 10. The article in italics is in the original text.

¹⁰ Ibid, 12.

¹¹ Ibidem.

post-war neorealism¹². Vittorini is a strong believer in his role as intellectual-writer. He is deeply convinced that, “each man expects that the word may transform possibly the substance of an object. It is for the writer to believe it with dedication and resoluteness.”¹³ Vittorini never doubts his social function of intellectual, and his duty of engaging in politics. In 1945, he founds the weekly magazine “Il Politecnico”, sponsored by the PCI (Italian Communist Party). After two years he abandons the magazine due to disagreements with the party on how to direct it. While the PCI wants to emphasize the political and social aspect of the cultural magazine, according to Vittorini, the role of the intellectual and the purpose of culture need to go beyond the political ideology of the party.

¹² The Italian literary school of Verismo developed toward the end of the nineteenth century, and is inspired by scientific method and research as a way to objectively depict reality. Verismo is influenced by the contemporary French literary movement Naturalism, from which it differentiates itself by focusing on the social conditions of underdevelopment and backwardness of Italian local and regional realities. The “new realism” of the nineteen-thirties develops under the fascist regime and expresses a form of dissent and criticism toward the capitalist and bourgeois direction of the regime. It develops around the magazines “L’Universale” and “Il Bargello”, and the left wing fascist intellectuals. According to these intellectuals, among whom is Elio Vittorini, culture has to be influential in the political life. Vittorini’s first novel *Il garofano rosso*, was initially published in the magazine “Solaria” and soon after censored. This novel can be considered an example of the New Realism. Neorealism develops toward the end of WWII, first as a literary movement, and soon after as a cinematic trend. For both artistic and intellectual expressions, it emerges as a form of denouncement of the horrors of war and Fascism, and from the need of the intellectual to be engaged. It is worth noting that the New Realism I refer to in this chapter has nothing to do with the school of thought proposed in the last years by Maurizio Ferraris. The Manifesto of New Realism written by Ferraris, published in Italy in 2012, distances itself from the post-modernist idea that reality is mainly a social construct, and affirms that reality is independent from human interpretation. In his manifesto, Ferraris uses three key terms to explain his position: ontology, Enlightenment, and critics. Through an analysis of these terms he supports a reading of reality based on the verification of facts, instead of its acceptance.

¹³ Elio Vittorini, *Diario pubblico*, qtd. in Luperini, *Il Novecento*, 567. The original text reads, “è in ogni uomo attendersi che forse la parola possa trasformare la sostanza di una cosa. È nello scrittore il crederlo con assiduità e fermezza”.

Vittorini's political engagement, and the ensuing disenchantment with the communist party reflect the general behavior of many intellectuals of the post war. Between 1945 and the sixties, several intellectuals, among which Pavese, Calvino, and Revelli, gradually distance themselves from the ideological and political stands of the PCI. They all disagree, at different levels, with the increasing conservative approach of the party, and the political control on the intellectual strata.

The experience of the war and the end of fascism motivate the new generation of intellectuals to go beyond the elitist aspect of the man of letters and, instead, to take on a new form of literary and cultural "engagement"¹⁴. As Vittorini appealed in "Il Politecnico", the intellectual engagement has to include the civil aspect and needs to stress the "practical"¹⁵ value of culture. In a few words, the new intellectual needs to address and go toward the people. This intellectual attitude, which I define as a beginning exemplification of intellectual activism, is influenced by the Resistance experience of the authors of this period. In the new post war climate, the spirit of Resistance is manifested through a moral indignation and rebellion toward the economic and social contradictions present in the Italian population. As Asor Rosa stresses, and according to many intellectuals who participated in the Resistance, "The culture of Resistance lays the foundations of its request of renewal on the general observation that, in Italy, the problem of survival, in itself, is far from being solved. ... Poverty, hunger,

¹⁴ Luperini, *Il Novecento*, 379.

¹⁵ Vittorini, *Una nuova cultura*, in "Il Politecnico", 1, 1945, I, in *Il Novecento*, 383.

social and mental oppression are, like fifty, one hundred years before, the enemies to identify and to fight”¹⁶.

The authors of the literature of the Resistance and neorealism have in common an antifascist past, and a strong desire to create the foundations for a new culture. Their names intertwine, overlap, and often are the same. Writers like Calvino, Vittorini, Pavese, Carlo Levi and Viganò are considered both neorealist authors and representatives of the literature of the Resistance. Others like Fenoglio, Mario Rigoni Stern, and Revelli, although their literary production expands on different themes, are mainly related to and acknowledged for their works on WWII, their partisan experience, and novels on the Resistance. Nevertheless, all these authors have in common a commitment toward social engagement, combined with a moral and ethical intent, and an urge to reach the people by using a simple and concise language, and the local dialect.

The publication of several works of Antonio Gramsci, between 1947 and 1951, influences the orientation of the Communist party and the emergence of a new intellectual conscience. Writings like *The Formation of the Intellectuals*, *The Organization of Education and Culture*, and more generally *Prison Notebooks*, become essential points of reference in the left’s plans to conquer political power by reaching the working class and peasant’s social strata. Gramsci responds to the new longing to reach the people for the new and engaged intellectual. It has

¹⁶ Asor Rosa, *Scrittori e Popolo*, 133. “La cultura della Resistenza fonda la sua istanza di rinnovamento sulla generale constatazione che, in Italia, il problema stesso della sopravvivenza e tutt’altro che risolto. ... La miseria, la fame, l’oppressione sociale e ideale, sono, come cinquanta, come cento anni prima, i nemici da individuare e da combattere”.

been observed by Asor Rosa and Luperini that the efforts of the post-war intellectuals to go toward the people remained more as a utopian and idealist concept than a real achievement. According to the scholars, these writers remained essentially anchored in their intellectual bourgeois, or educated middle class, outlook and ideas of culture¹⁷. Luperini stresses that although inspired by the re-discovery of Gramsci's readings, this form of populism did not include social or methodological criteria of analysis¹⁸ and persisted, as mentioned, to be within the limits of the idea of the traditional intellectual as an autonomous class, and separated from the people. Pavese's words support this detached attitude, "... it can be asserted that the best of us, gloomy and desperate as we were, found ourselves often absorbed, in the past years, to recognize that we could have been saved only by one thing: a jump into the crowd, a sudden fever of proletarian and peasant interests and experiences, by which the special and refined disease that fascism was spreading would resolve into the humble and practical wellbeing for everyone."¹⁹ These words convey a burning enthusiasm. The "jump into the crowd" to which Pavese refers denotes not only a sense of separation, but also the author's hierarchical vision regarding the relationship between intellectuals and the people.

¹⁷ Ibid., 172.

¹⁸ Luperini, *Il Novecento*, 396.

¹⁹ Cesare Pavese, *La letteratura Americana*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1956) 226. "... si può affermare che i migliori di noi, ombrosi e disperati com'erano, si sono sovente sorpresi, negli anni andati, a figurarsi che soltanto una cosa avrebbe potuto salvarli: un tuffo nella folla, un febbre improvviso d'esperienze e di interessi proletari e contadini, per cui la speciale e raffinata malattia che il fascismo ci iniettava si risolvesse finalmente nell'umile e pratica salute di tutti".

Pavese, Vittorini, Levi, Calvino, and Viganò, while being politically antifascist and socially engaged intellectuals, don't belong to the class they represent in their writings. The realism emerging through Pavese's collection of poems *Hard Labor*, published in 1936, written after the writer's exile in Calabria, contains also spiritual and mystical elements.²⁰ Although Pavese's new style needed a "new language: hard, colloquial, direct, but also austere and reticent, devoid of rhetoric, spurning all bookishness and decorative learning"²¹, is still very aristocratic. The narrative and words of these authors are filtered through their cultural and educational background and often tends to objectify a world, the peasant world, that they can finally acknowledge and experience, but not fully comprehend. As objective their work can be, their characters talk through the authors' words, voices, and interpretations. Most importantly, the introduction of peasant characters, and the interest toward the peasant world, however good the writers' intention, responds more to an individual, literary, and intellectual necessity, or to a political maneuver, rather than to a social form of engagement as predicated by Gramsci.

As I underscore in my chapters, until the fifties, peasants constituted the majority of the Italian population. In *The Southern Question*, Gramsci is interested in peasants as the social group who, by forming a coalition with, and guided by, the workers of the north, would have helped to transform Italian society, and would have given more autonomy and power to the proletarian and

²⁰ Cesare Pavese, *Hard Labor*, trans. by William Arrowsmith, (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1976), xiii.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

subaltern classes. This writing also offers a very insightful analysis of the century-old exploitation and manipulation of peasants and their stagnant state of poverty. We read, "What can a poor peasant achieve by occupying uncultivated or poorly cultivated land? Without machinery, without accommodation at the work place, without credit to tide him over till harvest, without cooperative institutions to purchase the harvest (if the peasant hasn't hung himself from the strongest bush or the least sickly fig tree on his uncultivated land before harvest time) and save him from the clutches of the usurers, what can a poor peasant achieve by occupation?"²² This article was written in 1926, during the time of the fascist regime, and first published in 1930. Mussolini's agrarian politics, from 1922 until WWII, worked toward the recovery of the swamplands in the central regions of Italy and Po valley. Although Mussolini's propaganda used the image of farmers' labor to create and inspire a form of nationalism based on agrarian principles, these politics aimed to appeal especially to the medium and big landowners, and the old aristocratic class that continued to support, especially in the south, the passive reality of the latifundia. On the economic level, the increase of the monetary value of the Italian "lira" provoked several cuts in agrarian public investments. The implementation of "Battle for Grain", in addition, an increase of taxation on the production of grains during fascism, aggravated the already miserable conditions of small landowners and farm workers, and contributed to

²² Antonio Gramsci, *The Southern Question*, trans. by Pasquale Verdicchio, (West Lafayette, IN: Bordighera In. Purdue University, 1995), 18.

the fall in price of the land²³. The level of misery of peasants depicted by Gramsci reflects a general social and economic situation that continued to persist for decades after WWII.

Through the analysis of the authors presented in my dissertation, I structured the chapters to reveal a gradual evolution from the traditional intellectual to the organic intellectual and to determine also how the historical and cultural background of the Slow Food movement, discussed in my fourth chapter, confirms a lineage and descendency from the Italian Resistance, peasant traditions and contemporary forms of activism related to food and agriculture. I suggest that this method, combined with my ecocritical interpretation of the texts, highlights new shades of peasant culture and proposes a better understanding of Italian peasant history and tradition, as deeply intertwined with the territory, landscape and natural environments. The authors and texts I refer to are related to peasant realities of northern Italy, as these were the regions where the Resistance and the partisan movement developed and acted. Although the stories I analyze are very locally based, many of the issues they bring up reflect, as Revelli points out in *The World of the Defeated*, to questions common to all Italian peasants, both in the north and the south.

Calvino, addressing the local character of neorealism explains that, “the local settings were intended to give a flavor of authenticity to a fictional

²³ Oddino Bo, “Considerazioni sulla politica agraria del post-fascismo”, in www.israt.it (visited on 04-26-2016), official website of Istituto per la Storia della Resistenza e della Società Contemporanea in Provincia di Asti.

representation with which everyone the world over would be able to identify.”²⁴ As I demonstrate in several sections of my dissertation, the sense of locality, or a bioregional awareness, is extremely well portrayed, not only through the history and testimonies of the characters analyzed in the texts, but also in the inclusion of natural settings, the interaction of humans with it and the presence of living beings other than humans in the landscape.. The sense of authenticity Calvino refers to implies the presence of both humans and non-humans.

My ecocritical reading exposes this second aspect, and builds its theoretical foundations in the environmental consciousness developed in the United States between the fifties and the eighties. More specifically, my first three chapters are informed by the theoretical approach of Deep Ecology, a philosophical and environmental movement started in the early seventies. The Norwegian philosopher and mountaineer Arne Naess used the term deep ecology for the first time in his essay “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement”, which was presented in 1972 in Bucharest, Romania, during the Third World Future Research Conference. Naess uses the terms shallow ecology vs. deep ecology to address movements that offer an image of the environment in relation to humans, and in contrast to an image of the environment in which humans are not the controllers, but simply part of a larger network of relations among other organisms. Instead of considering natural

²⁴ Italo Calvino, *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*, 10.

diversity as a valuable resource for humans, deep ecology considers natural diversity for its own “intrinsic” value²⁵.

The approach of deep ecology toward environmental issues is not about promoting solutions based on the same consumption or consumerist values that gave rise to recycling or monoculture organic agriculture. Although some of these techniques are useful and necessary, Deep Ecology is interested in going to the root of contemporary environmental issues. Hence, a “deep” ecological attitude involves restructuring a system of values and methods that engages the preservation and protection of the ecological and cultural diversity of the natural system.

Among the authors who have informed my theoretical approach and inspired the basic principles of Deep Ecology, Aldo Leopold deserves special attention. Although he is not directly mentioned in my chapters, his ideas expressed in *A Sand County Almanac*, published in 1949, have shaped and influenced my interpretation of Italian peasants’ connection to the land. In introducing his essay *The Land Ethic*, Leopold points out that human relationship with the land “is strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations.”²⁶ In this affirmation the author denounces an anthropocentric relationship with the natural environment, in which natural elements and living beings other than human are experienced and used exclusively for human gains with no regard for

²⁵ Bill Devall, *Simple in Means, Rich in Ends. Practicing Deep Ecology*, (Layton UT: Gibbs Smith Publisher, 1988), 33.

²⁶ Aldo Leopold, “The Land Ethic” in *A Sand County Almanac*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 238.

the consequences of their actions. On the contrary, Leopold's land ethic offers a biocentric rather than anthropocentric vision of the world, and enlarges the idea of community to include nonhuman components or inhabitants. "The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, water, plants and animals, or collectively: the land."²⁷ or what he calls a "biotic community."²⁸ As he continues later, "In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo Sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community, to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow members, and also respect for the community as such"²⁹.

I cannot maintain that, throughout history, peasants have been demonstrated to have an ecological mind. As the texts presented in my dissertation often highlight, peasants' relationship with the land has been influenced by the purpose of advantageously transforming the soil, in economic and material terms. Yet, it is also true that the land is considered and treated as an ally, and as such it needs to be respected and valued. As Alcide Cervi, Revelli and Petrini often remark, peasants recognize that depleting the land affects their ability to live from its fruits. They are aware that their survival is strictly dependent on the good condition of their land, animals and plants, and the care they provide and can ensure to them.

The discipline of ecocriticism developed in the United States in the nineties, in light of increasing ecological disasters during the last fifty years, and

²⁷ Ibid, 238.

²⁸ Ibid, 240.

²⁹ Ibidem.

as the consequent expansion of a more environmental conscience. In the last decade, ecocriticism has attracted a growing interest among scholars at the international level. Cheryll Glotfelty, one of the first scholars to work on the relationship between literature and the environment, synthesizes the task of ecocriticism in these words, "Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman."³⁰ Although in the last few years ecocriticism has expanded, specializing in different aspects of examining the relationship between humans and non-humans, among which are ecofeminism, animal studies, environmental ethics, political ecology, social ecology, eco-materialism and others. Glotfelty's definition still remains valid to all the numerous stands. For this purpose ecocriticism denotes an interdisciplinary approach which offers a more comprehensive and inclusive reading of the texts.

Borrowing a claim from William Rueckert, "I am not just interested in transferring ecological concepts to the study of literature, but in attempting to see literature inside the context of an ecological vision."³¹ My own ecocritical approach, therefore, seeks to make evident that peasant culture has contributed and still contributes, particularly today, to reconnecting humans, in a more conscious way, to nature. I contend that contemporary forms of intellectual

³⁰ *The Ecocriticism Reader, Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), xix.

³¹ William Rueckert, "Literature and Ecology", in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, 115.

environmental activism related to farming and food, of which Slow Food and Terra Madre are only two examples, have their cultural roots in the intellectuals from the Resistance and can reawaken humans' connection to the land and its fruits, as well as to our biological and natural origins. These movements have the potentials to motivate humankind to become more environmentally conscious and ecologically aware.

As Gary Snyder, one of the first theorists of bioregionalism, points out, "In the old ways, the flora and fauna and landforms are *parts of the culture*."³² For native people, peasants and farmers, in Italy and elsewhere, the territory, the place where communities live, and the land, form both the center of their lives and their epistemological knowledge. The place where they live is not delimited by political borders, but defined and experienced by bioregional characteristics such as climate, soil, vegetation, and animal presence. Stories, myths, and legends enrich a local culture and take shape not exclusively, but also from the interrelation and experiences of humans with the surrounding natural elements such rivers, lakes, forests, rocks, plants, animals, planes, mountains, or hills. Italian peasant culture is greatly based on local realities and influenced by the landscape and natural surroundings. In a few words, the place is experienced and rearticulated through all the elements that help to form that space.

The character of Agnese in Viganò's novel, Alcide Cervi's memories in chapter two, and the testimonies in chapter three highlight this strong connection

³² Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*. (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), 37. The italics is from the original text.

of peasants with the territory. The intellectuals who participated in the Resistance lived, either a brief or prolonged time, in the mountains or hills in direct contact with local people. They personally connected, some for the first time, to the places and the people of these places. That is why their stories, as Calvino clearly states in the preface of *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*, reveal a renewed perception of the natural environment as well as the people who inhabit it.

Gary Snyder's interpretation of the place as an experience that stays with us through time can help to better understand how a place is part, as he claims, of what we are. He writes,

The childhood landscape is learned on foot, and a map is inscribed in the mind – trails and pathways and groves – the mean dog, the cranky old man's house, the pasture with a bull in it – going out wider and farther. All of us carry within us a picture of the terrain that was learned roughly between the ages of six and nine. (It could as easily be an urban neighborhood as some rural scene.) You can almost totally recall the place you walked, played, biked, swam. Revisualizing that place with its smells and textures, walking through it again in your imagination, has a grounding and settling effect.³³

Aldo Leopold's poetic description of the howl of a wolf introduces a shift of perspective in the perception of nature that resonates in some of the testimonies of chapter three. The mountain is not a simple inhabited place, but is the basis of a conscious ecosystem in which every single living being plays its part. We read,

A deep chesty bawl echoes from rimrock to rimrock, rolls down the mountain, and fades into the far blackness of the night. It is an outburst of wild defiant sorrow, and of contempt for all the adversities of the world.

Every living thing (and perhaps many a dead one as well) pays heed to that call. To the deer it is a reminder of the way of all

³³ Ibid, 26.

flesh, to the pine, a forecast of midnight scuffles and of blood upon the snow, to the coyote, a promise of gleanings to come, to the cowman a threat of red ink at the bank, to the hunter a challenge of fang against bullet. Yet behind these obvious and immediate hopes and fears there lies a deeper meaning, known only to the mountain itself. Only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howls of a wolf.³⁴

Mountaineers, peasants living in the mountains, and partisans during the Resistance know the harsh living conditions in the mountains. They learned through experience to respect the mountains as a wild place in which humans are simply creatures among other living beings. Leopold's biocentric perspective, coupled with a bioregional outlook, and the environmental philosophy promoted by Deep Ecology have shaped the ecocritical approach of my first three chapters.

When thinking of social aspects as one of the main factors that contribute to and generate the ecological imbalance in today's societies, Murray Bookchin's social ecology offers a valuable perspective. An anarchist, activist and pioneer of the ecology movement, Bookchin opposes the biocentric view of Deep Ecology by pointing out the social roots of the ecological crisis. According to Bookchin, in fact, contemporary ecological problems cannot be understood or solved unless they are dealt with and in conversation with the problems within society³⁵. Seeing ecological and social problems as deeply intertwined, Bookchin proposes a utopian, but according to him possible, change of the system of hierarchy in society. Pointing to capitalist mentality as the source of both social and ecological issues, Bookchin's social ecology "seeks to redress the ecological abuses that

³⁴ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 137.

³⁵ Murray Bookchin, "What is Social Ecology?" in *Environmental Philosophy*, edited by Michael E. Zimmerman, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2005), 462.

society has inflicted to the natural world by going to the structural as well as the subjective sources of notions like the “domination of nature”. That is, it challenges the entire system of domination itself and seeks to eliminate the hierarchical and class edifice that has imposed itself on humanity and defined the relationship between nonhuman and human nature.”³⁶

Bookchin’s social ecology ideas and attacks on the culture of commodity, the giant corporations, and in general a culture based on profit as the cause of the natural disasters as well as the state of poverty of the world’s unprivileged, are directly connected to the argument I present in chapter four. In the analysis I offer on Slow Food and Terra Madre, I assert that a re-evaluation of food and food cultures based on peasant traditions offers, today, valuable alternatives to the control exercised by food industry. These movements related to food create a higher level of awareness on ecological issues. Their activities are locally based, but their effects have global repercussions. More importantly, through their practices of reviving farming traditions, traditional produces and sustainable forms of agriculture, these movements propose a paradigm shift on the value of food, its producers, on an economic system based on the monopoly of multinational corporations, and on humans’ relationship with the land.

Slow Food and Terra Madre, as has been said, are only examples of the hundreds and thousands grassroots movements that exist and are flourishing around the planet. These grassroots movements re-discover, re-value and re-position peasant culture and are key elements through which to acknowledge

³⁶ Ibid, 475.

their history and to connect it with the need to develop an environmental conscience. Some movements have food and food cultures as their points of departure, such as the Navdanya organization in India, or the international movement La Via Campesina, that works toward unity among peasants, landless people, women farmers and indigenous people. Others promote environmental conservation, as does the African Green Belt Movement, or the historical Indian Chipko movement, which fights deforestation. They all express different forms of environmental activism, and have in common a deep connection to the land, ecological consciousness and the awareness that humans are not separated from the other living beings and that, as temporary guests on this planet earth, it is necessary to reexamine humans' use and exploitation of natural resources.

My dissertation's contribution to Twentieth Century Italian literary culture scholarship is in its consideration of Italian peasant tradition beyond the traditional notion of Italian peasants as passive, guarded and mistrustful of the State. Through my analysis of the authors, explored through the lenses of the organic intellectual, I present a cultural history and reinterpretation of Italian agrarian past into contemporary Italian identity. These texts demonstrate that, in specific historical moments, Italian peasants made their conscious choices and were, both intellectually and in practice, engaged in protecting their land and their people. My ecocritical reading of the texts suggests an understanding of peasants' connection to the land, both in cultural, social and ecological terms, and proposes a historical and cultural tie to past and present forms of intellectual

environmental activism contributing, in this way, to a more interdisciplinary approach to cultural studies and food studies.

My first chapter presents, through Pavese and Viganò, a gradual passage to a more socially engaged form of intellectual activism. Although neither Pavese nor Viganò can be considered organic intellectuals, their novels offer a vision of peasants involved in the Resistance, and more active compared to the past Italian literary tradition. Along with peasant interactions, the influential role of the landscape, and the natural elements in the development of the stories and characters, enliven my ecocritical reading of the texts through the theoretical framework of bioregionalism.

The story of the Cervi family analyzed in chapter two reverses the idea of the traditional passive and conservative peasant, and presents the story of a peasant family intellectually engaged both in the improvement of agricultural techniques and in the Resistance movement. Although Calvino's intellectual influence is noticeably present in this chapter, I argue that Alcide Cervi, through his memoir, sets the example of organic intellectual. The story of his family also offers a deeper and more critical interpretation of Italian peasant life, while Alcide's language and metaphors reveal a vision of the world constantly connected to nature and farming tradition, and confirm my main argument regarding peasants as the social group most connected to the land.

My Gramscian reading of the authors through the organic intellectual develops further in my third chapter. This chapter analyzes Nuto Revelli's work and peasant testimonies as two examples of organic intellectuals, and introduces

the beginning, of an environmental consciousness in the seventies. According to Gramsci, “The problem of creating a new stratum of intellectuals consists therefore in the critical elaboration of the intellectual activity that exists in everyone at a certain degree of development, ... , which is perpetually innovating the physical and social world, [and] becomes the foundation of a new and integral conception of the world.”³⁷ Revelli’s texts analyzed in this chapter include a first long introduction, in which the writer and historian offers his own interpretation of the testimonies, and the reasons in Italy for the mass exodus from the mountains and country. The testimonies presented in these volumes are one of the first authentic and original transcriptions of Italian peasant voices. Although peasants do not directly participate in a “critical elaboration” of their reality, they do indirectly become “the foundation of a new and integral conception of the world”. Their testimonies not only inform us of their world, but also become important points of reference for the realization of several contemporary projects focused on the repopulation of abandoned areas, of which Paraloup is an example. Furthermore, these peasant testimonies also provide a pivotal cultural and historical basis, as well as inspiration for new agrarian movements and sustainable forms of agriculture, as denoted in chapter four.

Slow Food, discussed in chapter four, emerges, as Petrini himself declares, from the cultural panorama of the Italian Resistance and the partisan

³⁷ Antonio Gramsci, “The Intellectuals” in *Prison Notebooks*, 9.

movement, and is deeply rooted in Italian peasant tradition³⁸. For this reason, Slow Food presents itself in its documents and on its website as a collective and a grassroots movement, rather than as the property of its founder Carlo Petrini³⁹. Slow Food, developed in the eighties, and founder Carlo Petrini are able to fully explicate through their activism related to food and agriculture, the social function and the practical role of the intellectual that Gramsci inaugurated and which Resistance's writers began to acknowledge. Terra Madre connects the local experiences of farmers and producers of food to a more global reality. The biannual gathering represents an opportunity, not only for the producers of food to connect with their consumers, or co-producers, but it is also an important moment for the exchange of knowledge, as well as the raising of consciousness on issues related to small scale and traditional farming, and the environmental and social issues related to it.

Finally, the exclusive interview released by Carlo Petrini presented in the appendix includes details on the relationship of Slow Food with Italian peasants, and confirms my overall thesis on Italian culture as rooted in peasant tradition.

³⁸ Carlo Petrini in conversation with Gigi Padovani, *Slow Food Revolution. A New Culture for Eating and Living*, trans. by Francesca Santovetti, (New York: Rizzoli International, 2006), 55.

³⁹ www.slowfood.com/about-us/

CHAPTER 1:

Peasants' Culture in Pavese's *The House on the Hill* and Viganò's *L'Agnese Va a Morire*. An Ecocritical Approach to Italian Literature of Resistance.

In 1940, Italy entered the Second World War as part of the Axis powers, along side Germany and Japan. After suffering multiple military losses in several campaigns, and losing its colonies, in July 1943 Italy deposed Mussolini. Over this three-year period, during which Italians lost many soldiers, the war had not yet entered Italian territory. Only after the September 8, 1943 signing of the armistice with allied armed forces did the country become a theatre of some of the war's harshest battles. The battles fought in the Italian territory during World War II, the Resistance movement, and the struggles for liberation between 1943 and 1945 represent some of the most critical and intense events of twentieth-century Italian history. The Resistance Movement represents, therefore, within recent historical Italian context, a significant example of civil and political struggle, and using terminology often found in Gramsci, "from below". If, in his famous essay *The Southern Question*, Gramsci referred to the masses of peasants with this term⁴⁰, then the period of the Resistance can also be considered a powerful and spontaneous movement from below that saw common people, from civilians in the cities to peasants in the countryside, uniting forces

⁴⁰ Antonio Gramsci, *The Southern Question*. Trans. by Pasquale Verdicchio. (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University, 1995), 39.

and exchanging their services for a common purpose: the liberation of the country from the Germans, and from Mussolini's regime. Furthermore, it also inspired some critical and fundamental democratic principles of the Italian constitution. The increase of political and civil discontent due to over twenty years of fascist oppression, Nazi occupation of Italian territory, and the announcement of Italian withdrawal by General Pietro Badoglio on September 8, finally allowed the strong antifascist movement to operate both visibly and steadily.

The Italian peasantry played a central role in the success of the Resistance Movement. While peasants have historically been acknowledged as supportive of the Resistance, there are still many gaps in the evaluation of the peasant-partisan relations. As the historian Anna Bravo highlights in her intervention at the conference on *Contadini e Partigiani*⁴¹, historiographers initially relegated peasant society mostly to the background of the Resistance, and were more interested in emphasizing the political ideology of the movement⁴². Not until the 1970's did historians and researchers start to pay more attention to the active involvement of the rural world in the Resistance, realizing that the fragmentation of the territory, and the local nature of the peasant culture required a detailed study of the different realities connected to the geographical areas involved. Nonetheless, research has been very discontinuous, and has

⁴¹ Anna Bravo, "I partigiani e la popolazione contadina nell'astigiano", in *Contadini e Partigiani*, records of the conference in Asti-Nizza and Monferrato in December 1984, (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 1984), 15. This conference was organized for the forty years anniversary of the Italian Republic and the liberation in WWII of the area of Asti, in Piedmont.

⁴².Ibidem.

offered notably little interdisciplinary work in developing a cohesive vision of this multifaceted and often stereotyped relationship valued, up to this time, mostly from the perspective of the partisans' experience. It is important to both acknowledge and stress the connection between the resistance and the rural world based on very local realities. Each region, and each area within the region, from the valleys to the hills or the mountains, was characterized by a specific reality and conditioned by the local people, as well as by the geographical shape of the territory. Within the Resistance Movement, local peasant's knowledge of the area became of vital support, and a source of networking for the constant repositioning of the partisans in the territory.

In this context, reviewing Resistance literature can help fill this gap, while offering insights on important features of how Italian culture and tradition were intertwined with the geographic conditions. Renata Viganò's *L'Agnese va a morire* and Cesare Pavese's *La casa in collina* are examples of literary works on the Resistance, in which it is possible to trace the strong connection of humans to their natural surroundings, and examples of authors politically and socially engaged. Both Viganò and Pavese considered narrative to be a form of civil commitment designed, following World War II, to expose both the extreme experiences of the war, and the delicate dynamics of the relationship between the partisans and the local people. The practices of solidarity exercised by the rural people, together with their culture of sharing, are elements common in peasant traditions, although heterogeneous in their histories, stories, and places. The twentieth century witnessed the gradual disappearance of Italian peasants in

the cultural, social, and geographical Italian panorama. In this chapter, I investigate how Resistance literature, through the novels of Pavese and Viganò, can help us to understand what happened to peasant culture and tradition as representative of the ancestral pact between humans and the land. Both authors were antifascist and were very aware of the importance that geographical areas played during the period of the Resistance, sometimes in favor of the partisans, sometimes against them. In the novels of these authors, the natural element is always part of the background, and occasionally stands out as protagonist or as dominant force.

The words of the intellectual, writer, and ex-partisan Italo Calvino confirm how critical the natural surroundings for the partisan movement had been. In the presentation to his novel *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*, Calvino admits that, for him, the Resistance “represented the fusion of landscape and characters.”⁴³ Calvino confesses, that when he was writing his novel, the first material available to him was “a landscape”, as if to signify a key function played by the natural element in the partisan movement. In his continuous attempt to write, years later, the presentation to his first novel on the Resistance, Calvino, hints at his literary experience of neorealism, and the war, through an incomplete sentence, “It was from this possibility of situating human stories in landscapes that the

⁴³ Italo Calvino, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, (Milano: Mondadori, 2012), IX. “La Resistenza rappresentò la fusione tra paesaggio e persone”. The English version I use is, *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*, trans. by Archibald Colquhoun (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998), 11.

‘neorealism’...”⁴⁴. This fragmented sentence includes the three essential elements of the literature on the Resistance: the presence of people, natural environment, and the neo-realist style of the stories. Although his book came out in 1947, Calvino considers Beppe Fenoglio’s *A Private Affair*, published in 1963, the representative novel of the Resistance. Fenoglio’s novel, published a few months after the author’s death, and twenty years after WWII, is seen by Calvino as the novel that best represents the main themes of the partisan war in an epic atmosphere. Most importantly, Calvino does not forget to stress that this novel also “it is a book of landscapes”⁴⁵.

In this chapter I examine peasants’ practices of solidarity, their strategies to protect the partisans, and their knowledge of the local territory presented in Viganò’s and Pavese’s novels, through the lenses of an ecocritical approach. Simply defined, ecocriticism is a methodological approach that studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment⁴⁶. As characterized by Cheryll Glotfelty, ecocriticism “shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it”⁴⁷. Considering this simple definition as the premise of an ecocritical approach to the literary text, I argue that the presence of both peasants and the natural

⁴⁴ Ibid, X. “Fu questa possibilità di situare storie umane nei paesaggi che il ‘neorealismo’...” – Ibid, 11.

⁴⁵ Ibid, XXIII. “un libro di paesaggi”. – Ibid, 26.

⁴⁶ Glotfelty Cheryll, Fromm Harold, *The Ecocriticism Reader. Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), XVII.

⁴⁷ Ibid, XIX. Professor Cheryll Glotfelty is professor of Literature and Environment, and co-founder and past president of the Association of the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), the principal association for American and international scholars of ecocriticism.

environment in the stories highlights essential characteristics of Italian society and culture. This focus helps to accentuate and re-evaluate the importance that peasant society and the territory have had in the construction of Italian culture since the war. More specifically, I intend to look at the relationship that the peasants and the protagonists have, and develop, with the specific region and territory of the story, and, on the other hand, to examine how the territory and the region affect the peasants and the protagonists. The rural social world contributes, although often misrepresented, to Italian history and identity. Italian peasant cultural experience transmits, indeed, a specific knowledge of the land and Italian territory. My ecocritical reading of these novels, advances the understanding of peasants as having played a significant role in the consciousness-raising of issues connected to the relationship of humans to the land and the environment.

It is through a relationship of people with the territory that we can recognize the interdependence of local landscapes and human actions. For this purpose, the concept of bioregion proposed by Gary Snyder is essential in understanding the inter-connection between humans and nature, and nature with humans. Considering the boundaries of a territory more for its geographical and natural characteristics than its geopolitical implications, Snyder stresses how “our relationship to the natural world takes place in a *place*, and it must be grounded in information and experience”⁴⁸. From this bioregional perspective, the

⁴⁸ Snyder, Gary. *The Practice of the Wild*. (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), 39. The italics are part of the original text.

knowledge shared by the peasants with the partisans about the geographical areas, as well as with the local communities, is central to Resistance histories, interactions and stories.

1.1. The Social and Historical Background of the Protagonist in *L'Agnese va a morire*

Viganò's novel is set in the brackish lagoons situated in the Comacchio Valley, in the plains area of the Po valley, and close to the Adriatic coast. In *L'Agnese va a morire*, the element of water is not only often present, but also an active component of the story. On the other hand, the hills around Turin in northern Italy, and the hilly area of the Langhe are a constant presence in Pavese's *La casa in collina*, both as a geographical element, and as a point of reflection for the protagonist. It is important to clarify the position Italian peasants had within the historical and political context, to better understand the personality and the position the characters play in the novels.

Until sixty years ago, the Italian population was still predominantly rural, and peasants represented over fifty-two per cent of the entire population⁴⁹. The rural world was in fact, through the first half of the twentieth century, the main representative of Italian culture and tradition. Although peasants were the majority of the Italian population, not only had their participation in the political and social life been historically denied but, considered as a mass of people

⁴⁹ Albanese, Francesco, et al. *Le campagne italiane e la resistenza*. (Bologna: Grafis, 1995), 11.

incapable of improving their lives, they were mostly seen as inferior human beings, and were purposely marginalized by the State. The rural world, a society with its own inner hierarchies and stratifications, from the landlord to the tenant farmer or the simple day laborer - though it embodied the majority of the population - was still a world apart. Neither the State nor the growing bourgeois class, not the landlords nor the previous feudal system have ever had any interest in knowing or approaching the cultures, values, and traditions of the peasants. Moreover, the different regional and environmental characteristics participated in diversifying both the lifestyles and agricultural practices of peasants.

During the two World Wars, while the peasants were forced to go to war because they were valued for their high level of resistance to hardship, they also lost the highest number of lives⁵⁰. This circumstance, added to centuries of exploitation and marginalization, perpetuated a climate of diffidence and mistrust toward the government and the State among the peasants. During the fascist regime, Mussolini's politics of supporting and glorifying a new rural society based on hard work, sacrifice, and economy was, in reality, very distant from peasants' ideals, and perceived by the rural people as a way of avoiding any real or material improvement of their conditions⁵¹. The agricultural economic politics during the fascist regime, in fact, tended toward more support for large landowners, and measures to reclaim the land, than toward real policies to invest

⁵⁰ Ibid, 42.

⁵¹ Ibid, 50.

in improving agriculture⁵². As highlighted by Oddino Bo, ex-combatant during the WWII and “Alleanza dei contadini” and later “Confcoltivatori” union organizer, “rural society, especially in the southern Italy, had too many unresolved problems under fascism to become a force for change”⁵³. The years between 1943 and 1945 opened up the possibility of an encounter and of collaboration between the resistance movements and the rural world, bridging the gap between the centenary cultural divisions of the peasant world, and the rest of Italy.

Gaetano Salvemini’s historical perspective on the peasants’ attitude during the Resistance helps us to comprehend how powerfully their support influenced the turn of events of those years: “For the first time in the history of Italy since the XIII century, the rural people actively participated in a civil war. Their participation was not reactionary, but was motivated by a national and social conscience that, although possibly confused, was oriented and ready to face the last sacrifice”⁵⁴. Salvemini, an expert in Italian history from the Middle Ages to contemporary times, summarizes the power and strength of the peasant culture. Reticent, often judged as conservative by the bourgeois class, detached from the political and social events of the country, undervalued and mainly

⁵² Attilio Esposto, *Democrazia e Contadini in Italia Nel XX Secolo: Il Ruolo dei Contadini nella Formazione dell'Italia Contemporanea*. (Roma: Robin, 2006), 343.

⁵³ The English translation is mine. “Coi suoi problemi irrisolti, a partire dal Mezzogiorno, non si può dire che la ‘società rurale’ abbia avuto un ruolo d’avanguardia per cambiare le cose durante il ventennio fascista”.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Albanese, Francesco, et al. *Le campagne italiane e la resistenza*, 10. The original text has not been translated into English. The English translation is mine. The original Italian text reads, “Per la prima volta nella storia d’Italia dal secolo XIII in poi le popolazioni rurali parteciparono attivamente ad una guerra civile, non più stando dal lato reazionario, ma sommosse da una coscienza nazionale e sociale, confusa quanto si vuole, ma sicuramente orientata e pronta ad affrontare anche l’ultimo sacrificio”.

treasured as a labor force, peasants fought alongside the partisans with courage, endurance and an enormous spirit of sacrifice. Not all their stories are documented, and only a few are known. Cervi's brothers' story, documented by their father Alcide Cervi in *I miei sette figli*, is one of the few detailed chronicles, and became a symbol of the struggles and the tragic end of many farmers' families. However, personal testimonies, research, and the presence of peasant characters in the narrative of the Resistance confirm the fact that rural presence and practice are a relevant aspect of Italian history. Through these documents it is possible to bring back to light values and customs representative of peasant lives and traditions as important features of Italian culture.

Agnese, the main character of Viganò's novel, is a laundress who lives in the countryside of Emilia Romagna, and she fully incarnates and illustrates the spirit of sacrifice and determination described by Salvemini. Furthermore, Agnese embodies several characters and key aspects of the people's fight against the fascists and the Nazi; she is a peasant, a middle aged woman, a wife, a motherly figure and finally, a partisan. Published in 1949, few years after the end of the Second World War, *L'Agnese va a morire* is one of the most illustrative novels of the Resistance. The story is set in the years between the end of the summer of 1943, and the spring of 1945, in the countryside of Comacchio Valley, north east of Italy, and is centered on Agnese's clandestine life with the partisans, from the death of her husband, Palita, till her death at the novel's end.

From the first page, the author sets the pace of the book, offering us valuable details of the characters while anticipating the main themes of the story. The protagonist is going home, carrying a wheelbarrow full of wet clothes, on a dirt road among the fields, when she meets a soldier:

He was a young soldier, small and tattered. He had broken shoes through which his dirty and muddy toes could be seen. Looking at him, Agnese felt tired. She stopped and put down the handles of the cart. The wheelbarrow was heavy. But the soldier had light and happy eyes, and gave her a military salute. He said: - The war is over. I go home. I've been walking for many days -. Agnese untied the neckerchief under her chin, turned its angles on her head, and fanned herself with her hand: - It's still very hot -. She added, as if she was remembering: - The war is over. I know. Last night everybody got drunk when the radio gave the news -. She looked at the soldier's face and smiled, a rough and unexpected smile in her face burned by the air. - I think the worse troubles are yet to come, - she suddenly said, with the resigned disbelief of poor people; and the soldier rubbed his hands, he was a very joyous soldier.⁵⁵

The vivid and physical portrayal of the soldier and Agnese's feelings of fatigue, as well as incredulity to the soldier's news captures the main features of the two characters. The soldier does not have a name, as if instead of highlighting his individual position in that moment he is representing the situation

⁵⁵ Vigano' Renata. *L'Agnese va a morire*. First ed. 1949. (Torino: Einaudi, 1994), 11. There is no English translation of Vigano's novel. The English version is mine. "Era un soldato giovane, piccolo e stracciato. Aveva le scarpe rotte, e si vedevano le dita dei piedi, sporche, color di fango. Guardandolo, l'Agnese si sentì stanca. Si fermò, abbassò le stanghe. La carriola era pesante. Ma il soldato aveva gli occhi chiari e lieti, e le fece un saluto militare. Disse: - La guerra è finita. Io vado a casa. Sono tanti giorni che cammino -. L'Agnese si slegò il fazzoletto sotto il mento, ne rovesciò le punte sulla testa, si sventolò con la mano: - Fa ancora molto caldo -. Aggiunse, come se ricordasse: - La guerra è finita. Lo so. Si sono tutti ubriacati l'altra sera, quando la radio ha dato la notizia -. Guardò il viso del soldato e sorrise, un sorriso rozzo e inatteso sulla sua faccia bruciata dall'aria. - Io credo che i guai peggiori siano ancora da passare, - disse improvvisamente, con la rassegnata incredulità dei poveri; e il soldato si fregò le mani: era un ragazzo molto allegro".

of many soldiers. He is young, as were many partisans and soldiers of the period. The way the author depicts him gives us the impression of a gaunt figure that has been suffering different kinds of deprivations from the war. Viganò devotes an entire paragraph to describing his bare feet and broken shoes. This detail connects to how soldiers had to count only on their physical strengths, and how their means of transportation were simply their legs and feet. His muddy feet, protagonists of long walks in wide valleys, hills and mountains, are the soldier's direct connection with the soil and the land.

Meanwhile, the author is also anticipating the forthcoming events. Using the detail "broken shoes", an icon in partisans' popular songs such as "Fischia il vento", Viganò's soldier can be interpreted as a figure typical of a young partisan. As Salvemini emphasizes, two new main facts characterize the Italian Resistance, the massive presence of young people and the participation of the peasants⁵⁶. In these first lines we notice Agnese's sense of empathy toward the soldier. Looking at the soldier, Agnese feels tired. However, this feeling also describes her own exhaustion due to the heavy and daily routine of her wearying work as a laundress. Her barrow is heavy and while she needs to take a pause, the vision of the soldier mirrors her own fatigue as if they have something in common or to share.

The next paragraph starts with a "But", so as to highlight the difference of attitude between the soldier and Agnese. Full of enthusiasm and excitement, the

⁵⁶ Salvemini, Gaetano. *Scritti sul Fascismo*. Volume III, 426. (Milano: Feltrinelli Editore, 1974).

young soldier announces the war is over and that he is going home. This joyful message of hope is counteracted by Agnese's action and comment. She could have immediately smiled to demonstrate some form of delight at this good news. Instead she unfolds her neckerchief and uses it to wave it in front of her face. Agnese's comment about the heat portrays how the present climate, a natural element, actually has had a stronger impact on her wellbeing than the possible end of the war. Only then, while the author confesses to us Agnese's thoughts about the previous night, when people were drunk because of the news given by the radio, does the woman look at the soldier and smile. Her smile is rough because she is not used to smiling; her harsh life does not allow her to display emotions, and her closed personality is not accustomed to displaying this kind of affection. This is why her smile is abrupt and does not fit the features of her face, shaped and carved by the weather. The climate and weather conditions, as is the case with peasants working outdoors, have left an imprint on her, body and soul.

Toward the end of the paragraph, Agnese finally reveals her thoughts and, although contradicting the radio news, and the enthusiasm of the soldier, she indicates the actual direction of the approaching events in the novel and the war. We will in fact soon learn that the war is not over at all, but that Italy has now changed its allies, and Germany's presence in the Italian territory is stronger and more threatening. Viganò describes the woman's expression as if she is, in that moment, embodying the wisdom and detachment of all the poor peasants.

Traditionally peasants were used to mistrusting the State and the government, so Agnese, following her intuitive mistrust, doubts the news from the radio and, on the contrary, foresees more troubled happenings.

On the evening of September 8th 1943, General Badoglio, through a recorded message on the radio, publicly announced the armistice between Italy and the Allied armed forces. The general gave orders to the Italian army not to attack the allied forces, but, in so doing, left the soldiers without specific instructions on how to behave with the Germans. Many divisions and troops collapsed, and the German armies occupied Italian territory without much resistance. After the proclamation, in an initial atmosphere of confusion and impasse, many soldiers deserted, wandering in the Italian countryside without direction or clear understanding of what would happen next.

Highlighting the reluctance of the rural people to take a specific position following the events of 1943, Gianfranco Bertolo underscores, however, that their delay in participating did not mean an absence of participation within the resistance panorama⁵⁷. In October, a month after the official announcement, and when the partisans received the first instructions from their commanders on how to treat the peasants, the latter had already spontaneously demonstrated actions of solidarity towards “gli sbandati”. “Gli sbandati”, the drifters, were ex-foreign prisoners of war escaped from the camps or young soldiers and people who

⁵⁷ Gianfranco Bertolo, et al. *Operai e contadini nella crisi italiana del 1943-1944*. (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1974), 259. Bertolo has written several books on the role of the Italian workers and the peasants during the Second World War and the Resistance movement.

were running away from the Germans or fascists⁵⁸. Many families in the countryside opened their homes to the partisans and “gli sbandati”, offered them shelter, food, and often also built refuges and places to hide from the army. September 8 marks the first encounter and authentic collaboration between civilians and the rural world.

1.2. The Natural Settings in *The House on the Hill* and *L’Agnese va a morire*

Written between 1947 and 1948 and published in 1949, the same year as *L’Agnese va a morire*, Pavese’s novel, *La Casa in Collina*, narrates the vicissitudes of Corrado, a high school professor in Turin, during the period of the Nazi bombings. The protagonist finds shelter in the hills near the city, in the house of two women and, although he had a detached attitude toward the war, becomes friends with the local people of the area who, on the contrary, are involved in antifascist operations. After the armistice of September 8, 1943, the Fascists arrest Corrado’s friends and he moves to other hills to avoid being captured. The second section of the novel describes Corrado’s hiding in a boarding school of the city of Chieri, and the final journey across the hills to reach his parents’ house in the rural area of the Langhe. Throughout the book, Corrado’s inner voice and reflections about his experiences with the locals, the two ladies he lives with, and the war, disclose a solitary and disenchanted man. The protagonist seems to have understood the deeper social and political implications of the war, but purposely decides not to be actively engaged. Within

⁵⁸ Ibidem.

this context, the landscape plays a strong presence in the narrative and is an essential point of connection between the human action and the environment.

In *The House on the Hill*, the hills of Piedmont are present in the title, in the first lines of the story, and they are protagonists throughout the novel. Speaking in the first person, the main character introduces us to the hills near Turin where he lives, providing us important information as to how the surroundings are an integral part of a way of living,

Even in the old days we referred to the ‘hills’ as we might have talked about the sea or the woods. I used to go back there in the evenings from the town when it grew dusk, and for me it was not simply a place like any other; it represented an aspect of things, a way of life. For me there was no difference between those hills and these ancient ones where I played as a child and live at the present time: the same sort of broken, straggling country, cultivated, yet wild, the same roads farmsteads and ravines.⁵⁹

The first sentence of the book brings our memory back to old customs and ways of conceiving of one’s surroundings. Although it may sound like a generalization, the protagonist is, in reality, reinforcing the unity and connection of the residents with the territory where they live. The sea, the hills or the woods indicate a landscape with similar characteristics, and at the same time designate a specific geographical area with particular life styles, climates, and local cultures. The local inhabitants are connected to these bioregions through a “local

⁵⁹ Pavese, Cesare. *The House on the Hill*. Trans. W. J. Strachan. (New York: Walker, 1961), 5. The original text reads, “Già in altri tempi si diceva la collina come avremmo detto il mare o la boscaglia. Ci tornavo la sera, dalla città che si oscurava, e per me non era un luogo tra gli altri, ma un aspetto delle cose, un modo di vivere. Per esempio, non vedevo differenza tra quelle colline e queste antiche dove giocai bambino e adesso vivo: sempre un terreno accidentato e serpeggiante, coltivato e selvatico, sempre strade, cascate e burroni”, p.3 in *La casa in collina*. (Torino: Einaudi, 2008).

sense of place”⁶⁰. As Thayer Jr. defines it, “A bioregion is literally and etymologically a “life-place” – a unique region definable by natural (rather than political) boundaries with a geographic, climatic, hydrological, and ecological character capable of supporting unique human communities”⁶¹. Natural environments affect humans’ lives and choices, be they the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, the vegetation and animals in the mountain woods, or the crops and fields of the countryside. Corrado is a son of farmers from the Langhe, a hilly Piedmont area in the southeast of Turin, near the coastal northwest region of Liguria. The hills, for the protagonist, are a vital part of his world and represent a way and vision of life. By picturing the hills where he currently lives as similar to the ones of his childhood, he is in reality sharing his sense of belonging and connection with these landscapes, his sense of familiarity and comfort with the natural surroundings and the countryside.

The hills and mountains around Turin are the perfect night refuge for those who work in the city during the day. Many residents during the war used to commute in order to protect themselves and their families from bombings. Soon, in fact, Corrado discloses his intimate relationship with the hills and the region. Living in the hills brings Corrado back to his memories of childhood and youth. His solitude, which is described not as loneliness, but as a personal choice, is accompanied by a sense of detachment from what the war is causing to civilians.

⁶⁰ Lynch Tom, Glotfelty Cheryll, and Armbruster Karla. *The Bioregional Imagination. Literature, Ecology and Place*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 2.

⁶¹ Thayer, Robert L. *LifePlace: Bioregional Thought and Practice*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 3.

The image of the hills when the night falls, conveys the power of nature over human life, “Behind the tilled fields and the roads, the human dwellings, under one’s feet, the age-old, indifferent heart of the earth brooded in the darkness, lived in hollow and among roots, lurked in hidden things, in infant fears”⁶². The land, once dominated by and molded through human intervention, has returned to wilderness. The soil and the earth have acquired a sinister presence in the protagonist’s mind which, influenced by memories of childhood, sees the earth as solitary, uncaring, and as a frightening presence which lives in the darkest parts of the hill and its soil. This description of the hill at night indirectly anticipates the scenery and atmosphere that will pervade the hills of Piedmont during the period after September 8th 1943, as well as the novel’s story.

If the hills of Piedmont are the main element in the structure and narrative of Pavese’s novel, then the element of water in a predominant landscape of lagoons, wetlands, and extreme climate conditions is constantly intertwined with the protagonists’ actions in Viganò’s story. Both authors, fresh from memories of the war, know that the natural surroundings, the places and the spaces, are essential in the dynamics of the plot. In *L’Agnese Va a Morire*, the description of natural elements is combined with any important action Agnese accomplishes, and is often introduced at the opening of the chapters, as if to emphasize the embracing yet decisive function of the natural surroundings. After Palita’s death, Agnese starts collaborating with the partisans, who were previously friends with

⁶² Pavese, *The House on the Hill*, p. 9. The original text says, “Dietro ai coltivi e alle strade, dietro alle case umane, sotto i piedi, l’antico indifferente cuore della terra covava nel buio, viveva in burroni, in radici, in cose occulte, in paure d’infanzia”, p. 5.

her husband, as “staffetta”. Her involvement with the partisans is still sporadic until one evening she kills a drunken German soldier who had killed her husband’s cat, the only connection to Palita she had left. Agnese does not feel bad for her action, and she is not afraid of the consequences. The chapter ends with Agnese leaving her house and walking toward the countryside.

In the following chapter, Agnese continues walking in the night,

Agnese proceeded along a channel, and arrived at the riverbank. She struggled to pass it because it was high and steep, and she descended on the other side, until she reached the trail along the shore. The moon came out, the water was white and it looked like a road. ‘It must look the same from the sky – Agnese thought – that’s why often the British airplanes throw bombs in the river by mistake.’⁶³

The depiction of Agnese in the wetland gives us a sense of how the natural element is both dominant, and at the same time deceptive, for those who are not familiar with the area. The prevalence of water in a swamp region like the Comacchio Valley often creates many difficulties for the local inhabitants. Nature and civilization, forces of nature like rivers, swamps and water, and human interventions like riverbanks and unpaved roads, intertwine and blend with the moon’s light. The pale and surreal nocturnal light deceives human perception of the surroundings, confusing fluid elements with solid man-made entities.

The water and the vegetation of the wetland play in favor of the partisans, and become sites in which to hide from the Germans or the fascists.

⁶³ Viagnò *L’Agnese va a morire*, p. 55. The original text reads, “Proseguì lungo un canale, e arrivò all’argine del fiume. Lo superò con fatica, perché era alto e ripido, e scese dall’altra parte, fino al sentiero della riva. Era venuta fuori la luna, e l’acqua era bianca, sembrava una strada. “Anche dal cielo deve parere così, - pensò l’Agnese, - perché spesso gli aereoplani inglesi si sbagliano e tirano le bombe nel fiume”.

Occasionally these natural elements become obstacles for their missions or retreats. The weather conditions, on the other hand, are more unpredictable, and are often present in the scene as influential, and sometimes benefit the outcome of the partisans' actions, while at other times, challenging their emotional and mental endurance. Each of the three parts of the book is dominated by the presence of a season. We pass from the burning heat of the summer in part one, to the humidity of rainy season in the second part, and endure the snow and cold winds of the winter in the last part of the novel. Agnese, nevertheless, is rarely discouraged by the climate conditions, and in spite of her age and heaviness she continues her duty undismayed.

Agnese grabbed the umbrella, the two full shopping bags, went out in the field and reached the usual place. Since that morning, it was the third time she had gone there. Two women were missing, maybe because of the season. "They might have got sick with this rain, - thought Agnese, - or they may not want to come". They were not wrong: it was a hard life... Her feet were always wet, and now she also had to wear the slippers, the shoes were too tiring for her. The channel wasn't too far. She closed the umbrella, and got more rain on her back. 'A little more, a little less it doesn't matter, - she thought, - now it rains softly'.⁶⁴

It's autumn, and the dominant presence of water in the wetlands is accentuated by the rainy season. Agnese is in charge of taking the provisions to the partisans hiding in the houses in the waters, and her strength and endurance,

⁶⁴ Ibid, 144. "L'Agnese afferrò l'ombrello, le due sporte piene, uscì nel campo, s'avviò al solito posto. Dal mattino era la terza volta che ci andava. Mancavano due donne, forse a causa della stagione. 'Con questa pioggia si saranno ammalate – pensava l'Agnese, - o non vorranno venire'. Non avevano torto, era una brutta vita. ... I piedi li aveva sempre bagnati: anche adesso doveva portare le ciabatte, con le scarpe si stancava troppo. ... Il canale non era molto lontano. Chiuse l'ombrello, si prese ancora dell'altra pioggia sulla schiena. "Un po' più un po' meno non conta niente, - pensava – e adesso piove piano".

in this unfriendly environment, are contrasted by the absence of the women she is supposed to meet. However, Agnese does not lack compassion or understanding. She knows the sacrifices and dangers everyone is exposed to in supporting the partisans. Her motherly and giving personality is compensated by her resolution to complete her mission, even at the expense of her own health.

Once again, the water is central in the scene and it permeates Agnese's body from the top to the bottom. At the beginning of the novel the soldier had broken shoes and dirty and muddy toes. In this part of the novel Agnese, who is now fully engaged in the partisan's fight, has tired, constantly wet, feet. Like the soldier, her feet connect her to the soil, represent her roots, and more importantly allow her to be operative and efficient. Her sense of sacrifice and indifference toward the obstacles that nature presents are part of her personality, as well as a characteristic of peasant culture, that of being accustomed to living and dealing with natural elements on a daily basis.

1.3. Protagonists' Relationship with Locals

Through the personalities and backgrounds of Corrado and Agnese we learn about the value of peasants within the context of the partisan, movement. Corrado is a teacher who works in a high school in Turin, and lives in the hills near the city. His provincial and farmer-family heritage allows him to be familiar with, and to connect to the peasant culture, but his intellectual education and unemotional personality keep him always distant, and prevent him from getting directly involved. Although the constant, conflicting presence of these dual

aspects is in Corrado's nature, he recognizes in the rural community the reliability, strength and altruism lacking in the bourgeois class, yet embodied in the novel by the two women from whom he rents the room. Corrado's behavior, in fact, is often brusque toward his landowners, and he always defends the local residents in front of the ladies. When Elvira, the younger lady, complains about the lack of food resources, accusing *l'osteria* of buying everything available, the dialogue underlines cultural and social implications:

It's all bought up by the inns where you spend the nights having a good time'. 'And sleeping on the ground', I added. 'I'm not interested', snorted Elvira, turning round. 'But they're not our sort of people'. 'You're right there', I said. 'They're much better than us'. She put her hand on her throat, her eyes blazing with indignation. ... 'But they are...' 'Subversive elements, I know. So much the better. Do you think the world is made up of priests and Fascists?'⁶⁵

By stating that people from the inns are "much better than us", Corrado recognizes a higher value to the people involved in the resistance but, at the same time, he includes himself with Elvira, he does not identify with those he supports. Elvira's expression, after Corrado's words in support of the common people from the inn, denotes a possible and typical reaction of a middle class person. Her whole belief system, based on petty but comfortable realities and the unspoken conviction that the bourgeoisie is a superior class to the peasants, has been shaken upon hearing Corrado, an intellectual, giving more credit to a supposedly lower class of people. Elvira, nevertheless, is not in favor of the

⁶⁵ Pavese, *The House on the Hill*, (86). "- Comprano tutto le osterie dove si passa la notte a far baldoria.- E si dorme per terra, - dissi.- lo non voglio sapere, - sbottò l'Elvira voltandosi. - Ma non è gente come noi. - Credo bene, - le dissi, - vale molto più di noi. Si teneva la gola, con gli occhi indignati. ... - Ma sono... - Sovversivi, lo so. Meno male. Crede che al mondo non ci stiano che i preti e i fascisti?" (54).

German occupation or the R.S.I.⁶⁶, but her attitude hides prejudices and a defiance toward the local people. This attitude highlights that, even in dark times and deprivation, cultural differences could occasionally keep the neighborhood divided. The fascist squads tried, by threatening and scaring the civilians, to suppress any form of solidarity among the people, hoping the rural communities would deliver the rebels and prisoners to the German or the fascists⁶⁷. These sorts of pressures exacerbated the peasants and accentuated the centuries-old conditions of economic disadvantage, social fragmentation and isolation in which the rural world lived⁶⁸. It would not be uncommon to find, within the same rural community, a few families or single farmers supporting the Germans, like Agnese's neighbors in Viganò's novel, and others like Elvira, feeling contempt for the partisans.

On the other hand, Luigi Ganapini points out, WWII unleashes all the contradictions accumulated by the rural people in the decades between the two World Wars⁶⁹. The establishment of the R.S.I. brings back to the surface the miseries and deprivations suffered by the people during fascism, while

⁶⁶ R.S.I. stands for Italian Social Republic. "Il 23 settembre del '43, i vecchi gerarchi fascisti costituiscono la Repubblica Sociale Italiana. Neofiti e vecchi squadristi professano di volere un regime di popolo e per il popolo, un ritorno al programma diciannovista del fascismo, una costituente..." Albanese, Francesco, et al. 60. "On September 23th 1943, the old fascist hierarchs constitute the Italian Social Republic. Neophytes and old squadron leaders professed wanting a regime of the people and for the people, a return to the fascist program of the 1919, a constituent..."

⁶⁷ Bertolo, Gianfranco, et al. *Operai e contadini nella crisi italiana del 1943-1944*, p. 260.

⁶⁸ Ibidem.

⁶⁹ Luigi Ganapini, "Con la vanga e col moschetto: ruralità, ruralismo e vita quotidiana nella RSI", records of the conference titled *Agricoltura e vita quotidiana nella RSI*, Salò' 19-20 Nov. 2004. (Venezia: Marsilio, 2006), p. 171.

strengthening the refusal of the rural world to return the fascist regime⁷⁰. Often idolized through radio propaganda during fascism, the rural world was, in reality, less protected by the totalitarian State, and also the class less represented by the first labor unions⁷¹.

During the twenty years between the two wars, the fascist regime focused on developing a more technologically sophisticated country through the implementation of agricultural machines, the introduction of chemical fertilizers, and support for the mass migration of the mountain population to the rural plains, and from the rural plains to the cities. Through their propagandistic plan to transform the rural world into the base for a new technological expansion, the fascist regime ended up exploiting the rural resources in favor of the industrial development of the country. Furthermore, while reinforcing old traditions such as the patriarchal social system, fascism supported an authoritarian and male-centered organization of work and society, which not only continued to leave women invisible and voiceless, but also gave more power and control to landowners, and kept the peasants and labor force in a position of dependence⁷².

Viganò's *Mondine* is a well-documented example of the exploitation of rural women. "Le mondine" or the rice-weeders, were women who, from the end of the nineteenth century worked, from April to June, in the rice fields of the northern regions of Emilia Romagna, Piedmont, Lombardy and Veneto. During these months, thousands of women migrated from all over Italy to work, in very

⁷⁰ Ibidem.

⁷¹ Ibid, 172.

⁷² Ibid, 173.

bad conditions, as rice-weeders. This job consisted of standing in water up to the knees and clearing weeds that interfered with the rice seedlings. “A life like animals, a life of injustices and oppressions and abuses; as if the masters had bought for thirty days a herd, and they could throw it here and there, for how long they wanted, overloading it with work, degrading it with strain, and then giving a handful of calculated money, examined, coming out with difficulty from their full pockets”⁷³. As with many of the testimonies included in this valuable document, the rice-weeders worked over eleven hours per day and ate only rice and beans, twice a day, for their whole period of employment. Many of them died during the working season because of diseases and lack of medical assistance or, as Metti Maria of Raffaele testifies, many perished simply because of sunstroke, due to all the hours spent under the sun.

1.4. Intellectual Differences in the Protagonists of *The House on the Hill* and *L’Agnese va a morire*

Pavese and Vigano’ are very aware of how the events of September 8th and the institution of the R.S.I. created a change in attitude among the civilians, and in particular among the peasants. On several occasions, in the first half of the novel, the protagonist of *The House on the Hill* finds himself talking with the people of the inn about the war. In a conversation with the old lady, mother of

⁷³ Renata Vigano’, *Mondine*, (Modena: Tipografia modenese, 1952), p.30. “Vita da bestie, e ingiustizie e soprusi e maltrattamenti; come se i padroni si comprassero per trenta giorni una mandria e la potessero buttare quà e là quanto vogliono, caricarla di lavoro, abbrutirla di fatica, e dar poi quel pugno di denaro misurato, vagliato, stento a uscire dalle loro tasche provviste”. The translation is mine.

Cate and owner of La Fontana, and a few of the men present at the inn, Corrado's interpretation of the German's occupation is an eye opening for those present,

Not the Germans' fault?' said the old lady. 'It isn't the Germans who are to blame', I remarked. 'The Germans have merely administered the final push and succeeded in discrediting our former bosses. The war is a bigger affair than might appear. The people have seen those who were in charge to begin with, running away, and now - nobody's in control. But you can take my word for it, they've got it in, not only for the Germans, but for their former masters too. It's not a soldier's war which could end tomorrow; it's the war of the destitute, the war of those who are fighting desperately against hunger, poverty, prison, rottenness. ... Now that we've got the Fascists back again, they're beginning to slip off; they'll go off in the mountains and end up in prison. The real war has now started, the real war, between desperate men. Thanks, of course, to the Germans.⁷⁴

Although some of the people living in the hills are developing a form of political and social consciousness, and start to collaborate with the workers in Turin to organize an antifascist resistance, the majority, like the old lady, simply reacts to the oppression. Corrado, being a teacher and the only literate among the different characters of the novel, is the only person who offers a broader and deeper vision of the meaning of the war and the German occupation. By creating a parallel between the German oppression and that exercised by the old Italian

⁷⁴ Pavese, *The House on the Hill*, pp. 105-106. The Italian text reads, "La vecchia disse: - Non è colpa dei tedeschi? - Non è colpa dei tedeschi, - dissi. - I tedeschi hanno soltanto sfasciato la baracca, tolto il credito ai padroni di prima. Questa guerra è più grossa di quello che sembra. Adesso è andata che la gente ha veduto scappare quelli che prima comandavano, e non la tiene più nessuno. Ma, fate attenzione, non ce l'ha coi tedeschi, non soltanto con loro: ce l'ha coi padroni di prima. Non è una guerra di soldati, che domani può anche finire; è la guerra dei poveri, la guerra dei disperati contro la fame, la miseria, la prigione, lo schifo. ... Adesso che abbiamo di nuovo i fascisti, ricominciano a muoversi, e scapperanno in montagna, finiranno in prigione. È adesso che comincia la guerra, quella vera, dei disperati. E si capisce. Bisogna dir grazie ai tedeschi", p. 66.

rulers, and by the revelation that this war is foremost a civil war, Corrado personifies a new form of intellectual, and discloses, both to the characters of the story and the reader, a new version of the latest events.

In this moment, Corrado is no longer a traditional intellectual, as conceptualized by Gramsci, but is transformed, even if temporarily, into an organic intellectual. According to Gramsci, intellectuals fall into two groups, traditional and organic. The traditional intellectual can be identified with scholars, scientists, theorists, philosophers etc. and represent “an historical continuity”⁷⁵ even among the different social and political changes. The organic intellectual, on the other hand, emerges from a particular social class but is less distinguished by his profession than by his alliances and activism. His activity and function, by directing new ideas and aspirations, help to bring “new modes of thoughts”⁷⁶. He spends time with the locals, and they gradually accept his presence. Moreover, his words create an impact on them and help to revise the meaning of their subversive actions.

Nevertheless, Corrado’s awareness and intellectual support for the role of the partisans and peasants in the Resistance do not motivate him to participate in the movement. His role of organic intellectual does not evolve, and Corrado refuses to engage with the group. On the other hand, his introverted and detached nature finds, yet again, a direct connection with the landscape and the hills, protagonists with him until the conclusion of the novel. Corrado is walking

⁷⁵ Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, edited and trans. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. (New York: International Publishers, 1997), p.7

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 9.

back to his native house in the area of the Langhe. The hills of the Langhe exemplify what this land means and how it affects the protagonist.

There were no villages in sight, only farmsteads on wild, chalky slopes. To reach any one of them, I should have had to climb up steep pathways beneath low, sultry clouds. I examined closely the lineaments of the hillcrests, their ruggedness, their vegetation, the stretches of ground that offered no cover. The colors, the forms, the very smell of the sultry air were known and familiar to me; although I had never been in that actual spot before, I was walking in a cloud of memories. Some of the stunted and twisted fig trees seemed like those at home and reminded me of the one by the gate behind the well. I shall be at Belbo before nightfall, I said to myself.⁷⁷

In this paragraph, nature overpowers human presence, a condition also experienced by the partisans in these mountains and valleys during the Resistance. Both landscape and climate conditions, a physical and ethereal natural presence, characterize this familiar surrounding, and give Corrado the assurance that he will arrive at his destination by the end of the day. There is no real urban setting in the valley, but only sporadic signs of farmers, a presence Corrado is trying to associate with familiar communities, places and spaces. It is the beginning of summer, and the muggy weather seems to bring the land and the sky closer, communicating almost a sense of oppression. Round hills and deep valleys, mostly parallel with each other, whose sides are dug by streams, characterize “the lineaments of the hillcrests” and the landscape of the Langhe.

⁷⁷ Pavese, *The House on the Hill*, p. 170. The Italian version reads, “Non si vedevano paesi, solamente cascine sui versanti selvosi e calcinati. Per raggiungerne qualcuna avrei dovuto divulgarmi sui sentieri rapidi, nell’afa delle nuvole basse. Scrutavo attento i lineamenti delle creste, gli anfratti, le piante, le distese scoperte. I colori, le forme, il sentore stesso dell’afa, mi erano noti e familiari; in quei luoghi non ero mai stato, eppure camminavo in una nube di ricordi. Certe piante di fico contorte, modeste, mi sembravano quella di casa, del cancello dietro il pozzo. Prima di notte, mi dicevo, sono a Belbo”, p 109.

Its land changes color and properties according to the latitude, creating a diversified flora and a territory rich for many different cultures. This bioregion is familiar to Corrado who, although he has no personal experience in the specific area, recognizes the colors, shapes, vegetation and smells. The clouds in this paragraph are not only an overwhelming atmospheric presence, but also take the shape of the protagonist's memories connecting and confusing, as in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, past and present. The specific reference to the fig tree creates a connection with the narrator's land and accustomed places, and is a sign of his proximity to his final destination. The harsh reality of the war soon reappears when Corrado notices the ruins of a bombed house. The author highlights once more the intimate interconnection of humans and land in a crude image of the land nurtured by human's vital force, "How much blood, I wondered, had already bathed these lands, these vineyards".⁷⁸

Pavese's "destitute's war"⁷⁹ against hunger and oppression and a beginning of social and political consciousness rising are also well chronicled by Viganò's character. Agnese is a poor woman peasant who "spontaneously" finds herself part of the partisans' fight. Her hatred and resentment toward the Germans and the fascists are due to the personal abuse she and her husband have suffered. Within this context, in fact, Agnese's character creates points of connection between various unrepresented realities, by both the State and the intellectual strata. Agnese's qualities and features are very different from

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 171. The Italian version reads, "Quanto sangue, mi chiesi, ha già bagnato queste terre, queste vigne", p. 109.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 106.

Corrado's. She is a woman and a peasant, two subaltern realities within the context of the war and Italian history and culture⁸⁰. These twofold elements are constantly present in the protagonist's personality as well as in the development of the story, giving us further clues on how women and peasants contributed to the partisan fight.

With her article "The Story of Agnese is not a Fantasy", appearing in the communist party newspaper "L'Unità" soon after the publication of the novel, Viganò makes a clear connection between her fictional representation of Agnese and the testimony of rural women partisans whose role was so important in the Resistance.⁸¹ In the Italian literary panorama, *L'Agnese va a morire* is the only Resistance novel depicting a peasant woman as protagonist. Her character matures, and marks the beginning of a new political awareness of the peasantry. Historians, soon after the war, were engaged in helping to shape a new national identity and were focused more on the political aspect of the partisans' role within the Resistance movement. Scholars did not acknowledge the peasant's presence within the movement until several years later.

Embracing the antifascist movement, for many women living in the countryside and in the mountains, was the direct consequence of witnessing years of tyranny suffered by their families, first from the fascists and later from

⁸⁰ Ruberto, Laura. "La contadina si ribella: Gendered Resistance in *L'Agnese va a morire*". *Romance Languages Annual* 9, (1997). Ruberto writes, "Agnese's story upsets the dominant Resistance literature and brings to light the complicated position of women and peasants in Italian culture", 328.

⁸¹ The article "La storia di Agnese non è una fantasia", published by "L'Unità", the newspaper founded by Gramsci, on November 17, 1949, is included in the 1994 Einaudi edition of *L'Agnese va a morire*.

the German occupiers.⁸² Agnese's involvement with the Italian Resistance, in fact, happens only after her husband Palita is captured and dies in the German camp. The group of communist partisans, with whom Palita is previously involved, asks Agnese to participate initially as a "staffetta", carrying messages or items, on behalf of the partisans, between different encampments. "Staffetta" is a term that, we see later in the novel, is specifically used to address women who volunteered, and worked in incognito, to help the partisans. According to Anna Bravo, this term vaguely generalizes the role women covered outside their usual domestic domain⁸³. As Bravo points out, it is important to acknowledge the important and often essential role the "staffetta" played, and the fact that, within the Resistance movement, women's work was considered with respect and admiration. In an interview with Nuto Revelli, Tersiglia Fenoglio Oppedisano, a peasant from the Langhe, in Piedmont, recalls her experience as staffetta and admits that in her group, she was considered more as a sister, part of the family, than a woman⁸⁴. "In the group I was not a woman but a sister. There were no rude jokes, and no one would touch me. If a man had offended me he would have been attacked by ten of them. I was surrounded by a familiar environment. I was sleeping among them, shoulder to shoulder, I was the only girl of the faction".⁸⁵ Although the number of men participating in the resistance

⁸² Albanese, Francesco, et al. *Le campagne italiane e la resistenza*, 164.

⁸³ Anna Bravo, "Resistenza civile" in *Dizionario della Resistenza*, edited by Enzo Collotti, Renato Sandri and Frediano Sessi (Torino: Einaudi, 2000) Vol. I of II, p. 272

⁸⁴ Nuto Revelli, *Il mondo dei vinti*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1977), p. 404.

⁸⁵ Ibid. "In banda non ero una donna ma una sorella. Niente scherzi di cattivo gusto, non uno che mi sfiorasse. Se uno mi avesse offesa gli sarebbero volati in dieci addosso, ero

outnumbered the women, Tersiglia is appreciated and valued for her work and contribution in the partisan movement, and was as equally respected as any other member of the group.

Agnese's interaction with the partisans is always illustrated by her modest yet steady and courageous participation; her simple attitude never changes, even when her tasks require higher responsibilities. One of her most common replies is, "if I am good at it..."⁸⁶, as to signify that although she has never done anything similar before, she will strive to accomplish her duty. Her practical and realistic sensibility is here combined through a simple yet powerful comment that indicates her loyalty to her group. Although her recurrent comment might be interpreted as sign of lack of self-confidence, I read it as indication of humility and simplicity. Her attitude refers to her perceived lack of experience but, on the other hand, demonstrates her immediate and practical wisdom, revealing an unpretentious honesty that does not allow her to make false claims. Agnese displays this practical aspect of her nature on several occasions, which is noticed and highlighted by the companions in various parts of the novel. When "the Commander" reads aloud a letter ordering the group to dissolve until springtime, the partisans start complaining and ask Agnese's opinion, but her reply is very short and direct, "What do you say, mama Agnese? – I don't understand anything, - she answered, removing the pan from the fire, – but one does what has to be done. Agnese was right. 'One does what has to be done'. She was

circondato da un ambiente di famiglia. Dormivo con loro, spalla a spalla, ero l'unica ragazza della formazione".

⁸⁶ Renata Viganò, *L'Agnese va a a morire*, p. 26. Original text: "se sono buona..."

used to counting very little on others. All her life, more than fifty years, she had managed on her own".⁸⁷ Addressed and seen as a mother, she is indeed a caring, trustworthy and nurturing figure. While her political awareness is just starting to emerge, she does not participate in the group's discussion. Her participation is mainly marked by her immediate actions rather than her verbal comments, and is due to her lifelong experience of having to count solely on herself, a feature very common in the peasant culture of women. On the other hand, Agnese's participation in the Resistance offers the partisans a nurturing and motherly presence and most importantly, by being connected with the local territory and inhabitants, increases the chances for the success of their plans.

Through a motherly instinct, Agnese is concerned about the primary needs of the partisans as if they were part of her family. Agnese's ways of portraying her care toward her men is mostly manifested through food and clothing. Partisans live in the open air and are subjected to atmospheric conditions: the humidity of the rivers, the cold wind and the snow of the winter. On different occasions as the winter approaches, Agnese engages in weaving wool to make socks, sweaters, gloves or hats for the partisans. Her ability to knit is indirectly related to women's traditional activities in weaving and spinning. All peasant women, especially in the center and north of Italy, are expected to have these skills if they want to be considered good candidates for marriage.

⁸⁷ Viganò, *L'Agnese va a morire*, p. 142. "Tu cosa ne dici, mamma Agnese? – lo non capisco niente, - rispose lei, levando dal fuoco la padella, - ma quello che c'e' da fare, si fa. Aveva ragione l'Agnese. "Quello che c'e' da fare, si fa". Lei era abituata a contare poco sugli altri. Da tutta la sua vita, più di cinquant'anni, si arrangiava da sola."

Nuto Revelli's large collection of testimonies from peasants who lived from the beginning of the twentieth century until WWII, represents a valuable point of reference from below that can help to understand in detail the living conditions, atmosphere, and hardships women suffered. Wintertime would not allow the opportunity to work in the fields, so women's work with spinning represented the main source of economic income during this period. Pietro Balsamo remembers his youth in poverty, and how women's activity in winter sustained the whole family, "The youngsters were vigilant and controlled if the girls were working, if they were spinning. The lazy girl would not find a groom. "We will all die of hunger, the youngster would think".⁸⁸ Although the division and duties of gender roles within the family structure and society were a strong reality in all Italian culture, during the period of the resistance these were often put aside.

Marisa Ombra's insights and testimony about her experience as a partisan woman confirm the plausibility of Agnese's character, "For the first time in the Resistance we women did not feel like mothers or daughters. Rather people, along with other people, were doing something that simply had to be done. And this work was considered with a lot of respect."⁸⁹ Ombra's personal experience clarifies Viganò's choice of portraying Agnese as a childless woman. This characteristic echoes a common reality among many partisan women

⁸⁸Nuto Revelli, *Il mondo dei vinti*, p.6. "I giovani 'ndavu 'n via (andavano in veglia), a controllare se le ragazze lavoravano, se filavano. La ragazza pigra non trovava a sposarsi. "Moriemo tutti di fame", pensava il giovane"

⁸⁹ *Contadini e partigiani*, p. 375. "Nella Resistenza noi donne per la prima volta non ci siamo sentite madri, né figlie. Piuttosto persone che con altre persone stavano facendo qualcosa che semplicemente andava fatto. E questo nostro fare era considerato con molto rispetto".

without depriving the character of their feminine qualities. What emerges is not a division among genders, but the necessity of acting together and being united toward a common interest, the fight against the fascists, and the expulsion of the Germans from the Italian territory. Ombra's acknowledgment of the practical aspect in women is very much alive in Agnese. She constantly displays it together with the spirit of sacrifice and dedication, qualities often present in peasants.

Although Sereni defines the collaboration between partisans and peasants as a patriotic battle to expel the Germans from Italy⁹⁰, the patriotic trait in the peasants, as well as in Agnese, can be considered a form of organic patriotism from below. If we want to consider it patriotism, as Sereni affirmed, it grew without the support of any specific ideological or political structure, and was mainly contingent on practical situations or personal experiences. The main goal, for the peasants, was the protection of the land, and only secondarily, the country. Pina Palma rightly observes that the lack of ideology in Agnese's character is due to the gender separation⁹¹. Although her remark reflects a century-old historical gender condition present in Italy until the second half of the twentieth century, Agnese's lack of political awareness is mainly due to the peasants' social and political isolation caused by historical oppression and geographical separation. Many of the testimonies gathered by Revelli disclose an attitude similar to Agnese's. Peasants' choice to support the partisans is not

⁹⁰ Albanese, Francesco, et al. *Le campagne italiane e la resistenza*, p. 194.

⁹¹ Pina Palma, "Food in War, L'Agnese va a morire" in *NEMLA Italian Studies*, vol. 25-26, 2001, p. 65.

dictated by some patriotic idea or national pride, but is accompanied by “an instinctive choice, more human than political”.⁹²

The words of Tersiglia Fenoglio Oppedisano, a woman peasant, stress peasants’ and women’s spontaneity and promptness in choosing a side, “If [the partisans] told me: “shoot yourself out of a cannon”, I would have shot myself out of a cannon. I was sure they were on the right side. I understood little or nothing about politics, I did not know what class struggle was. But I felt a great admiration toward my masters, I never met such men.”⁹³ Oppedisano’s dedication and devotion to the partisan comes from a personal and human perspective; she learns about their political orientation by experiencing partisans’ actions and discussions. She fully trusts, without any condition or reserve, the people she works with and her partisan group. She is ready to die for them. She is not fighting for any specific ideology while she is risking her life during the Resistance.

Similarly, Agnese understands the spirit behind the actions of “the commander” and the partisans only toward the end of the novel. Since the beginning, her commitment has been displayed through her immediate and instinctive actions. She is first a “staffetta”, she later kills the German soldier Kurt, and finally she fully engages in the partisans’ life. We never hear Agnese

⁹² Revelli, *Il mondo dei vinti*, “una scelta istintiva, con una scelta più umana che politica”, CXVII.

⁹³ Ibid, p. 405. “Mi avessero detto: ‘Fatti sparare in un cannone’, io mi sarei fatta sparare da un cannone. Ero sicura che erano dalla parte giusta. Avevo capito poco o niente di politica, non sapevo che cosa fosse la lotta di classe. Ma provavo una grande ammirazione nei confronti di quei miei maestri, non avevo mai incontrato degli uomini così”.

justifying or explaining her actions with any higher purpose than her hatred for the Germans and the fascists, a hatred conditioned by the death of her husband. It is only after having lived for months in direct contact with the partisans that Agnese starts acquiring a form of political awareness and class-consciousness. Agnese reveals a new level of understanding when, thinking of the time her husband would meet with the communist companions, shares, “Now, on the other hand, she could talk with Palita. She knew much more. She understood what in the past she would call “men’s business”, the party, the love for the party, and that one could get killed to support a beautiful idea, an instinctive power, to solve all the dark mysteries, that begin in childhood and end when old people die”.⁹⁴

Peasants’ support knew no boundaries once they decided to protect and help the partisans. This attitude is confirmed both in the fictional character of Agnese, as analyzed by the peasants’ testimonies in chapter three. After Palita’s death, Agnese embraces her husband’s mission and is ready to give up her life in order to protect the partisans’ mission. Salvemini’s comment fully portrays the degree of the peasants’ dedication: “To assist a partisan was to confront a death sentence. Even when the partisan was a no good...the peasant did not denounce him, because, ... for as much as he would steal his chickens, for as much as he would commit even worse abuses, he was serving a worthy cause.

⁹⁴ Viganò, L’Agnese va a morire, p.166. “Adesso, invece, potrebbe parlare con Palita. Sapeva molto di più. Capiva quello che allora chiamava “cose da uomini”, il partito, l’amore per il partito, e che ci si potesse anche fare ammazzare per sostenere un’idea bella, una forza istintiva, per risolvere tutti gli oscuri perché, che cominciano nei bambini e finiscono nei vecchi quando muoiono”

Without the assistance of the rural Italians, the partisan movement would have not been possible.”⁹⁵

As Quazza points out, it is important to examine the social character of the Resistance and also to consider it, especially after the events of September 8th, as a mass movement that saw the participation of people from all kinds of social origins and conditions.⁹⁶ From this perspective, the literary production of the Resistance, in the years following the war, represented the only channel through which the role of the rural people was officially acknowledged and represented.

Agnese is an unpretentious peasant woman whose husband’s tragic death, and the horrors of the war, naturally guide her to join the partisans. However, her figure embodies the destiny and reality not only of women, but also of many civilians during the war. In Viganò’s article we learn, in fact, that the character of Agnese was inspired by her acquaintance with a woman called Agnese, a peasant from the valleys between Ferrara and Ravenna, and who lived for a while in her partisan group. In Viganò’s account, the general atmosphere that pervaded the resistance stands out, an “antiheroic, anti-dramatic, and domestic”⁹⁷ climate that pervades the life of everyone, from the peasant, to the fugitive, to the citizen, and the intellectual. This climate is

⁹⁵ Gaetano Salvemini, *Scritti sul fascismo*, vol. III (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1974), p. 428.

“Assistere un partigiano era sfidare una condanna a morte. Anche quando il partigiano era un poco di buono ... il contadino non lo denunciò, perché, ... per quanto gli portasse via i polli, per quanto commettesse prepotenze anche peggiori, serviva una causa degna di essere servita. Senza l’assistenza dei rurali italiani il movimento partigiano non sarebbe stato possibile”.

⁹⁶ Quazza, Guido. *Resistenza e storia d’Italia: problemi e ipotesi di ricerca*. (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1976), p. 109.

⁹⁷ Viganò, *L’Agnese va a morire*, p. 245. “antieroico, antidrammatico, casalingo e domestico”.

reproduced in both Pavese and Viganò's novels, and is particularly characteristic of peasant culture, a culture that, in the euphoric economic boom of the sixties, was once again gradually put aside.

Thirty years after the war, in the seventies, mindful of how this new phase of Italian industrialization is reducing the rural population, Nuto Revelli decides to tape record the voices and memories of the last generations of peasants living in the area of Cuneo, in Piedmont. Some of these recordings have been transcribed, leaving us the most authentic and valuable testimonies of the peasants from the mountains, countryside and hills of Piedmont. Beginning in the sixties, certain industries relocated their facilities. As examples, Michelin moved its tire factory to the countryside of Cuneo, and Ferrero moved its chocolate factory to the countryside of Alba. Their purpose was to attract a young peasant labor force that, enchanted by promises from these industrial giants, abandoned their native valleys where the economy was still based on elemental, but vital, rural activities. Without young people, the rural world progressively witnessed its own disappearance. Many families left their villages after the war because of the lack of a work force. The landscape, once characterized by small landowners, shepherds, and vineyards, receded to desolated land. "Ten kilometers from Cuneo, ten kilometers from the modern and sophisticated Michelin, I already meet India, in the hills of Roccasparvera".⁹⁸ The environmental impoverishment, desolation, and lack of infrastructure in the rest of the region are the

⁹⁸ Revelli, *Il mondo dei vinti*, XXVII. "A dieci chilometri da Cuneo, a dieci chilometri dalla Michelin, moderna, sofisticata, incontro già l'India, sulle colline di Roccasparvera".

consequences and realities very much present also in the so-called industrialized north. “In the Valley of Piz, the Pian della Regiana there was a terrestrial paradise, an amazing hollow rich of wild and mighty water springs. Enel sucked all the water at the top, also the water from the small sources. Today Pian della Regina is a dry, dead hollow and its water flows in cement canals.”⁹⁹

Revelli interviewed mainly the older generations as bearers of the traditional knowledge and witnesses of the latest historical and social changes. Giovanna Giavelli, a farmer born in 1886 who lived her life in the mountain village of Ferriere and moved with her family in the seventies to the countryside, comments in response to Revelli’s questions: “Revelli – “What do you think of the mountain?” Giovanna – “I would like to go back. Revelli – “But no one is in Ferriere!” Giovanna – “I would go back to my home. I would be the owner.” Revelli – “What is that you liked so much about Ferriere?” Giovanna – “To work the field, to be in the open air, the good water. Water was wine; it would cleanse you inside. The air, it was like we had wings. Freedom.”¹⁰⁰

Although permeated with nostalgia, Giovanna’s words reflect the feelings of thousands of Italian peasants of the time, but they also echo the historical turn

⁹⁹ Ibid, XXIX. “Nel Vallone del Piz il Pian della Regina era un paradiso terrestre, una conca incredibile ricca di polle d’acqua impetuose, prepotenti. L’Enel ha succhiato tutta l’acqua a monte, proprio tutta, anche l’acqua delle piccole sorgenti. Oggi il Pian della Regina è una conca arida, morta, la sua acqua è nei canali di cemento”.

¹⁰⁰ Film documentary, *Il popolo che manca, The People Who Are Missing*. This dialogue was originally audio recorded by Revelli and it appears in the documentary. “Giovanna – Che mi piacerebbe tornare. Revelli – Ma non c’è più nessuno a Ferriere! Revelli – Cosa pensa della montagna? Giovanna – Io tornerei a casa mia. Sarei padrona di quello. Revelli – Ma cos’è che vi piaceva tanto di Ferriere? Giovanna – Lavorare la campagna, stare all’aria, l’acqua buona. L’acqua era il vino, puliva dentro. L’aria, come avessimo avuto le ali. Libertà”.

marked by the alliance between the partisans and the peasants. Giovanna could, in fact, easily be seen in Viganò or Pavese's novels. Her simplicity can remind us of Agnese, when in rare peaceful moments she contemplates her life and surroundings. Similarly, she could be one of the peasants Corrado meets and talks to in the hills on his return to his parents' home. The way Giovanna uses the word 'freedom' is connected both to her relationship with the territory, and to the attitude many peasants had when fighting against the Germans and the fascists. Freedom is therefore a sign of Giovanna's direct connection with the surroundings through her intimate relationship with the land. Freedom was not so much as an idea, value, or right, but a natural, real and practical way of living, of which, as in WWII and many times before, peasants were deprived.. Freedom was, for peasants, something concrete to fight for during WWII, against external and visible enemies. Freedom was the price to pay, in the new Italy of the economic boom, to support the industrialization process at the expense of the environment, nature, and peasants, who, until a few decades before, still represented the majority of the Italian population.

CHAPTER 2:

A Story of Peasant Resistance: The Cervi Family

At the end of the XIX century, during Italian unification, peasants represented 60% of the Italian population. After less than a century, throughout WWII and the time of Resistance, peasants constituted 52% of the population, and therefore, still represented a majority. At this time, although it was mainly peasants who populated the Italian territory, their presence and influence in prevailing social and political decisions was minimal to non-existent. The partisan movement embodied one of the most significant examples of Italian civil resistance, and was indebted to the presence and support of peasants. As Italy reconsidered its position in the world during the reconstruction of the country at the end of WWI, the peasant presence was finally evident, and acknowledged by historians, politicians and intellectuals as a fundamental element in the outcome of the Resistance movement.

In a 1952 article in the newspaper “Il Mondo”, the historian Gaetano Salvemini claimed emphatically that, “the participation of Italian peasants in the partisan fight is the most important fact in the Italian history of our century”¹⁰¹. The first official acknowledgment of peasant participation in the struggles for

¹⁰¹ Istituto Alcide Cervi, *Le campagne italiane e la Resistenza*, (Bologna: Grafis Edizioni, 1995), 10. The original text is in Italian, the English translation is mine and it reads, “la partecipazione dei contadini italiani alla lotta partigiana è il fatto più importante nella storia italiana del secolo in cui viviamo”.

liberation dated back three years to 1949. Ferruccio Parri, antifascist journalist and later politician, summarized the peasant contribution to the Resistance in an article titled “The Resistance included Peasants”¹⁰²:

Their contribution to the war of liberation in general, particularly those in mountain areas, was noteworthy. The brutality partisans had to endure against the Nazi-fascists forced them to often look for refuge in the countryside, where they were hosted and fraternally assisted by peasants’ families. They harshly paid for this support through innumerable executions and deportations. Nazi and fascist reprisals were, in fact, more severe and bloody in the countryside and the mountains than in urban areas.¹⁰³

By pointing out the support and solidarity of peasants, and the geographical settings where the resistance most frequently took place, Parri officially inaugurated both a shift of focus and interest in the peasants, who, until that moment, had been marginalized and mostly forgotten by Italian political forces.

Particularly significant within this context is the story of the Cervi family, peasants from Gattatico in Emilia Romagna, an area between the cities of Reggio Emilia and Parma. All family members were actively involved in the antifascist movement, and were among the first farmers of the area to join the partisans in 1943. Most importantly, the innovative and vanguard visions of

¹⁰² The original title is “La Resistenza fu anche contadina”. The English translation is mine.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 55. “Notevolissimo è stato il contributo che i contadini in genere e specialmente quelli delle zone montane hanno dato alla guerra di liberazione. L’asprezza che la lotta dei partigiani continuamente sostenevano contro i nazi-fascisti li costringeva spesso a cercare rifugio nelle campagne dove essi venivano accolti e fraternamente assistiti dalle famiglie dei contadini. Essi hanno pagato duramente questa assistenza con innumerevoli fucilazioni e deportazioni. Le rappresaglie dei nazisti e dei fascisti sono state molto più dure, infatti, e sanguinose, nelle campagne e nelle montagne, che nei centri urbani”.

farming introduced by the Cervi family helped transform their surrounding landscape, and both influenced and inaugurated a new understanding of the living dynamics that link land, humans and non-humans.

After the war, the antifascist activities of the Cervi family during WWII became part of the political agenda of the Italian Communist Party (PCI). This agenda served as an important model to the spread of communist values throughout the population. In those years, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) enjoyed a strong influence and worked toward maintaining and increasing that influence in all social strata. As the ex partisan journalist and member of the Communist party, Sandro Curzi, emphasized in his interview with Eva Lucenti in 2004, it was during this time that the communist party “re-discovered” and engaged the writings of Antonio Gramsci, Marxist theoretician, with the purpose of reaching the population at large and the subaltern classes.¹⁰⁴

In his article “Workers and Peasants” published in 1919 in *L’Ordine Nuovo*, Gramsci considered the peasants’ and workers’ situation in order to reflect on the economic and social conditions of Italy after WWI, as well as upon the possibilities for a new proletarian revolution. Gramsci’s observations help us to understand Alcide Cervi as a model of action for his sons, and to shed light on the post WWII Italian communist party’s choice to evoke Gramsci and focus on the consensus among the peasants in their political propaganda. In the first part of the article, Gramsci analyzed the historical conditions of backwardness and

¹⁰⁴ Eva Lucenti, *I fratelli Cervi nascita di un mito*, Istituto Alcide Cervi. Annali 27-28, 2005-2006. (Reggio Emilia: Tecnograf S.p.A.), 236.

underdevelopment of the peasant, especially in the South of Italy. Toward the end of the article, he focused on the potential of including, and creating active participants of the peasant masses within the new communist revolution. He states:

Thusly organized, the peasants will become an element of order and progress; abandoned to themselves, in the impossibility of taking systematic and disciplined action, they will become a formless commotion, a chaotic disorder of exasperate passions to the point of the most cruel barbarism from the unheard of suffering that are more and more frighteningly looming. [...] It is absolutely necessary to join the city and the countryside, inspire institutions of poor peasants in the countryside on which the socialist State can be founded and developed, through which it will be possible for the socialist State to promote the introduction of machinery and determine the grand process of transformation of agrarian economy¹⁰⁵.

Within this logic, it is clear that the 1955 publication of Alcide Cervi's biography, *I miei sette figli* (My Seven Sons), edited by journalist and member of the PCI, Renato Nicolai, became part and parcel of an ideologically driven propaganda campaign, organized by the party to reach people by using the story of one of their own, in which they might recognize themselves.

Nevertheless, while the ideological and political aspect cannot be discounted, my intention is to shift the focus away from the family as being considered a symbol of the Resistance in ideological and political terms. Rather, in this chapter my intention is to revisit their story as farmers, including their relationship to their land as conveyed by the biography, and to the consideration of that , in and of itself, as a form and act of resistance. As both Calvino's

¹⁰⁵ Antonio Gramsci. "Workers and Peasants (from *L'Ordine nuovo*, Aug. 2, 1919) in *The Southern Question*. Translated by Pasquale Verdichio. Ms in progress. pg. 4.

articles, published in 1953 in the Italian communist newspaper “L’Unità” on the Cervi family underscore, and the biography published in 1955 testifies, the Cervi family was the first to level the land to improve its fertility and maximize production. The peasant family backgrounds and labor, as well as the agricultural history of the area, are important testimonies to how the land was lived upon and experienced, and how humans and surrounding environments were deeply intertwined. In the following pages of this chapter, I will address how the territory of Emilia Romagna contributed to shaping the story and choices of the Cervi family and, on the other hand, how both the farm work, and the dedication of this family toward the land they cultivated, participated in shaping the landscape of the area.

It was Alcide Cervi, in both Calvino’s articles and the memoir, who inspired the writing and linguistic style. If writing itself is an intellectual act, how is the organic intellectual, specifically Alcide Cervi, interacting with the hegemonic culture? Who is really speaking, and who is, in reality, using whom? In his famous essay *The Formation of Intellectuals*, Gramsci states, “Every social class, coming into existence on the original basis of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates with itself, organically, one or more groups of intellectuals who give it homogeneity and consciousness of its function, not only in the economic field, but in the social and political field as well: ...”¹⁰⁶. In this

¹⁰⁶ Antonio Gramsci, “The Formation of the Intellectual” in *The Modern Prince and Other Writings*, (New York: New World Paperbacks, 1967), 118. “Ogni gruppo sociale, nascendo sul terreno originario di una funzione essenziale nel mondo della produzione economica, si crea insieme, organicamente, uno o più ceti di intellettuali che gli danno

chapter, Gramsci's idea of the organic intellectual clarifies the relationship between Calvino as representative of a renewed image and role of engaged intellectual, and Alcide Cervi, as the emergence of a peasant figure of the organic intellectual. With the concept of *populismo*, Asor Rosa indicated a shift from a culture of elite to a culture from the people as a calculated ideological maneuver supported by the intellectual class. Along this line, I consider the language used, and episodes narrated, by Alcide Cervi in *I miei sette figli*, through the mediator of Nicolai, as vehicles of resistance that shift the focus from ideological and theoretical purposes, to pragmatic examples and experiences of the life of a peasant family.

2.1. Italo Calvino's Influence In *My Seven Sons*

Italo Calvino is the first to narrate the story of the family, and its role in the Resistance movement, in two articles published respectively in "Patria indipendente" in January 1953, and "L'Unità" in December of the same year. The content of the articles derives from several meetings of the author with the surviving father Alcide Cervi, and some other family members. In these pages, I am focusing mainly on the first article, as the second presents very similar contents and messages, and differs only slightly in style. The simplicity of the language seems to be inspired by the testimonies of the protagonists, and by

omogeneità e consapevolezza della propria funzione non solo nel campo economico, ma anche in quello sociale e politico: ...".

Cervi's farm, the environment where the meetings took place. Calvino roots his story in the land and its protagonists, a peasant family and its sons.

In the first paragraph of the January '53 article, titled "Through Seven Conscious Faces, Our Strenuous Rebirth"¹⁰⁷, the story unfolds in a very direct, yet simple, panoramic style focusing on the place, and the people who lived in that place. In a few lines, we enter a microcosm of reality where the agricultural land is the setting, and the peasants are the agents on this specific slice of land, "Here from this row starts the seven brothers' land"¹⁰⁸. Calvino did not begin by introducing the family members and their story as partisans, but by observing the space in which they live, and the row, the visibility of their work resulting from the family labor in the territory. Nature acquires a specific shape, the row, through the presence and hard work of humans. Calvino is indirectly connecting the century-old human presence in the Italian territory and the landscape as the result of interactions between the two.

Calvino uses the row as an example of the methods peasants found in which to use space and nature in the most economic yet fruitful possible way. The row consisted mainly of elms and rural maples trees, equally distanced, upon which farmers would grow grapevines. It characterized, then and today, the landscape of the Po Valley in the region of Emilia Romagna. The row is, in fact, part of the "piantata padana" and this typical arrangement of trees had multiple

¹⁰⁷ The original title is "Nei sette volti consapevoli la nostra faticosa rinascita". The English translation is mine.

¹⁰⁸ Italo Calvino, "Nei sette volti consapevoli la nostra faticosa rinascita", 3. The English translation of this article, from now on, is mine. The Italian article says, "Qui da questo filare comincia la terra dei sette fratelli".

agricultural advantages. The leaves from the trees were integrated in the bovines' diet, and the vertical trunks of the trees, besides being support for the vines, allowed enough space to cultivate the surrounding land. The main source of sustenance for the Cervi family was bovine milk production, along with the family's cultivation of grass.

Mountains, hills, plains, gulfs and natural basins created a variety of soils, climates, botanical and agricultural domains. Due to its particular stretched out, long, boot shape, Italian territory includes very diverse geographical, soil and climate features. "The hundred agricultural Italies"¹⁰⁹, a phrase coined by Stefano Jacini after a famous 1877 study on the agrarian situation and condition of farmers in Italy¹¹⁰, corresponds to a stronger natural diversity to which humans have adapted and molded different rural cultures. The agricultural and natural landscape furnishes a strategic setting for the resistance movement. Regarding the discourse on Italian resistance, Ernesto Ragionieri rightly affirms:

The hundred agricultural Italies, heritage of centuries of division of the country, did not suddenly disappear: recent studies demonstrated that also in these situations the small owner from Piedmont was not the same as the sharecropper from Tuscany: different were the times of actions in the fight, the intensity of participation and also the guides they choose. But common was, somehow, the inclination that the Resistance imposed on their behavior¹¹¹.

¹⁰⁹ Original, "Le cento Italie agricole".

¹¹⁰ The study Jacini conducted is titled *L'inchiesta agraria e sulle condizioni della classe agricola in Italia*.

¹¹¹ Ernesto Ragionieri, "Dall'unità ad oggi. La storia politica e sociale", in *Storia d'Italia*, vol. IV (Torino: Einaudi, 1976), 2380. English translation is mine. "Le cento Italie agricole, retaggio di secoli di frazionamento del Paese non scomparvero di colpo: gli studi recenti hanno dimostrato che anche in queste circostanze il piccolo proprietario piemontese non fu omologabile al mezzadro toscano, il bracciante della Val Padana non fu la stessa cosa del coltivatore

While the historical, cultural and geographical differences among peasants have been acknowledged, Ragionieri continues to reinforce the ideological aspect of the Resistance as a unifying factor, an aspect which the political forces, post-war intellectual strata, and also later generations, appear to maintain. Notwithstanding the importance of the ideological dimension, the essential role that the landscape, with all its environmental and ecological implications, played in the success of Italian Resistance, and peasant involvement, cannot be underestimated.

Bevilacqua offers an interesting historical interpretation of the Italian agricultural landscape of Ferrara and Reggio Emilia, by connecting the organization of those spaces to the way in which the ancient Roman agrarian colonies were organized. The geometrical shape of the fields corresponds to a rational order of the territory, whereby the different “centuratio” were connected through small roads. Even today the Via Emilia reproduces, in Emilia Romagna, along the agricultural fields, the ancient lines of the Roman “centuratio”¹¹². The row, therefore, connects ancient practices of organizing and shaping the land with more modern agricultural necessities. Additionally, it indirectly evokes the sense of discipline and organizational practices needed for the possible advent of a communist revolution, as predicated by Gramsci in the above-mentioned article in *L'Ordine Nuovo*. In his call to unite worker and peasant forces, Gramsci states,

diretto del Veneto: diversi i momenti di ingresso alla lotta, l'intensità di partecipazione ed anche le guide che si scelsero. Ma comune fu in qualche misura la linea di tendenza che la Resistenza impose nel loro comportamento”.

¹¹² Piero Bevilacqua, *Storia dell'Agricoltura Italiana in Età Contemporanea*, Vol. I. (Venezia: Marsilio, 1989), 12.

“Communist revolution is essentially a problem of organization and discipline”¹¹³. Although it may be challenging to see Calvino’s intent from this perspective, the use of the row fulfills both the need of using a simple visual agricultural example to be seen and understood by peasants, as well as the ideological need of attracting peasant masses, as was envisioned by the communist party soon after WWII.

Calvino knows that the land is a protagonist in the economy of rural life. Before presenting us with the family, the author presents us with their land. The organization of the space offered by the row gives us a very unique image of the area that we can easily picture in our minds when thinking of the Emilia Romagna landscape. By using the row as the subject of his first sentence, Calvino immediately creates a vivid image that relates to the region and all its natural and agricultural characteristics. Furthermore, the row is a distinctive mark of human intervention on nature in the region, and an implicit suggestion that the actions, choices and outcomes of the Cervi family are, directly and indirectly, interwoven with, and influenced by, the territory and landscape, the 'place' where they lived.

Lawrence Buell explains how “Place entails spatial location, entails a spatial container of some sort. But space as against place connotes geometrical or topographical abstraction, whereas place is ‘space to which meaning has been

¹¹³ Antonio Gramsci. "Workers and Peasants (from *L'Ordine nuovo*, Aug. 2, 1919) in *The Southern Question*. Translated by Pasquale Verdicchio. Ms in progress. pg. 4.

ascribed”¹¹⁴. Cervi’s land and farm is the place where all is included: family efforts and labor, as well as ideas of how to improve the land’s cultivation, practices, and experimentations. In a few words, Cervi’s land comprises the whole story of the Cervi family, both in intellectual and ecological terms. After meeting with the surviving farmer and father, Alcide Cervi, Calvino notices how the story of the Cervi family is inseparable from that place, that geographical structure, that region, and more specifically, that farm on which they live and work. The land and the farm, therefore, as well as the labor devoted to working the soil, become essential co-protagonists in telling the story of the family.

After the opening sentence, the first long paragraph of Calvino’s article continues to describe the land and the work performed by each of the seven Cervi brothers. “This plain has been worked by the arms of the seven brothers, these canals, this vineyard, everything around here, has been done by the seven brothers;”¹¹⁵. Calvino’s simple language and the immediacy of its content reproduce certain characteristics of peasant’s spoken language. While Calvino engages with the peasant’s world by writing about the story of the Cervi family, the intervention of Alcide Cervi as an organic intellectual is shown through the use of a literary means, Calvino’s article, to let his story be known from his perspective and experience. The simplicity of the language is coupled with the pragmatic wisdom distinctive of peasant people, and emphasizes the importance

¹¹⁴ Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism. Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 63.

¹¹⁵ Italo Calvino, “Nei sette volti consapevoli la nostra faticosa rinascita”, 3. Original version, “Questa piana sono state le braccia dei sette fratelli a lavorarla, questi canali, questa vigna, ogni cosa qua intorno, l’hanno fatta i sette fratelli;”

of the labor and consistent physical presence in the fields, where the life and prosperity of the land is directly connected, and dependent upon the life and prosperity of the family. By literally focusing on their arms, Calvino stresses the physical labor required to work the land, to work with natural elements, and the physical ability to adjust to possible natural obstacles.

This first long paragraph continues by presenting the farm, identifying the roles each brother covered to keep the farm going, and giving details of the famous night of November 1943, when they were attacked in their home and captured by the fascists. The last sentence of the paragraph returns to the land and once again connects the people to their roots, their place of origin. "The story of the seven Cervi brothers all unfolded here, on this farm, on this land"¹¹⁶. The Cervi farm becomes the symbol and metaphor of Italian peasant life, the deep connection and dependence on the land, as well as the efforts necessary to make it flourish and be fruitful. In addition, the author is also reminding readers of the importance of having the local peasants' support in the Resistance. In simple words, using language easily comprehended and commonly used by over fifty per cent of the Italian population, Calvino is connecting two social and cultural worlds, historically separated and grown distant, those of the intellectual and the peasant.

Once again, the farm and its land are the place and the space where Calvino focuses the next three paragraphs, bonding different generations of the family. The second paragraph refers to the present time, introducing us to the

¹¹⁶ Ibid, "La storia dei sette Cervi si è svolta tutta qui, in questa fattoria, su questa terra."

children of the seven brothers engaged in working the farm, from the boy who is repairing the wagon wheels to the girl who is feeding the chickens. Calvino describes Alcide Cervi lifting hay with the pitchfork, and refers to him as “that short man, solid and knotty as a tree stump”¹¹⁷. The juxtaposition of the human figure and the natural element of the knotty tree creates a powerful and interchangeable image suggesting durability, strength, and power of resistance against human and natural obstacles, but also wisdom and knowledge due to age and endurance in life. Alcide, like a tree stump, has survived all kind of weather and still supports new growth. This analogy is repeated later, in several writings about the family that describe the old man.

Luciano Casali in his introduction to the Alcide Cervi memoir, *I miei sette figli*, refers to Calvino’s use of language in his articles published in 1953 as “almost a people’s language [...] drawn directly from the protagonists’ testimony, from Alcide’s folk tale way of recounting. [...] but it was the same “people’s language” that would distinguish *I miei sette figli* in 1955”¹¹⁸. The concept of *populismo* as discussed by Asor Rosa discloses how Calvino’s writing style functioned. In Calvino’s articles, and in the publication of *I miei sette figli*, the style acts as a political and ideological instrument to reach and open a dialogue with the peasants. Asor Rosa explains the use of popular content in literature in

¹¹⁷ Ibid, “quell’uomo basso e solido e nodoso come un ceppo d’albero è Alcide Cervi”.

¹¹⁸ Renato Nicolai, *I miei sette figli*, (Torino: Einaudi, 2010), XVIII. English translation is mine. The original version says, “un linguaggio quasi popolare [...] tratto direttamente dalla testimonianza dei protagonisti, dal modo di raccontare fabulistico di Alcide. [...] ma si trattava dello stesso “linguaggio popolare” che avrebbe caratterizzato nel 1955 *I miei sette figli*”.

ideological, social and historical terms using the concept of *populismo*¹¹⁹. He traces it historically from the 1800s, Italian Risorgimento, and sees its maximum expression during the Resistance and post-Resistance period. He recognizes, in this last period, the moment in which a “culture from the people” imposes itself, in different artistic, literary and cultural forms, over a culture from the elite¹²⁰. He states, “Resistance and post-resistance populism is probably the most conscious, the most organized, to an ideological and political level, of all our literary tradition”¹²¹.

Intellectuals such as Pavese, Vittorini, Viganò, Fenoglio, Rigoni Stern, and Calvino, just to name a few, are directly and indirectly involved with the partisan and antifascist organizations. They realize the Resistance is a movement born from the people, whose common objectives are the re-establishment of basic social values and rights, as the partisan faction *Giustizia e Libertà* (Justice and Freedom) itself indicates. Both the intellectual and political classes understood that to reach the people, culture has to come from the people. The fame already attained by Calvino motivated Renato Nicolai to reiterate both his language style, and the episode cited as a formula for the ideological project of the PCI, to successfully reach the people who ensured the success of the party within the post-war Italian political panorama.

¹¹⁹ Alberto Asor Rosa, *Scrittori e popolo. Il populismo nella letteratura italiana contemporanea*, (Roma: Savelli, 1976), 153.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid. English translation is mine. The original version says, “... il populismo resistenziale e post-resistenziale è probabilmente il più consapevole, il più “organizzato”, al livello ideologico e politico, di tutta la nostra tradizione letteraria, ...”.

Nevertheless Calvino is not new to this style. In 1947, he published *The Path to the Spider's Nest*, one of the first novels of the Resistance, whose story revolves around the experience of a boy with the partisans in the mountains of Liguria. In this novel the author uses very simple, young and playful language. Calvino, in the remarkable presentation of the novel written in 1964, remembers, having just survived the war, that there was a possibility of bridging the gap between people of different levels of education. The stories of the war and the Resistance, according to the writer, “established an immediate communication between the writer and his public: you were face-to-face, equal, loaded with stories to tell, ...”¹²².

Although the Resistance had already established its ideological, political and social significance, the literary explosion of the period following World War II was, according to the Calvino, driven by the need to include the people who experienced, lived and survived the war. It was an existential, physiological, collective manifestation, and above all, a necessity. Calvino continues explaining that the Resistance and the war are the common ground of shared memories and practices, “this was my experience, my experience multiplied by the experience of others”¹²³. The author recognizes the personal and civil aspect of it, adding a more intimate tone to the ideological message of the movement. Likewise, the articles written about the Cervi family carry a similar drive. The

¹²² Italo Calvino. *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*. 6th ed. (Cles (TN): Oscar Mondadori, 2012), vi. English translation is mine. The original version says, “...stabiliva un’immediatezza di comunicazione tra lo scrittore e il suo pubblico: si era faccia a faccia, alla pari, carichi di storie da raccontare, ...”

¹²³ Ibid, xx. “...era questa la mia esperienza, la mia esperienza moltiplicata per l’esperienza degli altri.”

story of the seven brothers, their sacrifice and commitment, first toward their land and later against fascism, spoke to the hearts of people in a very simple and immediate language with which many, regardless of their social status, could recognize and identify.

Furthermore, Calvino's articles paved the road to create what several scholars commonly refer to as the myth of the Cervi family. The title of the first article, " Through Seven Conscious Faces, Our Strenuous Rebirth" creates a similarity between the brothers and the time after the war. By pointing to their faces, Calvino sets an inspiring model and, at the same time, builds the foundation for the myth of the family. The recent tragic and heroic past, and the difficult and nevertheless-full-of-possibilities present, are both included in this short, incisive title and statement. The adjective used to describe the faces of seven brothers, who died fighting fascism and the German occupation, not only refers to the bravery and strength with which they faced their destiny, but also to the sense of conscious sacrifice of the entire social category of peasants and farmers, and the ideals and values standing behind it. On the other hand, the adjective "strenuous" used in the second part of the title, refers to the whole country and the surviving members of the Cervi family. Alcide Cervi is the one who, once again, is guiding the family and directing the work on the farm. His testimony becomes a symbol of resistance and endurance, both for the family and for the country.

2.2. From Sharecroppers to Small Landowners

At the end of the nineteenth century, Italy was exclusively a peasant country, and its economy still followed a feudal organization controlled by the agrarian bourgeoisie. Industrial scale cultivation of grains started to penetrate Italian rural economy, and the law on “*macinato*”, approved in 1868, enforced new taxes on grain in order to abolish the local market in favor of a new national market. The dissatisfaction and hunger the new law imposed upon the already fragile economy of small farmers and peasant families pushed them to revolt against the new law. Emilia Romagna, besides being the first region where capitalism arrived in the fields, became the epicenter of the peasants’ insurrection.

Alcide Cervi begins his biography by remembering the origin of his family as sharecropper farmers, as well as how they participated in the fight against the law on “*macinato*”¹²⁴. Although Cervi does not spend much time detailing his family battles at the dawning of the unification of Italy, the attitude of the Alcide family resistance is an epiphany of the choices his sons will make during the German occupation and, on a larger scale, highlights the crucial role the region of Emilia Romagna already plays within the Italian farming economy and communist ideology.

From the end of the eighteenth century until the beginning of the twentieth century, sharecropping was one of the most common realities in the rural social structure of Emilia Romagna. That structure, inherited by the feudal system,

¹²⁴ Renato Nicolai, *I miei sette figli*, 10.

mainly consisted of a contract between the landlord, usually of noble origins and owner of large extensions of land, and a farming family who committed to work the land and to share the crops with the landlord. Sharecropping did not offer farmers real possibilities to improve their living conditions or emerge from poverty, since they were always bound to, and dependent upon, the landlord. According to Emilio Sereni, the subjugation of the sharecropper to the landlord was even “more humiliating, and onerous than the Sicilian “*metatiere*” – harvester – or the roman colonist”¹²⁵ and, as he explains, there was a static relationship between the peasant family, “the colonic family”¹²⁶, and the farm. Sereni stresses that the private life of each sharecropper family member was constantly under the control and supervision of the landlord since either they were not allowed, or needed permission, to perform any kind of work outside his property¹²⁷.

In addition, most of the time, landlords did not live on the property, and made arbitrary decisions about what to cultivate and how to use the land, even if their knowledge about agricultural techniques was very poor or non-existent. This kind of control over farm families and the land kept the life of farmers very stagnant, and any kind of agricultural advancement was almost impossible. In cases where a landlord was not living on the farm, the sharecropper dealt with a leaseholder that did live on the farm and imposed a very severe contract and

¹²⁵ Emilio Sereni, *Il capitalismo nelle campagne (1860-1900)*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1947 and 1968), 180. English translation is mine.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

form of control. On this matter, Alcide Cervi remembers, “the agreement of sharecropping was a robbery, you would sign an agreement but then there were so many other clauses asking for more that there was nothing left”.¹²⁸ Often, the sharecropper was responsible for the expenses of agricultural improvements which imposed heavy burdens on their fragile income, and made almost impossible any economic improvement, much less the possibility of becoming independent.

As mentioned, the reality of sharecropping in central Italy lasted until the first half of the twentieth century, and created a delay in the development of independent agricultural systems. Scholars often pointed out that, although sharecroppers’ living conditions were harsh and miserable, they never really organized to rebel against this system. Sergio Anselmi justified this behavior by referring to the fact that sharecropping guaranteed food, a place to stay for the family, and the possibility of creating sporadic personal income by selling, when possible, handcrafted or extra crop production¹²⁹. According to Anselmi, being able to cover the basic human needs conspired to keep alive the semi-slave relationship with the landlord in central Italy until the end of World War II.

Notwithstanding the generally unfavorable subsistence for the sharecroppers, Anselmi notes that certain geographical features, such as the plains and square fields, connected peasants from different areas, and helped to

¹²⁸ Renato Nicolai, *I miei sette figli*, 49. “I patti della mezzadria erano fregaroli, perché il contratto si poteva pure firmare, ma poi c’erano tanti altri nota bene che a forza di togliere non ti rimaneva niente”.

¹²⁹ “Mezzadri e mezzadrie nell’Italia centrale” in *Storia dell’Agricoltura Italiana in Età Contemporanea*, edited by Piero Bevilacqua. (Venezia: Marsilio, Vol. II, 1989), 224.

develop the grain, meat, and silk markets¹³⁰. These marginal forms of local economy guaranteed a steady, even if small, income to peasant families still living under the conditions of sharecroppers. The possibility of some economic income was, according to the scholar, the reason sharecropping lasted so long. On the other hand, Fabrizio Spaggiari finds a possible answer in the extreme dependence on the land. To find land to cultivate was essential for a farmer; one year without land meant the end of the sharecropper because all his capital would be lost¹³¹: livestock, seeds, and agricultural instruments. This is the reason, according to Spaggiari, sharecroppers often accepted infamous contracts with the landlord or the lessor.

Nevertheless, the story of the Cervi family illustrates an example of how pressure from the landlord and the level of discontentment became so unbearable that peasants, thanks to their qualities of hard work and sacrifice spent in the fields, as well as their knowledge of the land and harvesting, managed to gain independence and were able to change their condition from sharecroppers into leaseholder. In 1934, after so many transfers from different landowners, the Cervi family is finally able to sign a rental contract for the small farm of Campi Rossi, in Gattatico, whose poor conditions made it, until then, impossible to cultivate the land in a profitable manner. The value of the shift between sharecropper and leaseholder resided, as we will see later, in economic

¹³⁰ Ibid, 225.

¹³¹ Fabrizio Spaggiari. "Dalla Restaurazione all'Unità d'Italia fra Campeggine e Santa Vittoria" in *La Terra dei Cervi prima dei Cervi. L'agricoltura a Campeggine dal Settecento al fascismo*, (Reggio Emilia: Amministrazione Provinciale di Reggio Emilia, 1982), 76.

growth and in the ability and courage to experiment with new agricultural techniques which, consequently, improved agricultural conditions for the land and the crops.

In the conclusion of *I miei sette figli*, Alcide Cervi summarizes the fate of his family with words of peasant wisdom that reflect his personality and his pragmatic attitude toward life. His deep connection with, and dependence upon, his work and the land is here clearly displayed, “When they told me about my sons’ death, I said – after a harvest a new one follows –. But the harvest does not come on its own, you have to cultivate and work hard not to spoil it. I raised seven children, now I had to educate eleven grandchildren”¹³². The harvest and his grandchildren both belong to the same natural cycle of life and, for that, they follow the same rules and laws. On the other hand, it also suggests that the past cannot be pondered for too long, and whatever the crops and nature offer, whatever life brings has to be faced with practical knowledge and wisdom based on experience.

The murder of his sons does not follow the natural and harmonious cycle of life, and can be compared to a sudden disruption of it, like a natural disaster, an earthquake, storm or a cyclone. Alcide Cervi was in his seventies during World War II, therefore his death should have eventually preceded that of his children. Yet, the father acknowledges his farming experience, and uses rural

¹³² Renato Nicolai, *I miei sette figli*, 107. “Quando mi dissero della morte dei figli risposi – Dopo un raccolto ne viene un altro –. Ma il raccolto non viene da sé, bisogna coltivare e faticare, perché non vada a male. Avevo cresciuto sette figli, adesso bisognava tirar su undici nipoti”.

metaphors to describe how forces of nature, “after a harvest, a new one follows”¹³³, overpower human life. The image of the harvest illustrates not only his focus on life over death, but also how life in the fields, and natural and seasonal cycles of agriculture, provides the model for moving forward. The fruits obtained from the harvests are the result of human labor and imply fatigue, hard work and the mediation of human relation with nature. The natural world is experienced as the only mean of sustenance, and as such, has to be taken care of through hard work and sacrifice. As a result of this relationship between human and nature, the harvest and the family will grow again. Land and family, nature, human and nonhumans are deeply connected, and are protagonists as well, in the story of Cervi family. On the same note, their story is representative of numerous Italian peasant families in the first half of the twentieth century, and fulfills the political design of speaking to all the peasants who survived the war, and who were engaged in the fight against the fascists.

2.3. The Family

Only families, not single farmers, were selected as sharecroppers. The larger the family, the better, as each family member would mean more labor force to be employed. The family, thus, not only is a vital part of peasant culture, but its organization and unity is essential for survival and possible economic and social advancement. Alcide Cervi's story is a good example of the efforts and time necessary to achieve any form of economic independence. Mindful of how

¹³³ Ibid.

numbers in the family counted, he mentions that he and his brothers had more children than their father, and that he worked as sharecropper in his father's family before finding a new farm to work¹³⁴. He married in 1899 and until 1934 he and his family worked as sharecroppers¹³⁵. Alcide mentions several times that during this period he and his family were forced to do "San Martino"¹³⁶.

San Martino in the Christian calendar falls on November 11. Using the saint's name is an indication, among the area peasants, that describes the time of the year when they would move from one farm to another. Autumn indicates the end of harvesting. The strain in the field is over and the agricultural tools are back in the barn. This is the moment, just before wintertime, to negotiate new contracts and move to new farms, a common practice among the families in Emilia Romagna. The cycle of seasons, the climate conditions, and the products of the land structure the rhythm of life, and the work of each family member around the farm. As animals and nature go into hibernation, the fall is, for the farmer, the time to gather provisions and prepare for cows to give birth. Wintertime is the period for domestic work such as weaving, spinning, and the maintenance of the agricultural equipment.

Family duties are connected to the natural environment, and the family members use this model to shape the organization and division of labor. Alcide Cervi, in fact, associates his sons with the roles they covered on the farm. The distribution of jobs is very similar to that of the sharecropper family. Still following

¹³⁴ Ibid, 10.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 46.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 18.

the patriarchal tradition, the “head farmer” governs the family¹³⁷. The Treccani Enciclopedia traces the origin of the word “vergaro” from the Latin “ververius”, shepherd. In the countryside of Emilia Romagna, the Tuscan area of Maremma and other regions of central Italy, “vergaro” is referred as the person who safeguards the herd of several shepherds, helping them to pass and survive wintertime. Similarly, “vergara” is the woman, not necessarily the wife, but the one responsible in helping the “vergaro” by attending activities on the farm and managing the farmhouse. In the sharecropper family, the oldest son works close to the “azdor”, who is in charge of the storehouse and conducts the plough, the wagon or the harrow. The other sons attend the rest of the duties under the direction of the first son.

The seven brothers, although very united and carrying out responsibilities based on their personal attitudes, replicate the scheme above. Alcide Cervi remembers how Gelindo, the first son, goes with him to look for land to purchase, the one they ended up living on, “Campi Rossi” in Gattatico¹³⁸. Being the oldest, he is the one who accompanies the father to the fair to buy the bull to plow and level the new land¹³⁹. Antenore, the second son, is responsible for the fields and is very serious about his work, “He had his mind fixed on the production of grain, and how to have more of it”¹⁴⁰. Agostino and Ovidio, the fifth and sixth brother,

¹³⁷ Calanca Daniela, et al, *Identikit del Novecento. Conflitti, Trasformazioni Sociali, Stili di Vita*, (Roma: Donzelli editore, 2004), 102. The original offers a list of definitions, “vergaro, massaro, capoccia o azdor, e dalla vergara, massaia, capoccia, azdora”.

¹³⁸ Alcide Cervi, *I miei sette figli*, 48.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 53.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 63. “Lui aveva la mente fissa alla produzione del grano, per come si poteva fare per averne di più.”

look after the cattle and the barn. Renzi relays that this role of the farmers of Emilia Romagna and the area of Campegine was particularly important, since livestock holdings were the real sign of progress, even more than the land¹⁴¹. It is interesting to note that the Cervi family came to own a decent number of cattle, and livestock was an important element in the family economy since they provided a source of income through the production of milk, butter and cheese. Nevertheless, the land and the work related to it remain the main focus of the Alcide's recounting. The landscape and the natural environment are, in fact, included as essential elements of their daily lives, as if family, farm and landscape are not separated but constantly connected, directly or indirectly, and part of the same representation.

While the economy, efforts and time spent in agricultural improvement play a very important role in Alcide's story of the family, when talking of his children, Alcide employs a more intimate and sentimental tone. The first episodes he cites refer to their childhood, their games and their personality. Ettore, the youngest brother, is introduced with a very affectionate tone through the episode when, still as a little boy, he would hide in the grass and ask his brother to find him¹⁴². He was so small, Alcide remembers, that the grass would cover him completely. The grass is the connecting element in Alcide's memory of Ettore when remembering him at the moment of his death, "now the high grass has

¹⁴¹ *La Terra dei Cervi prima dei Cervi. L'Agricoltura a Campeggine dal Settecento al Fascismo*. Edited by Renzo Renzi. (Reggio Emilia: Amministrazione provinciale di Reggio Emilia, 1982), 117.

¹⁴² Cervi, I miei sette figli, 19.

covered you all, and you are not here any longer”¹⁴³. The grass is a symbol of life and death. The grass referred to is actually grain that the young Ettore, guided by his older brothers, learned to mow with the use of a sickle. The grass, recalled through Alcide's image and memory, holds a double purpose of protector and barrier. It is a source of sustenance and is experienced as a playful matter by Ettore, carrying out its function of protector and supporter of life; it covers through this green layer Ettore's body, continuing to connect father and son.

A special role goes to Genoeffa, Alcide's wife. Although the book names her Genoveffa, Genoeffa is her true name, as it appears in later works on the Cervi family. There is no real or clear explanation of this choice by Nicolai, and the Cervi family never mentioned the reason behind it. Adding the consonant “v” helped probably to associate the name with the saint, Genoveffa, and to make it more recognizable for the readers. She is the only female member Alcide cites in his memoir. The three daughters of the family are kept, mainly for cultural reasons, in the shadows, and we don't learn much about them. On the contrary, Genoeffa is mentioned several times acquiring enough depth for us to understand her. She illustrates the role of women within peasant families in the first half of the twentieth century. She is the “azdora”, the female counterpart of the azdor, Alcide; she is the mother and a valid supporter of her sons and always consulted before any decision is taken by the family. She also plays a decisive supporting role during the time of the Resistance. Nicolai, in his contribution to the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of Genoeffa's death, gives a more

¹⁴³ Ibid, 101. “ora l'erba alta ti ha coperto tutto, e non ci sei più”.

politicized and localized image of the “*azdora*” of Emilia Romagna. He notes that she not only manages the family daily life of the farm and offers moral and practical support to the men of the house, but she also expects them to engage in social and political aspects of peasant life with the same commitment they demonstrate in the fields¹⁴⁴. Nicolai points out that peasant women in this area were historically used to witness their husbands' and sons' participation in social struggles, such as the fights against the law on “*macinato*” in 1869, and that they themselves were protagonists in the rice workers' strikes, in the first half of the twentieth century.

Yet, on a micro level, it is important to consider the relevance of the daily routine performed by the “*azdora*”. *Genoeffa* performs all the responsibilities not included in the field, and sometimes those too, which are considered domestic. As *azdora*, she knows the schedule and routine of each family member, and she decides the work and responsibilities of the other women of the house. *Genoeffa* is responsible for the courtyard animals, an essential component of the farm economy, the cultivation of herbs and vegetables around the house. She also performs spinning and weaving jobs. Alcide remembers that, “She did all the blouses, and the handkerchiefs, and the shirts and the socks we wore, for all eight men”¹⁴⁵. It is very plausible her daughters assisted her, although they are not mentioned. Summed up, the labors performed by the *azdora* match and often

¹⁴⁴ *Genoeffa Cocconi. Donna, madre, Contadina* in Quaderni del Museo Cervi, Number 2, November 2004. (Reggio Emilia: Tecnograph, 2004), 69.

¹⁴⁵ Cervi, *I miei sette figli*, 24. “Tutte le camicie, e i fazzoletti, e le maglie e le calze che portavamo le ha fatte lei, per otto maschi”.

exceed the work and responsibilities of the *azdor*. It comprises a tremendous portion of the family economy and knowledge of farming, making this figure much more complex than the contemporary housewife, to which she could be compared.

Last but not least, she is responsible for the education of her children. In the eyes of Alcide, Genoeffa is a sweet and shy woman who has the gift of making prophesies¹⁴⁶. According to Alcide she knows how to tell stories that contain a moral message. She is in fact the mother who educates his children and regularly reads popular stories or literary texts like *I promessi Sposi*, *La Divina Commedia* and *The Bible*. Through these stories, Alcide comments, she taught them to have respect and good principles, such as a sense of justice¹⁴⁷. Reading literary texts is not a common routine in peasant families. Hearing Genoeffa reading books or telling stories is part of the daily routine of the family, “In the winter in the cowshed, with the strong heat from the animal, in the summer in the courtyard, in front of the star-spangled sky”¹⁴⁸. The seasons and the natural environment are intimately connected with the intellectual experience of listening to Genoeffa’s readings. It could be argued that poor economic conditions forced humans and nonhumans to share the same space and places. Ironically, however, this taken- for-granted proximity with the natural elements keeps a balanced relationship of interdependence between humans and the

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 21.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 22.

¹⁴⁸ Ibidem. “D’inverno nella stalla, col caldo forte degli animali, d’estate nel cortile, davanti al cielo stellato”.

natural environment. These two apparently separate worlds are, in Alcide's memoir, constantly connected as integral parts of his both past and present life. These episodes not only deliver new and personal details on the Cervi family, but also help to transform set ideas of a peasant society, perceived often as ignorant and helpless, indirectly transforming the persona of Alcide Cervi, in these moments, from father and farmer, to that of organic intellectual.

2.4. The Land and Campi Rossi

Alcide concludes the description of his children with these words, "This is the story of my children's marriages: the land we cultivated, on the other hand, has a different story, always of growth, of course, but much more strenuous"¹⁴⁹. Again, Alcide creates parallels between his children and the land as if, in his experience, the two are related and progress together. For the farmer Alcide, the land serves human purposes, and its growth is perceived and appreciated in terms of human benefits. When Alcide talks about growth, he is referring to the fertility of the soil. Nevertheless, although he is interested in increasing the productivity of the land for personal purposes, his intervention on the land and landscape is not pure exploitation of this natural resource, and results in creating a beneficial relationship with his land. Humans receive benefits directly from the fruits of the land, while the arid and uncultivated land benefits and becomes richer and more fertile, thanks to human intervention and labor.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 46. "Questa è la storia dei matrimoni dei miei figli: la terra che lavoravamo, invece, ha tutta un'altra storia, sempre di crescita, s'intende, ma più faticosa".

The land, in the exhausting story of Alcide's family, has individual and personal implications as well as objective, social and historical ones. Before arriving at Campi Rossi, in the county of Gattatico, the land where Museo Cervi lives today, the family worked as shareholders on three different farms. The first was in the area of Caprara, called Tagliavino, where they lived with Alcide's brothers; the second was at Olmo, north of Praticello, and the last one in Valle Re, in the area of Praticello. On the map, these farms are located near each other, between the counties of Gattatico and Campegine, the area between Parma and Reggio Emilia, and feature similar landscapes and characteristics. Today, the landscape is flat, but during 1920-1940 the territory was dominated by a gibbous semi arid soil, which prevented systematic, productive, and consistent farming. The transformation of the landscape in this area is connected to the story of the Cervi family.

Alcide and his sons were always interested in the improvement of agricultural techniques. The main reason Alcide cites for all the "San Martino" they endured, the custom of moving from one farm to another, was in fact, due to the tensions created between his family and the landlord. In the Christian calendar, San Martino is on November 11. Using the saint's name is, in the popular peasant culture of Emilia Romagna, a way to indicate the time of the year when farmers would move from one farm to another. This is the moment, just before wintertime, to negotiate new contracts and move to new farms, a common practice among the families in Emilia Romagna. The Cervi family was interested in new forms of cultivating the land, "he liked things that were not

risky”¹⁵⁰, comments Alcide when referring to his landlord(s). Increasing the productivity of the land implies investing the farmer’s personal knowledge, time, energy, and funds toward new ideas and experimentations, a risk the semi feudal system of sharecropping was not prepared for, nor interested in supporting. Among the difficulties of being subdued by all the demands and expectations by the landlord of the sharecropper, Alcide includes the frustration of a farmer not having the freedom to cultivate different crops or utilize better techniques.

The first time Alcide’s sons had the idea to level the soil they were working as sharecroppers. They realized that the uneven terrain made it very difficult to create an efficient irrigation system and, consequently, prevented the growth of forage. According to Alcide’s memory, when they tried to persuade the landlord to invest in their project, the landlord replied “Better an egg today than a chicken tomorrow, I do not want risks, this is it.”¹⁵¹

The animal world is often a source of inspiration for Italian proverbs, and domestic animals such as chickens stand as testimony to the peasant roots of Italian culture and tradition. Although peasant life, culture, and tradition may vary according to the region, historical background, landscape, and courtyard animals like chickens are an essential part of the rural community and economy of the farmer. If, as in art, the iconography of the egg is a symbol of perfection, and is represented, for example, by the architectural shape of domes or in the religious

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 7. “a lui piacevano le cose senza rischio”

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 48. “Meglio un uovo oggi che una gallina domani, io non voglio rischi e basta”. An English version of this Italian proverb would be, “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush”.

paintings, then, in the mentality of the pragmatic peasant, the egg loses its sacredness and becomes a secure source of sustenance for the quotidian economy. In the long term, a flourishing chicken therefore carries potential prosperity. Within the stagnant reality of sharecropping, the landlord preferred to assure a small and immediate profit, rather than investing in a future project that implied risks in the present. In this context, the Cervi family represents, in central Italy, the passage from the old idea of a peasant whose main concern is to cover basic needs, shelter and food, to the new figure of the peasant and farming. The new farmer is using his knowledge and ability to become independent, to experiment with new technologies, and create a relationship with the land, not only as a source of sustenance, but also of profit.

With the reclaiming of the land between the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, the landscape and geographical changes of the Po Valley paved the way for changes to farming economy in the territory, and influenced a more progressive attitude among the peasants. The use of mechanical plowing introduced new forms of technology during the first decades of 1900 and allowed the transformation of swampland into ample cultivated areas that were interrupted, here and there, by stripes of vineyards. The trees along the riverbanks were cut and the land, now cleared, created space to cultivate grass, grain, and forage for cattle.

The focus of the Cervi family's agricultural production is, in fact, forage. As Alcide observes, "A person who knows the agriculture of Emilia Romagna knows that milk is the main production, the 'capital' are the cows. But everything

depends on the forage, it has to be a lot, and of good quality. In this way there is abundant milk, fat and tasty”¹⁵². Alcide’s practical understanding of farming acknowledges the interconnection and interdependence between humans, non-humans and land. Human intervention, the Cervi family’s work, transformed the configuration of the land, the structure of the soil, and increased the capability of cows to produce more milk.

It could be argued that farming techniques, and the introduction of agricultural machinery, ultimately serve human purposes, while the land and the animal world are mere instruments to reach that purpose. Nevertheless, until the economic boom of the sixties, Italy was not yet directed toward industrial agriculture, and the small improvements by farmers on the productivity of the land were based on methods that were also beneficial for the soil. Moreover, the farmer established a relationship of mutual exchange with the land. Although it was an anthropocentric vision of the environment and nature, there was the awareness that humans were not isolated from nature, rather were part of it. Land was not seen and experienced as a commodity, but as the essential living element that contributed to human prosperity. Seen as a source of sustenance and wealth, there was the desire of improving the yield while making sure the land received the proper nutrition and care.

¹⁵² Renato Nicolai, *I miei sette figli*, 46. “Uno che conosce l’agricoltura emiliana, sa che la maggiore produzione sta nel latte, che il ‘capitale’ sono le vacche. Ma tutto dipende dal foraggio, che dev’essere parecchio e di buona qualità. Così il latte viene abbondante, grasso e saporoso.”

The use of technology in Italian agriculture at the beginning of the twentieth century was slow and gradual. The initial phase of mistrust toward innovation reflected the attitude of diffidence peasants harbored toward change. To break this barrier, the first step was to introduce, give access, and create acceptance of these new concepts among a large number of farmers. The Cervi family attention to new agricultural techniques makes them, once again, atypical compared to the average peasant family and, at the same time, a model to follow for the peasant social strata. Both the Cervi family story and the Emilia Romagna attention to farming technology were models, in the political purpose of the left, to demonstrate what Gramsci had wished for in the twenties. His desire, in articles regarding a possible alliance between workers and peasants, and later further explained in *The Southern Question*, was now a reality.

The region of Emilia Romagna was the first to offer technical demonstrations, classes on agriculture, and literacy courses. For example, evening professional courses for the people¹⁵³ opened the doors to peasants who were engaged in the fields during the day. Soon the region opened courses on livestock, fruit farming, herbaceous farming, and grafts. Regia Scuola di Zootechnia e Caseificio "A. Zanelli" was among the first institutes to offer courses of specialization for cheese factories¹⁵⁴. This form of education, a practical and applied knowledge in agriculture, allowed Emilia Romagna to become a vanguard region, regarded as a more progressive agricultural system.

¹⁵³ Spaggiari. "Dalla Restaurazione all'Unità d'Italia fra Campeggine e Santa Vittoria", 121.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

As Calvino mentions in his second article on the family titled “The Seven Brothers”, the Cervi family members were considered “new minds”¹⁵⁵, people who would come with new ideas at any moment. By pointing out the family's unique farming techniques and qualities, Calvino’s heroic interpretation of the Cervi’s family during the Resistance, and as vanguard in their intellectual engagement in farming techniques, contributes to creating a sort of legend around the family and their story. On the other hand, it has to be noted that Calvino’s writings are the result of his encounters with Alcide, who in purposefully disclosing specific episodes, demonstrates himself to be in control of his story. In this article Calvino remembers that the neighboring farmers were always reticent toward the Cervi’s ideas, but pushed by their curiosity, would often stop by his farm, ready to learn from the good outcomes of his experiments. Calvino cites the example of the barn and the drinking fountain to illustrate how their work with cattle became so fruitful that in a few years, the neighbor farmers started to regard them as models to follow.

Eva Lucenti points out that, instead of using local cattle, the family worked with the breeds called “*pezzata nera*”, native to the Alps of Val d’Aosta, and Holstein Friesian cattle, bred in Northern Germany, both known for their outstanding milk production¹⁵⁶. These cows, living on the mountains where the soil is humid and the grass is rich, rely on good and abundant forage. By using non-autochthone breeds the family understood that they had to provide a similar

¹⁵⁵ Italo Calvino, “I sette fratelli” in *Raccolta di scritti e poesie sui fratelli Cervi*, 12. The English translation is mine. The original text reads “teste nuove”.

¹⁵⁶ Eva Lucenti, *I fratelli Cervi nascita di un mito*, 29.

natural context. Alcide and his sons knew that in order to be successful they had to begin by changing the configuration of the land and its landscape.

Good forage depends on a generous quantity and the even distribution of water. The irregular landscape of Campegine did not have a good water system, as water would tend to stagnate in the holes. Aldo, who used to read magazines on new agricultural technology, found inspiration on how to level the land from an article published in *Riforma Sociale*. Fascism promoted the recovery of the land by supporting, through “*Ente Bonifica*”, farmers who committed to participate. The refusal of the landlord to allow the Cervi family to level his land, although their request would have been at their own risk and expense, marks the end of their family as sharecroppers, and their beginnings as small leaseholder, and eventually, landowners.

It was the family practice to always take important decisions together, and leveling the land required, for the first years, hard work and sacrifices from all the family members. Alcide remembers that, “Everybody, also the women, agreed, as long as sharecropping ended, since it did not bring any enthusiasm to the job”¹⁵⁷. The Cervi family did not passively accept the decision made by the landlord. On the contrary, it gave them the courage to step out of this semi slave relationship and system of agriculture. The word “enthusiasm” denotes a lively and dynamic accord with their work as farmers, which, although characterized by

¹⁵⁷ Renato Nicolai, *I miei sette figli*, 49. “Tutti, anche le donne, furono d’accordo, purché si finisse con la mezzadria, che non dava entusiasmo al lavoro”.

hard work, simple life, and sacrifices, was stimulated by their self-education and mutually beneficial connections with landscape and non-humans.

Initially the land surface of Campi Rossi was particularly rough and hard to cultivate. Once again the family demonstrated strength and determination to persevere at their task, regardless of the natural obstacles. On the view of the land, Aldo, the most charismatic of the seven brothers, comments, “What can you do, Italy is like that, plains and hills, an unusual land. They say we are poor because Italy is badly shaped and needs help. Yet take this land and transform it. Make an exemplary allotment of it and you will see that it will give more than the other ones. It is a question of intelligence and will”¹⁵⁸. Aldo’s words, his proactive approach toward life, nature, and landscape is very distinctive of the family, but it also reflects the beginning of the change in mentality towards farming in Emilia Romagna. These words denote the practical attitude of the peasant in his environment, historically characterizing the passage from the reality of sharecropper to small farmer, while emerging individually as an organic intellectual, one who serves as an example of empowerment for peasants, introducing more innovative techniques acquired through education and determination.

Kate Rigby and Axel Goodbody discuss possible differences between the European and American ecocritical approaches by pointing out the geographical

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 50. “Che volete fare, anche l’Italia è così, pianura e monti, terra strana. E dicono che siamo poveri perché l’Italia è conformata male e per forza ha bisogno di aiuti. Eppure prendete questa terra e la trasformate. Fatene un appezzamento modello e vedrete che darà più degli altri. Il problema è di cervello e di volontà”.

distinctions, and how European thinkers are concerned with “cultural landscapes, with the pastoral rather than wilderness”¹⁵⁹. They further explain how the variations between the two ecocritical styles might have been geographically influenced by the impact of dense population on European land, its domestication, and eventually by creating an “artificial” nature, dependent for its survival on human agency”¹⁶⁰. What is interesting in Goodbody and Rigby’s attempt to differentiate between European and American ecocritical thinkers is that, due to geographical, historical and social characteristics, European thinkers are more open to conceive “nature as a cultural responsibility and project”¹⁶¹.

Although *I miei sette figli* might have been designed as an ideological instrument of the left party at the time, Alcide’s words, his memories about his family, and his connection to his land retain their independent power and strength beyond any ideological plan behind it. The Cervi family story is an example of how human intellect or better, peasant labor and knowledge of the land, has the capability of revealing its hidden potential. Nature, in this case seen through the eyes, practice, knowledge, and understanding of Italian peasant work and culture of the first half of the twentieth century, had already been perceived and experienced as a “cultural responsibility”.

In this chapter I have established how Gramsci’s concept of the organic intellectual has been helpful to understand the relationship between the

¹⁵⁹ Axel Goodbody, Kate Rigby, *Ecocritical theory: new European approaches*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 3.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

emergence of a socially oriented intelligentsia and the peasant world. I also described the way that Alcide Cervi, indirectly, reverts this relationship by using intellectual means, such as writing, to bridge the historical division between the aristocratic and a more popular culture. My next chapter further investigates this relationship and, through Nuto Revelli and the analysis of his works and collection of testimonies, sheds new light on two worlds culturally separated until the experience of the Resistance.

Chapter 2, in great part, is forthcoming in *Approaches to Italian Culture and Literature: The Denatured Wild*, edited by Pasquale Verdicchio and to be published by Lexington Books by Fall 2016. I am the sole author of the article.

CHAPTER 3:

Nuto Revelli and the Disappearing Voices of Peasant Resistance

The years of WWII are still very present in the memory of Italians. Many Italian families have members who were directly or indirectly involved with the war, and have stories to tell about that period. Every anniversary of 1943, the beginning of Resistance, and 1945, the liberation of Italy from the Germans and the fascists, is being celebrated and remembered today through various commemorations, some official and institutionalized, and others more organic and spontaneous. Among the latter, in 2015 the organizers of “Partisan Bicycling Tourist”, a project “of stories and travels between bicycle, history and memory, [and] above all, ... of the Resistance”¹⁶², commemorated the seventieth anniversary of the Liberation by cycling the mountains and the hills of the northern regions of Piedmont and Liguria. They retraced the pathways and memories of the partisans and writers of these areas, Beppe Fenoglio, Nuto Revelli, and Italo Calvino.

They published their experiences in a blog titled, “Journeys so slow that go back in time”. In a landscape inhabited by vegetation, rocks, trees, streams and animals, humans represent only a single element among many. Activities such as bicycling, walking, trekking, or simply being outside the city, in the

¹⁶² The original name is “Cicloturistapartigiano”. The original title is “Viaggi così lenti che vanno indietro nel tempo”. More information can be found at <http://www.cicloturistapartigiano.it>

mountains, hills, woods, and narrow unpaved paths, encourage the participants to slow down, look around, pay attention to their surroundings. The members of the “Partisan Bicycling Tourist”, retracing the paths of the partisans in the mountains, hills, and countryside, must have had a similar experience as represented in the novels of the Resistance. These authors, through their novels, showed readers the myriad ways to become open to the environment represented by rural landscapes and rural life, and stimulated a new awareness toward what we encounter today as environmental dilemmas, an awareness corroborated by the "Partisan Bicycling Tourist" project.

In the introduction to *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*, Italo Calvino writes, “the Resistance solved this problem of the fusion between landscape and characters”¹⁶³. In Calvino’s sentence, landscape is written first. From his experience as a partisans, he knows that the surrounding environment comes first, and plays a fundamental role in the success of the resistance but, as he admits, “in order to represent it, I had it to make it take second place to something else: to people, to stories”¹⁶⁴. A secondary role, Calvino says, for strategic purposes, but surely not less important. Like the background of a painting, landscapes, nature, and mountains both contextualize and often determine the destiny and choices of its inhabitants. In order to survive in this

¹⁶³ Italo Calvino, *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*, trans by Archibald Colquhoun (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998), 11. Original title, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*. (Milano: Oscar Mondadori, 2012), ix. Einaudi published the first edition of the novel in 1947, and the introduction I refer to was included in a new reprint in 1964. The original text reads, “La Resistenza rappresentò la fusione tra paesaggio e persone”.

¹⁶⁴ Ibidem. “Ma per poterlo rappresentare occorreva che esso diventasse secondario rispetto a qualcos’altro: a delle persone, a delle storie”.

rural environment, humans learn to relate to their natural surroundings by interacting and intra-acting with nature in a relationship of respect, understanding, and sometimes fear.

Nuto Revelli is also interested in the landscape, the people and their stories. Alpinist first, partisan during the Resistance period and historian later, Revelli was stationed, with his partisan brigade *Italia libera* – “Free Italy”, in the small mountain village of Paraloup, 1361 meters above the sea. Paraloup is the last village of Val Stura, a valley surrounded by mountains in the province of Cuneo, in the northern region of Piedmont. Its strategic position allowed and still allows, for those who visit it on clear, sunny days, to have a flawless view of the plain of Cuneo, up to the Asti area and the Langhe. Paraloup was already a semi-abandoned village during WWII and became, in the years following, fully abandoned. Revelli’s partisan experience in the mountains and the village of Paraloup, as well as his direct contact with peasants during the war, mark the rest of his life and reawaken in him a renewed sense of justice.

By the end of the seventies, Revelli witnessed in his region of Piedmont, the gradual and consistent degradation of the countryside caused by the establishment of new factories, and the consequent depopulation and abandonment of the mountains. In this period he published *The World of the Defeated*¹⁶⁵, his first collection of peasant testimonies from the northern region of Piedmont. Can Revelli and peasant testimonies be read, in Gramscian terms, as

¹⁶⁵ The book does not have an English translation and the original title is *Il mondo dei vinti*. I will use the English translation *The World of the Defeated* in my chapter, but in the notes and work cited, the page will appear with its original title.

exemplifications of organic intellectuals? What can these testimonies tell us about Italian peasant culture, and the relationship of culture to environment? In what ways are those environments related to peasant culture? And finally, what survived, and still lives, from that culture and those places? Undoubtedly, Revelli's work presented in *The World of the Defeated*, and later in *The Strong Link*¹⁶⁶ is an important historical, ethnographical and anthropological documentation of peasant life. From a more ecocritical and bioregional perspective, these stories tell the tales of ways in which peasants from Piedmont interacted with their environments, and what significance these environments and places, mountains, planes, hills and valleys held in the lives and culture of peasants. And what has been lost. Most importantly, I propose that these testimonies, through Revelli's patient and thorough methodological work, represent stepping-stones for what can, today, be re-evaluated both in cultural and environmental terms. After more than thirty years, Revelli's studies, and collection of testimonies from the peasants in the Cuneo area of the seventies, can be observed through the ideas of bioregionalism. Bioregionalism moves away from the political boundaries of a region, be it a state, nation or a county, and considers the territory from a "biotically determined framework, primarily based on natural communities and watersheds"¹⁶⁷.

¹⁶⁶ The original title is *L'anello forte* and also this book, like all the books of Revelli, has not been translated into English. As for all the books of Revelli that I cite in this chapter, I will use the English title in my writing but it will appear in the original Italian title in the notes and work cited page.

¹⁶⁷ Lynch, Tom; Glotfelty, Cheryl; Armbruster, Karla. *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place*. (Athens (GA): University of Georgia Press, 2012), Kindle Edition, 2-3.

These stories and testimonies also offer valuable insights, and serve as starting points to the analysis of histories from below. Revelli's approach can be understood as that of an historical materialist. Revelli's writing is a way, as Benjamin defines it, "to brush history against the grain"¹⁶⁸. The author Benjamin, in his brief treatises on what historical materialism is and does, highlights the idea that historians empathize with the victor, and "hence, empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers"¹⁶⁹. To celebrate their victory, Benjamin continues, the new rulers march in a procession carrying the spoils, which represent the cultural treasures of the defeated. These spoils "owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries"¹⁷⁰. The historical materialist, on the contrary, dissociates from this approach as much as possible. The protagonists in Revelli's books on WWII, the Resistance, and the peasants of Piedmont, are not the generals, the captains or the big landlords, but the "humbles"¹⁷¹, the regular soldiers, the peasant-soldiers, and the peasants. His books talk about the history of Italians with "h" in the lower case, versus History with the upper case "H". Revelli, indeed, is interested in the stories of the common people, of those people belonging to the so called subaltern classes whose names rarely appear in history books.

¹⁶⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 256.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*.

¹⁷¹ Nuto Revelli, *Le due guerre. Guerra fascista e guerra partigiana*. (Torino: Einaudi, 2003), XIII.

In this chapter my aim is to suggest that both Revelli's work and the testimonies of peasants can be considered two different aspects of Gramsci's interpretation of the organic intellectual. In chapter two, I explained that the articles published by Calvino could be considered as an exemplification of intellectual efforts to reach the people by the new generation Italian literates. I also proved, on the other hand, that through his memoir, Alcide Cervi could be interpreted as an emergent figure of the organic intellectual and representative of peasant culture. This chapter further develops my discussion of Gramsci's theory. In the next pages, I will explore how Revelli and his works unveil new aspects of Gramsci's concept and further reduce the distance between the intellectual strata and peasant world. I will establish that Revelli's attempt to fully penetrate and understand the role of Italian peasants within the Italian social and economic changes of the seventies represents, indeed, an example of encounter between the two worlds.

Revelli's role and work is not that of the traditional intellectual, but is closer to Gramsci's concept of the organic intellectual. While according to Gramsci, the traditional intellectuals are strictly related to a profession and hold special qualifications in society, such those of scholar, theorist, scientist, etc., the organic intellectuals are less distinguished by their profession, and can manifest, organically, in each social group. More specifically, Gramsci states that "Every social group, ... creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function, not

only in the economic, but also in the social and political fields”¹⁷². Revelli’s choice to write, after the war, does not come from an inner inspiration or a literary calling, but from a sort of “moral duty”¹⁷³. Unlike Calvino, Revelli is not a professional writer. Even when his books receive popular recognition, he denies his role as an intellectual. His longing to write comes from an inner motivation to share his experience as a partisan first and, in the seventies, to denounce the depopulation of the countryside and disappearance of peasants. His books emerge from a new sense of awareness that urges him to tell the story, and stories of the war from a less investigated perspective, in the first person as a testimony, and from the perspective of the often forgotten soldiers. The literary style of his books is always very intimate. His modes of expression appear in the form of a diary, as in *Never Late. Diary of an Alpine in Russia*, or in *The Last Front*, a collection of letters of dead soldiers, or even as testimonies from war survivors in *The Road of Davai*. The focus shifts to the rural society with his collection of personal stories from peasants in *The World of the Defeated* and *The Strong Link*. Each of Revelli’s publications condemns an underlying or pre-existent social, political or economic situation.

¹⁷² Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, (New York: International Publishers, 1977) 4.

¹⁷³ Marco Revelli, “Non solo un padre” in *Nuto Revelli. Uno storico tra le montagne*. (Torino: Accademia delle Scienze di Torino, 2015), 18.

3.1. Revelli's Encounter with Peasants

It is during the war, before becoming a writer acknowledged as an historian¹⁷⁴, that Revelli connects for the first time with the peasants. His first encounter with them is in 1941, when he is still an “alpino”, or member of an expert army unit with special training and equipment for mountain service. While he is a proud member of the Italian army, he sees, without understanding, that the peasant-soldiers experience military life as an imposition, “a disease”¹⁷⁵, and they simply dream of returning to their land. Until his experience in Russia, Revelli did not fully question the actions and the role of fascism. He admits to belonging to the generation of “Littorio”¹⁷⁶, and was used to taking everything seriously without questioning it. Only after experiencing the horrors and insanity of the war and fascism during the Russian campaign retreat does Revelli undergo a deep existential, and later political, transformation. This personal crisis leads him, after the amnesty of September 8 1943, to join the Resistance as a partisan.

Revelli's partisan experience was anchored in the mountains surrounding Cuneo, in the valleys Gesso, Stura, Grana and Vermegagna-Roia, where the first “Justice and Freedom” groups of Piedmont organized and operated. Mountains were always seen as wild and untamable, and often the wild nature of the

¹⁷⁴ In October 29, 1999 Nuto Revelli received the Laurea Honoris Causa in Educational Science from the University of Turin, as an acknowledgement of his pedagogical talent in making known the history of WWII and after war of Piedmont.

¹⁷⁵ Nuto Revelli, *Il mondo dei vinti*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1997), xix.

¹⁷⁶ La Gioventù Italiana del Littorio (GIL), the Italian Youth of the Lictor was a movement of the Italian fascist party established in 1937 as a paramilitary organization to educate young people to fascist ideology.

mountains reflected the personality of its inhabitants, people at the margins, able to orient themselves in wild spaces. Armiero highlights the ways in which fascism transformed the traditional rhetoric of “alpini”, or Alpine soldiers. These mountain troops were historically renowned to be composed of courageous mountain men, trained to protect the valleys from the enemy at any cost. Mussolini altered their image into a more aggressive tone and portrayed Alpine soldiers as fearless men engaged, in the name of fascism, in building a new empire in distant lands¹⁷⁷. Revelli was a mountain man and, although an Alpine soldier during fascism, his attitude and formation reflected the traditional one of protecting and defending the mountains.

The mountains and its inhabitants, these wild spaces and people traditionally marginalized, during the Resistance became the center of action and a renewed awareness. Revelli acknowledges that his own survival, and that of the other partisans, depended upon the support and the local territorial knowledge offered by the people from the mountains and the peasants. The author had already experienced the harsh winter weather conditions throughout the Russian campaign, a time during which he treasured the practical knowledge of the peasant-soldiers. He learned that “culture means to be able to let a mule walk at one hundred and four degrees Fahrenheit below zero”¹⁷⁸. Mules are hybrid animals, the result of cross breeding a male donkey and a female horse.

¹⁷⁷ Marco Armiero. *A Rugged Nation. Mountains and the Making of the Modern Italy*. (Cambridge, UK: The White Horse Press, 2011), 138.

¹⁷⁸ Marco Revelli, “Non solo un padre”, cit, 28. The original says, “cultura significa far camminare un mulo a quaranta gradi sotto zero”.

They are known as hard workers, capable of enduring harsh conditions, and commonly used to help on the farms, carrying heavy loads and ploughing fields. Since the end of the 1800s, mules had been adopted by the alpinists to carry weapons and munitions.

Mules are known for being intelligent, but also very stubborn. Taming them requires patience and the ability to direct them without too firm an imposition that may increase their instinctive resistance. Leandro Scamuzzi, a partisan who joined the first group of *Italia libera*, recalls the move of his group from their first base in Madonna del Colletto, considered to be too dangerous because of its visibility even from a far distance, to Paraloup. In this four hour march they had a lot of weight to carry and they suddenly found themselves with the problem of loading the mules. Scamuzzi comments, “no education degree or school teaches how to saddle and load a mule”¹⁷⁹. The only one who had some notion among them was a mountain lover who used to hike and engaged in alpinism. Scamuzzi explains that although it may be simple for those who know how to do it, without experience it can be a very difficult task. If you tie the load too tight, the mule has difficulty breathing and slows down. But if the load is too loose, then it falls on the side. Often mules, extremely intelligent animals, inflate their bellies, so when they walk the load keeps falling. Partisans learn, during the time of resistance, that accomplishing simple tasks depends also on the collaboration and successful relationship between humans and non-humans.

¹⁷⁹ *Resistenze, quelli di Paraloup*. Edited by Beatrice Verri and Lucio Monaco. (Torino: Gruppo Abele, 2013), 83. The translation is mine. The original reads, “nessuna laurea o scuola insegna a imbastare decentemente un mulo”.

In Revelli's observation therefore, culture is interpreted as the result of the interaction between humans and non-humans within the natural and ecological context where the peasants live, in this case the cold weather of the Alps of northern Italy. The cold, snow and wind endured by Revelli during the Russian campaign are re-lived during the Resistance in the mountains, in all its intensity. Inhabiting the natural landscape of the peasants as a partisan gives Revelli the opportunity, once again, to develop a deeper understanding of local people and their environments. "The wind, passing through, left in the lodges the smell of snow. ... This was the environment from where we tear my alpinists of Russia off, these were the lodges that the alpinists were looking for during the days of desperation"¹⁸⁰. The natural landscape of the mountains, the hidden lodges of Paraloup, and the small mountain villages, coupled with the knowledge of the area by the local people, are essential factors in survival, and the capability to counterattack the Germans and the fascists.

Italian peasants, historically suspicious and distrustful of the State, politics, and the government, have always, for reasons already discussed, and others later presented in this chapter, been dependent upon, and committed to supporting their land and natural environments. Revelli's attempt to enter the peasant world of Piedmont in the seventies comes from the necessity of having an authentic grasp on a culture that is disappearing, as well as from a desire to receive direct and authentic testimony of the knowledge, history, and traditions

¹⁸⁰ Nuto Revelli, *Il mondo dei vinti*, xix. "Il vento, passando, lasciava nelle baite l'odore della neve. ... Era questo l'ambiente dal quale avevano strappato i miei alpini di Russia, queste le baite che gli alpini cercavano nei lunghi giorni della disperazione".

connected to these specific places. Revelli's work informs us of a developing environmental awareness related to the local social and economic transformation of Italy and Piedmont and can be read through the bioregional presentation of Kirkpatrick Sale.

the crucial and perhaps only and all-encompassing task is to understand place, the immediate specific place where we live. ... And the cultures of the people, of the populations native to the land and of those who have grown up with it, the human social economic arrangements shaped by and adapted to the geomorphic ones, in both urban and rural settings— these are the things that must be appreciated.¹⁸¹

Since the war, Revelli is drawn to understand and to know, closely, the people who, during the war, are considered merely numbers. In the seventies, he personally goes to their homes, and their natural environments. He visits, explores, and researches the culture, and the places where those cultures generate, manifest, and risk dying.

Revelli's *The World of the Defeated* and *The Strong Link* contain a selection of eighty-five accounts chosen from over 270 audio-recorded testimonies of Piedmont peasants. They represent a powerful archive of peasant voices, offering valuable and unique stories of life between the end of the 1800s and the first half of the 1900s. Revelli's testimonies are not an attempt to idealize a disappearing world. He knows that "the ancient seasons of fireflies and songbirds were happy only in the pages written by the 'others', the literates, the

¹⁸¹ Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Dwellers in the land: the Bioregional Vision*. (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1985), 42.

educated”¹⁸². Revelli makes a conscious effort of not falling into the intellectual interpretation and objectification of peasants. His testimonies speak of migrations, hard work, the war, the condition of peasant women, the material and symbolic meaning of “la roba”¹⁸³, poverty, and hunger. Revelli understands that the strong connection to land, a spirit of survival, closed communities and typical mistrust toward the state are common to all Italian peasants. He says, “... the history of the poor countryside of the Cuneo area is not a marginal episode, it is not separate. It is the history of half Italy, of the north as well as the south, of the regions of Veneto as well as Calabria”¹⁸⁴.

The goal is, through his audio recordings, to give a voice to the poor country, so that it can finally “write its story”¹⁸⁵. Again, Gramsci’s concepts of the organic intellectual and subaltern classes, later reintroduced by subaltern studies, are practiced here through the humble, patient, slow and thorough task of collecting testimonies. As a conscious attitude of respect toward the peasants, and as a form of refusal to follow the pace imposed by the new wave of industrial capitalism, Revelli admits that, “Only by imposing on myself a slow rhythm can I avoid my research work being converted into a mechanical work”¹⁸⁶. His

¹⁸² Nuto Revelli, *L’anello forte*. (Torino: Einaudi, 19), xvii. “... la stagione antica delle lucciole e delle cinciallegre era felice soltanto nelle pagine scritte dagli ‘altri’, dai letterati, dai ‘colti’”.

¹⁸³ This word literally means “stuff”, and it appears several times in both books. It refers both to the dowry as well as material property in general.

¹⁸⁴ Revelli, *Il mondo dei vinti*, VIII. “(Ma) la storia della campagna povera del Cuneese non è un episodio marginale, non è un episodio a sé. È la storia di mezza Italia, del nord come del sud, del Veneto come della Calabria”.

¹⁸⁵ Revelli, *L’anello forte*, XIX.

¹⁸⁶ Ibidem. “Solo se impongo dei ritmi lenti evito che il mio lavoro di ricerca si trasformi in un lavoro meccanico, ...”.

research method has, in fact, surely been inspired by his experience dealing with peasants. Cautious, skeptical, proud, suspicious, not by nature but by imposition, mistrusting toward the “other” and the State, peasants have always been as Carlo Levi defines them “a closed world”, a world apart.

The separation between the city and the country is often associated with the dynamic historical process of industrialization in the urban area versus the stagnant reality of agriculture in the rural areas. The concentration of population in the cities contributed to the phenomenon of isolation in the country, and accentuated the contrast of opposing life styles and cultures, between the city and the country. As Emilio Sereni points out, before WWI, Italy was mainly recognized as a country whose economy was based on agriculture¹⁸⁷. During WWI, Italy is transformed into an agricultural-industrial country, and only between the two world wars does the Italian economy develop into a more industrial-agricultural based form¹⁸⁸. Despite the changes in the Italian economy, the population of peasants continues to be marginalized, secluded and forgotten. WWII and the Resistance movement forced, and ironically, contributed to a temporary connection between the two distant cultures of the city and the country. It is that connection, along with the urge to collect testimonies from a disappearing world that Revelli is trying to keep alive. “I run away from Cuneo, a deaf and hypocritical city, and look for the world of the defeated, where a

¹⁸⁷ Emilio Sereni, *La questione agraria nella nascita nazionale italiana*. 31

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

dialogue is still possible, where through dialogue I breathe life”¹⁸⁹. While Revelli does not idealize or romanticize rural life, he still finds in peasant people a form of authenticity that he cannot perceive in the new wave of capitalism and consumerism.

The only way to enter this world is by following their rhythm, their slow pace, times that evoke natural rhythms. Right timing, in fact, is essential to entering the peasant world, and “winter is the most suitable season, [since] during the other seasons even the ninety year old peasants work”¹⁹⁰. Winter, for nature and animals is the time for hibernation. For peasants, similarly, it is the time to retreat from the fields and work inside, at home or in cowsheds. Yet, Revelli’s perseverance is tested several times, when, for example, he goes visiting Maria Isoardi, an eighty-two year old lady. She says, “I don’t have time to waste, - ... -, why should I open my heart to you and tell you about my miseries?”¹⁹¹. It is the time of milking, and the house is not hospitable. Revelli is aware of the need to overcome their barrier of diffidence built over centuries of being submitted to injustice and exploitation. Without expectation, the next day the ex-partisan goes back only to find a spotless kitchen with the coffee machine ready on the stove, and a tray full of food. Most of the peasants know what hunger is, that is why offering food, wine or coffee is the most natural and humble

¹⁸⁹ Nuto Revelli, *Il mondo dei vinti*, XXVI. “Scappo da Cuneo, città sorda e bigotta, e cerco il mondo dei vitni, dove iun dialogo è ancora possibile, dove col dialogo respiro la vita”.

¹⁹⁰ Nuto Revelli, *Il mondo dei vinti*, XXXI. “L’inverno è la stagione più adatta, nelle alter stagioni anche I novantenni lavorano”.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, XXXI. “Non ho tempo da perdere, ..., perchè dovrei aprirvi il cuore e raccontarvi le mie miserie?”

gesture of hospitality. Once they open up, this atavistic hunger transforms into “hunger to talk”¹⁹², and becomes the vehicle to enter, through peasants’ words, their subterranean world.

The encounter between Revelli and the peasants is a crucial moment in the exchange of knowledge in which both function in similar ways, but from different perspectives, as organic intellectuals. Gramsci explains that “Each man, ... carries on some form of intellectual activity, ... has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought”¹⁹³. Revelli does not have a traditional academic background, and although his research is often based on original and historical written documents and facts, the best way he knows to reach the peasants is by patiently listening to their stories. He doesn’t expect direct answers and by being quiet, and only sporadically, and if necessary, asking a question, Revelli gives them the space and the time to be at ease, while gaining their trust. He does not interview by taking notes, a method that through its tools, a pen and a notebook, would establish a hierarchical relationship between a literate and most likely an illiterate person. The use of technology, in this case, helps him to create a more horizontal relationship. “The tape recorder does not disturb, does not distract, and does not intimidate the witness. Sometimes it holds him/her responsible. For the oldest witnesses the tape recorder is just a box, for most of the witnesses is ‘the box that listens and

¹⁹² Ibid, XXIX.

¹⁹³ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 9.

writes everything”¹⁹⁴. During the interviews Revelli is the witness and the receiver of the stories. Only in his books, through the process of writing, his function of intellectual and author, does the organizer and the interpreter surface. As Lajolo highlights, through his books Revelli becomes an intellectual mediator and connects two different worlds, the educated world and the peasant world based on oral culture¹⁹⁵. On the other hand, if Revelli’s work helps to preserve the memory of a vanishing culture, the memories presented by the peasants bring to surface stories that help to retrace the Italian history rooted in its peasant culture. Peasants, through their testimonies and memories, acquire subjectivity and contribute to bringing “ new modes of thoughts”¹⁹⁶.

Both *The World of the Defeated* and *The Strong Link* include a long introduction and re-elaboration of the experiences and the stories by the author, while the peasants’ testimonies are presented later in the books, and do not involve personal interpretation. Revelli admits that during the transcription he had to adapt the spoken language of the peasants, often dialect or Occitan, a Romance language spoken in the southern regions of France, the northern areas of Piedmont and in some regions of Spain. Although Revelli needs to offer a more linear discourse, proper of a written language, he never alters or manipulates the style of narration, nor the content. Gramsci writes, “The problem

¹⁹⁴ Nuto Revelli, *Il mondo dei vinti*, xxxiii. “Il magnetofono non disturba, non distrae, non intimidisce il testimone. A volte lo responsabilizza. Per alcuni dei testimony più vecchi il magnetofono è una scatola qualunque, per quasi tutti I testimony è ‘la scatola che ascolta e scrive tutto”.

¹⁹⁵ Laurana Lajolo, “L’interprete del mondo contadino” in *Nuto Revelli, Percorsi di memoria*, a special number edited by Michele Calandri and Mario Cordero of the journal *Il Presente e la Storia*, n. 55, 1st semester, June 1999.

¹⁹⁶ Antonio Gramsci, *qtd.*, 9

of creating a new stratum of intellectuals consists therefore in the critical elaboration of the intellectual activity that exists in everyone at a certain degree of development, ... [which] becomes the foundation of a new and integral conception of the world.”¹⁹⁷ If Revelli offers us a “critical elaboration” of the peasants’ world and the places where they live, the voices of these people present the other side of the story and contribute, along with Revelli, to a “new and integral conception of the world”. Filled with daily struggles, poverty, toils, these testimonies repudiate a rural world that is losing terrain as well as a growing industrial society that is losing its roots. Revelli’s peasant voices become the point of reference to understand the social, economic, and environmental changes of the rural society of that time.

3.2. Paraloup, a Place Where Memories Have Resisted

No less important are the places where these peasants live. The mountains, valleys, woods, rivers, and plains of the Cuneo area define and influence the life of its inhabitants, just as the inhabitants contribute to shaping the landscape of this area. If, as Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbruster say, “bioregionalism proposes that human identity may be constituted by a larger community of natural beings—our local bioregion”¹⁹⁸, and that, “literature is very much part of that shift, helping people reimagine the places where they lived and

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place*, 4.

their relationship to those places”¹⁹⁹, my intention in this section of my chapter, is to analyze and connect more closely the history and the stories of the local testimonies with the geographical characteristics of the area, more specifically Paraloup.

As already mentioned, when the first partisans arrive on the top of Valle Stura, in the middle of September 1943, the small village is already depopulated. Paraloup belongs to the district of Rittana, situated at the bottom of the valley, around 11 miles from the city of Cuneo. In the 1700s, forests, more specifically chestnut woods and oak woods, pasture, and cultivated land constitute the surrounding territory. The area peasants mainly grow rye, barley, and fodder, and live spread throughout the valley, in small communities composed by a maximum of twelve homes. As Walter Cesana points out, it is interesting to notice that the way the population is organized encourages the development of several small settlements, each with a proper name and that, according to the size, are referred as “borgate, tetti, casolari”²⁰⁰, small villages, roofs, or farmhouses. Among them, between the end of 1700 and during the 1800s, Borgata Paraloup is inhabited by five or six families, for a total of around thirty people, belonging all to the same family lineage, the Coletto family²⁰¹. The wild nature of the mountains does not facilitate the circulation of people in the valleys, and often mountain peasants live most of their lives in a single place. This is the case of

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ *Resistenze, quelli di Paraloup*, 138.

²⁰¹ Ibid, 139.

Paraloup where, until the beginning of the twentieth century, marriages within families are still a common practice.

The name Paraloup stems from the Occitan language, and literally means “defended from the wolves”. The Occitan verb “paràa”, to distance, and the noun “louf”, wolf²⁰² compose the name of the village. Local people used to call the village either “Paraluf” - “Paralouf”, or “Paralup - “Paraloup”, which denotes the influence of the Occitan among the local people, but also emphasizes the common practice of blending the Occitan and Italian in the spoken language, as the result of the French cultural influence in the territory. The locals, when writing, often use the French vowel “ou”, pronounced in Italian with the simple vowel “u”. Today, in fact, Paraloup, the name officially registered of the village, is a combination of the two languages. Paraloup, ending with a “p”, is a blend of the French “louf” and the Italian “lupo”.

The origin of the name Paraloup brings into question the ancient and difficult coexistence between humans and wolves. In the first half of 1800, the Alps hosted large numbers of wolves as the documents provided by Walter Cesana reveal²⁰³. In order to control the presence of the wolves, the Kingdom of Savoy reinforced wolf hunts in the area by offering rewards for killing the predators, which contributed, after a century, to their disappearance. In Italy currently, the wolf population is mainly concentrated in the central Apennines, and only a few hundred are found in the southern Apennines. The numbers in the

²⁰² Ibid, 9.

²⁰³ *Resistenze, quelli di Paraloup*, 137.

north are even lower, and a recent study has spotted less than a hundred wolves in the Alps²⁰⁴. Today, as in the past, the territory continues to be conceived and managed mainly, if not solely, for human purposes and to human advantage. A recent National Geographic article confirms, in fact, that the presence of wolves creates conflicts among local communities of farmers and residents. This anthropocentric vision of the natural environment fails to consider that the presence of wolves keeps under control the population of the other animals and helps to maintain a healthy ecosystem of the bioregion.

In the United States, the reintroduction of wolves in 1995 in Yellowstone has miraculously transformed and improved the ecosystem of the park. What happened in Yellowstone is known as the phenomenon of trophic cascade. Simply put, trophic cascade is an ecological transformation that occurs when the introduction of predators decrease the number of prey and alter their behavior, thereby changing the ecosystem²⁰⁵. For example, an increase of carnivores, like wolves, decreases the number of herbivores, like deer, and allows the increase of vegetation. A short documentary directed and commented by the environmental activist George Monbiot describes the consequences that occurred in Yellowstone with the repopulation of wolves. The presence of the wolves helped to control the number of deer in the park, augmented disproportionately in the last decades, but also modified the behavior of the

²⁰⁴ Lisa Signorile, "Uno, Nessuno e Centomila: quanti lupi ci sono in Italia?" in National Geographic Italia, article published on 10-26-2015.
http://www.nationalgeographic.it/natura/animali/2015/10/25/news/uno_nessuno_centomila_quanti_lupi_ci_sono_in_italia_-2817615/

²⁰⁵ <http://www.britannica.com/science/trophic-cascade>

herbivores, which helped the regeneration of vegetation and the forest. This created a chain reaction as the presence of more trees attracted the arrival of birds, beavers and other animals. The flourishing of the forest and the presence of new animal population helped to regenerate the soil and stabilize the banks of the river by reducing its collapse. As Monbiot says, “wolves changed the behavior of the river” and also “the river changed in response to the wolves”. Today Yellowstone has changed its geography and re-balanced the ecosystem through larger rivers, more pools, and water because of the reintroduction of wolves.

Although the geographic conformation and limited surface of Italy cannot be compared to the extended territory of the United States, the example of Yellowstone helps to consider, not only how the presence of animal species such as wolves, historically and culturally considered a threat to humans, contributes to the balance of the natural ecosystem, but also how this could help in the revival of water sources and endangered ecosystems. Unfortunately this is a lesson that Italy has not yet learned. In the last years, the central regions of Italy have seen a considerable increase of wild boars and deer. To contain their presence Tuscany has just modified the hunting law, allowing farmers to hunt wild boars and deer all year around²⁰⁶. Today the presence of wolves in Italy is still seen as a threat. On the other hand, encouraging the increase of wolves, or

²⁰⁶ <http://iltirreno.gelocal.it/regione/toscana/2016/02/03/news/toscana-si-alla-legge-sulla-libera-caccia-ai-cinghiali-1.12890374> ;
http://firenze.repubblica.it/cronaca/2016/01/27/news/ambientalisti_e_vip_contro_la_strag_e_animali_merce_per_i_cacciatori_-132182042/

at least not interfering with their presence, would help Italian mountains, both Apennines and Alps, to re-harmonize the fragile ecosystem often threatened by the humans' exploitation of natural resources. After the massive intervention of the Reign of Savoy in Valle Stura, wolf populations decreased until, in the first half of the twentieth century, their presence is only a memory among the peasants.

Peasant life in the mountains is strenuous and poorer than life led in the valley or the plains. Uneven surfaces and slopes prevent inhabitants from cultivating large amounts of land, and severe climate conditions limit the choice of crops. The territory, in high elevations, is often public property and locals use it as a land for transit or, by paying small fees, to graze the cattle. The mountaintops of Valle Stura are used mainly for planting potatoes, rye, gathering hay and for grazing. In addition, severe climate conditions do not allow living all year round from the fruits of the land, and often the stories of mountain people are stories of hunger. Before getting married, the family of Maria Goletto, from the small village of Bicocca, near Rittana, at the bottom of Valle Stura, did not have a cart to carry the hay. "My poor father later bought one", Maria Goletto remembers, "and we had a meadow in the mountains, on the top, two hours [walking] after Gorré, beyond Paraloup, at Tairé. Eh, my poor mother would carry the two wheels on her head, and my father, the ladder²⁰⁷ on his back, and we would climb the mountain to gather the hay. Once there we would load the hay bale on the cart and would pull the cart through the mountain, pull, pull, and

²⁰⁷ By ladder, Maria Goletto means the framework of the cart.

the belly empty”²⁰⁸. For Maria Goletto, life in the mountains is only related to work and hardship, and women in the mountain need to be strong and be able to work, because, she describes, living in the mountains with no strength to work brings only death²⁰⁹. Maria Goletto’s testimony of hunger and poverty recalls the protagonists of Carlo Levi’s *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, inviting us to consider that, until recently in the most remote areas of Italy, rural poverty had similar characteristics in the north and the south.

Paraloup is popular also for its water. Cesana documents that in the first half of 1800, Paraloup is an important source of water for the surrounding community²¹⁰, and the water from the fountain of Paraloup is considered to be, and used as, a common good by the population of the valley. Although after 1935 Paraloup is populated only during the summer seasons, it is still a point of reference for water supply and pasture for the surrounding communities. Until the sixties it was in fact common practice, from April to September, to take the cattle on the open meadows above Paraloup. Thanks to the mild temperature of the season, the abandoned houses, and stone huts in disrepair, functioned as shelters for all the shepherds of the area.

Paolo Riberi, a shepherd from Gorrè, a small village below Paraloup, reminisces that as a child, he worked as a shepherd and went to Paraloup for

²⁰⁸ Nuto Revelli, *L’anello forte*, 121. “Poi il mio povero padre ne ha comprato uno, ed avevamo il prato lassù in montagna, su in alto, due ore olte il Gorré, oltre Paraloup, ai Tairé. Eh, la mia povera madre si metteva le due ruote del carretto sulla testa, e mio padre *la scala* sulla schiena, e salivamo fino a lassù per fare il fieno. Lassù caricavamo le trusse, e poi tiravamo il carretto attraverso a quella montagna, tira, tira, e la pancia vuota.”

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 123.

²¹⁰ *Resistenze, quelli di Paraloup*, 139.

pasture during the summer²¹¹. While recalling his experience as a young shepherd, the pureness of the water comes to his mind, and Riberi comments that local people used to say only the water from Paraloup would allow for cooking the best polenta, a simple and poor meal common in the diet of peasants of northern Italy. The pureness of the water, in the memory of the old shepherd, is re-lived in a nostalgic tone, and becomes the essential ingredient to make the tastiest polenta. Water has indeed a taste. Its chemical and physical characteristics can affect the flavor of culinary dishes or drinks derived from it. Furthermore, water is the primary source of life of all living beings and, when human impact on the environment is minimized, mountain water is renowned as the purest waters. Mountain people know that nature at that altitude is more powerful than humans, and have learned to coexist with the climatic conditions as well as with natural elements such as animals, woods, rivers and rocks.

In 1943, when the partisans took refuge in the mountains, and the first partisan group of Piedmont, *Italia libera*, moved to Paraloup, wolves had already abandoned the valley, and the village was only sporadically populated in the spring and summer seasons. Mario Giovana, ex partisan of *Italia libera* and later historian, describes Paraloup as a place “sunk in the snow and its solitude”²¹². Snowfalls, in altitude, can last entire days, covering and making any and all rocks, shrubs, and trees, into uniform shapes. Residences, streets, or small trails

²¹¹ *Resistenze, quelli di Paralaoup*, DVD. The DVD is included with the text and contains recent interviews to peasants or ex-peasants of the area, and ex-partisans stationed in Paraloup during the Resistance.

²¹² *Resistenze, quelli di Paralaoup*, 71.

are concealed by this natural element, which temporarily erases both the presence and impact of humans on the natural landscape, and gives the mountain back to its wild nature. Not many people live in the mountains, especially during the cold season, and those who populate those areas or choose to live in altitude, need to learn to deal with extreme climate conditions, as well as isolation. The solitude Giovana refers to implies both the state of abandon of the village, and the intrinsic character of mountain life.

The original members of the partisan group are professionals, lawyers, or students, from Cuneo. They are militantly antifascist, most of them belonging to the political and ideological movement of *Giustizia e Libertà*²¹³, and have neither military experience nor specific knowledge of how to survive in the mountains. Their choice to leave the city comes suddenly, after the armistice of September 8, 1943, and all they carry with them are small bags with some supplies and few weapons. They first arrive at Madonna del Colletto, an abandoned church located on top of a hill, and reachable from Val Gesso or Valle Stura in one hour of walking. The position of the church is soon seen to be dangerous because of the relatively short distance from the more populated centers. The small group, composed originally of twelve men, begins to seek a more strategic and harder to reach location, until they finally decide to move to Paraloup.

²¹³ The “Justice and Freedom, “*Giustizia e Libertà*”, I am referring to here is the ideological and political antifascist movement originally created in Paris, France, in 1929. The movement conducted an important function of informing and sensitizing international public opinion on the Italian fascism. During the time of Italian Resistance, it formed also a partisan brigade called “Justice and Freedom”, and was connected with the “Partito d’Azione”, “Party of Action”, a political party born in 1942 with radical, republican, liberal socialist and democratic socialist ideological orientation.

The partisans stationed in Paraloup know that, if they want to establish a permanent base in the abandoned village, they need to prepare to live with the harsh climate conditions and find a way to coexist with the people of the valley. As Leandro Scamuzzi, a partisan belonging to the historical first band of *Italia libera*, articulates “We did not want to burden peasants, both for a question of principle, and because we did not want them to become our enemies”²¹⁴. Partisans know that, in a moment of danger, ..., peasants could betray them if threatened to lose their effects²¹⁵. Peasants’ sole support is based on the fruits from the land. Used to being deprived of their harvest by unjust crop laws during the dictatorship, the partisans know that they all share in common their hatred of fascism. On the other hand, in order to gain their support, partisans cannot take from them their poor possessions. They need to create a relationship based on trust and cooperation. On the trails they take from Madonna del Colletto to Paraloup, Scamuzzi recalls a meeting with a farmer who was attending his cattle. The man, once he learned that the young group was going to fight the Germans, offered some of his potatoes saying that he would have given all his belongings to get rid of the Nazi and the fascists²¹⁶. Even if peasants did not commit to an armed fight against the invaders and fascists, they had made their choice.

During the twenty months of Resistance, the support received from the local peasants, both in their quotidian necessity and during the most urgent and

²¹⁴ *Resistenze, quelli di Paraloup*, 89. “Non volevamo gravare sui contadini sia per principio, sia per non farcene dei nemici che, al momento del pericolo, ..., ci potessero tradire per difendere i loro averi”.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 84.

dramatic moments, that support is revealed to be essential to the survival of the group on many occasions. Lucia Goletto, one of the last residents of the small village of Gorré and a seasonal inhabitant of Paraloup, was a girl whose family was in contact with the partisans of the valley during WWII. She confirms that local people respected the young group of Paraloup and adds, “How they would have managed to survive if they had local people against them?”²¹⁷. She continues her testimony by recalling how her mother used to bring them, “for free”, their milk and cheese. If on one level Lucia Goletto’s comment about her mother not asking for compensation may recall peasants’ attachment to their land and belongings, on the other, it reveals a feeling of deep solidarity expressed through sharing what they actually cherish the most, their goods.

Peasants manifested solidarity and a spirit of sacrifice toward the partisans, often also at the risk of their own lives. Duccio Galimberti, co-founder with Livio Bianco of the group *Italia libera*, was hosted, and later transported to the doctors, by peasants. Caterina Brunetto’s family briefly hosted Galimberti when he was wounded in January 1944. She remembers how her husband gave their mattress to Galimberti and said, “When I was a soldier in Greece, and injured, I would have died if nobody helped me. They helped me and now I help others”²¹⁸. After the first aid, their neighbor transported the young commander to the near village of Borgo San Dalmazzo, down in the valley, hiding him in a

²¹⁷ *Resistenze, quelli di Paraloup*, DVD.

²¹⁸ Nuto Revelli, *L’anello forte* (Torino: Einaudi, 1985), 154. “Quando ero in Grecia soldato, da ferito, se nessuno mi aiutava ero morto. Hanno aiutato me, ed io aiuto gli altri”.

bundle on a small cart pulled by a horse²¹⁹. Also Breindl Halpern, know as Sara, the “doctor of the partisans”²²⁰, remembers this episode. Sara was a refugee from Poland who, in 1943, was able to leave the Jewish forced residence in Saint-Martin Vésubie, in France, and arrived in Valle Stura where she hid until the end of the war²²¹. The refugees, as well as the partisans, were temporary guests in the valley and, aware of the dangers the local were risking by having them around, tried to minimize as much as possible their inconvenient presence. Sara recalls several times the hospitality of the locals toward her and the partisans.

Some details from Sara’s memories are useful to understand the tacit support, and the relationship of solidarity and cooperation between the mountain people and the temporary residents. During those years, on several occasions Sara helped both the partisans and the locals, who did not hesitate to offer Sara shelter and food in exchange for her services. She recalls that Galimberti, when he arrived injured at Brunetto’s family stable, did not dare to ask anything more than to be temporarily hidden. It was Sara who offered to Galimberti the coffee she asked for herself, and later asked Caterina Brunetto to bring some rice with milk for the injured partisan²²². Not only, as Sara recalls, “that poor lady gladly did

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ *Resistenze, quelli di Paraloup*, 107.

²²¹ *Resistenze, quelli di Paraloup*, 108. Selected passages from Sara’s memoir are also present in the volume of Antonella Tarpino, *Spaesati* (Torino: Einaudi, 2013).

²²² Ibid, 113.

anything that was asked of her”²²³, but also Caterina risked her life several times to carry messages of the partisans from Paraloup to the base in Cuneo²²⁴.

Some locals eventually decided to join the partisan group. This is the case with Giovanni Monaco, battle name Nino, who lived on the eastern side of the mountain and, once he learned what they were doing, decided to join them. His knowledge of the territory and local people helped the group to use the resources of the land expertly, for example he showed the partisans how to recognize which wood to use for the fire, as well as how to connect with locals to help with their daily supply.

Like Alcide Cervi, Nino Monaco, in his biography, uses metaphors linked to nature to explain the role of Paraloup and the partisan group. Evoking his time in the mountains, during the winter of 1944, he writes,

Some groups already detached themselves from us and we lived an autonomous life, then others detached, like *a swarm from a big hive*. The group Italia Libera, created by the twelve of Madonna del Colletto, like *a sapling planted in a deserted moor*, grew luxuriant, *plunging its roots* solidly in the ground, and now *it was extending its branches* on a larger radius. The “rebels” of Paraloup became the partisans of the mountain.²²⁵

Wisely Lucio Monaco connects the metaphor of the hive to Paraloup, and the one of the tree to the original group of twelve. Nino Monaco joins the group

²²³ Ibid. “quella povera donna faceva volentieri tutto quello che le si domandava”.

²²⁴ Antonella Tarpino, *Spaesati*, (Torino: Einaudi, 2013), 55.

²²⁵ *Resistenze, quelli di Paraloup*, 122. Lucio Monaco here is quoting the original text from Giovanni Monaco, *Pietà l'è morta* (Milano: edizioni Avanti!, 1955), 69-70. The italic is from Lucio Monaco. “Alcuni gruppi s'erano già distaccati da noi e vivevano ormai di una vita autonoma, altri ancora se ne staccheranno, *come gli sciame di un grande alveare*. La Banda Italia Libera, create dai dodici di madonna del Colletto, *come un arboscello piantato in una landa deserta*, era cresciuta rigogliosa, affondando *le sue radici* solidamente nel terreno, e ora *espandeva i suoi rami* per un raggio sempre più largo. I ‘ribelli’ di Paraloup erano diventanti I partigiani della montagna”.

during the first phase of Free Italy, when the group is already composed of more than twelve people, and during his partisan experience he is always stationed in Paraloup. When he says “us”, he is indeed referring to the group of the first phase, and Paraloup is actually identified with the original group. Wild bees usually construct their hives in pre-existent structures like rock cavities or trees, usually located above the ground. Similarly, Paraloup is a pre-existent structure and not easily reachable. The tree is a metaphor used also by Alcide Cervi when speaking of his family, whereby Cervi compared the branches to his seven children. While Cervi uses the oak as a symbol of longevity and resistance against weather conditions, Nino Monaco uses the sapling to refer to the group, composed by young people and newly created. However, the sampling contains in itself all the potentiality to grow strong and fertile, as is indicated in the second part of the metaphor. It is also interesting to note that the term “rebel” implies indirectly the typical wild and untamable characteristics of the mountains, as Marco Armiero often expresses, indicating the rough personality of the mountain people²²⁶.

Aldo Quaranta, who joined *Italia Libera* soon after Nino Monaco, also refers to the group using a metaphor connected to the fame of Paraloup. “The group of Madonna del Colletto, ... after a few days transferred to Valle Stura, in the farmhouses of Paraloup, and would soon represent *the fountain of life* of the

²²⁶ Marco Armiero, *A Rugged Nation*, 87.

whole G.L. [Giustizia e Libertà] movement of the Cuneo area”²²⁷. Fountains are especially important in the mountains, built by the community to provide water, the natural element and source of life for which Paraloup is famous. Like water that penetrates the soil, nourishes other living beings, and flows through its streams and rivers to reach distant places, the group through its attacks on the Germans and, networking among the partisans in the territory, reawakes a sense of justice and active engagement among the civilians, and offers perspectives for a different future and a new life. The activities conducted by Free Italy in the valley can be compared to the chain of events unleashed by the presence of the wolves in Yellowstone. Both, considered wild and untamable inhabitants of the mountains, contributed to re-introduce, through their presence and actions, new forms of life.

These testimonies from the locals of Valle Stura offer significant historical, cultural and intellectual insights. The stories, in fact, reveal new information on the strategies and daily struggles of both peasants and partisans, but also these people, by re-interpreting the events of the past with new images and details, represent new forms of organic intellectuals. Although peasants’ testimonies are not always spontaneous recollections, but are answers to some direct or indirect questions, their stories still refer to personal experiences and memories. Their exposition, oral or written, is the synthesis of a specific way of thinking, of a

²²⁷ *Resistenze, quelli di Paraloup*, 123. The italic is from Lucio Monaco. “Il gruppo di MdC [Madonna del Colletto], ..., dopo alcuni giorni si trasferisce in Valle Stura, nei casolari di Paraloup, e rappresenterà ben presto *la fontana di vita* di tutto il movimento G.L. [Giustizia e Libertà] del Cuneese”.

particular way of conceiving the world of a local culture. In his essay, Gramsci explains, “The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, ... but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, ... and not just as a simple orator”²²⁸. Peasants’ practical knowledge, cultivated through experience after centuries of constant engagement in the fields, interacting and intra-acting with natural elements as well as non-humans, when shared, contribute to the understanding of peasants’ culture and a formulation of new epistemologies.

3.3. Memories From a Disappearing World. From Depopulation to a Slow Repopulation

In 1984, after almost forty years, Nuto Revelli returns to Paraloup. The documentary *Le prime bande* filmed by Paolo Gobetti records this event in which we see images of Revelli, along with Sandro Galante Garrone, a militant antifascist during the war and later an Italian magistrate and historian, hiking a mountain trail²²⁹. While Revelli walks this old narrow and steep mule path that leads to Paraloup, situated on the side of the mountain, we hear him saying, “dangerous”. This single word uttered by a man in his sixties suggests the cautiousness matured with age and experience, but also, and foremost, evokes memories of the times of Resistance. It recalls the constant risks the young men

²²⁸ Antonio Gramsci. *Prison Notebooks*, 10.

²²⁹ The images of Paolo Gobetti’s documentary I refer to are included by Teo de Luigi in his documentary *Resistenze, quelli di Paraloup*, which is included in the book.

took and how prudence cannot be taken into account in dire and threatening times.

Paraloup looks like an archeological site. The ruined stone houses, standing only through damaged supporting walls, and mostly without roofs, do not carry traces of ancient glorious times and yet, they hold a different historical value. They are remains of a history filled with dignified misery. These ruins are a testimony of the centuries-old peasant resistance to the adversity dictated by a wretched life, and of the more recent Resistance of the group *Italia Libera*.

Walking through the ruins, Revelli retraces the different locations of his partisan experience, from the dormitory to the kitchen and the armory, but soon after, his attention is caught by the desperate conditions of the small houses. While Galante Garrone and Revelli comment on the state of the ruined constructions, Revelli adds, "These were well done houses, and maintained. The secret is, when the houses start collapsing, to fix them immediately". He then points to a group of ruins, reminiscent of a house in the village. His comment not only denotes the state of abandonment of the site, but also the lack of will, from the local authorities, to support the survival of the local communities. In the eighties Revelli had already published *The World of the Defeated* and has almost finished *The Strong Link*. Although the horrors of the war can never be forgotten, his focus on this phase of his life shifts toward the visible and fast disappearing peasants' presence in the valley. He is aware that peasants' depopulation in the small and rural villages signifies the disappearance of a culture, and eventually of a source and form of economy.

Plants and young trees inhabit a portion of the houses and are a reminder of the power of nature, of the potential and gradual return to wilderness, but also suggest new forms of coexistence among humans and the surrounding natural environments. Walking among the remains, Revelli adds that the fate of Paraloup is not an exception, mountain valleys are full of semi-abandoned villages where a few people live among the ruins. In Pra Fioretto, a small village reachable only by a mule trail, Revelli meets Ghitinota, an old lady who lives alone. She gladly starts a conversation with the ex-partisan and comments that in wintertime, when snow reaches three or four meters, even the nearby bigger village of San Maurizio becomes too far to reach²³⁰. Natural elements have also contributed indirectly to the maintenance of the structures suggesting the continuous, dynamic and porous coexistence and relationship between humans and nature. Ghitinota's small stone house is in fact protected and supported on one side by an old elm, without which, she comments, the wind would take the structure away.

Although most of the old peasants moved to bigger and more organized centers, Ghitinota is an example of those who chose to stay in their native homes and, instead of being supported, are isolated. The condition of seclusion and depopulation of Pra Fioretto is, as mentioned by Revelli, a common destiny in many other small villages. According to Mario Cordero, in the area of Rittana alone there are more than thirty small abandoned villages²³¹. All Ghitinota would

²³⁰ Nuto Revelli, *Il mondo dei vinti*, LXI.

²³¹ Antonella Tarpino, *Spaesati*, 52.

like is a trail wide enough for a cart to pass. Small and simple supports from the local administration might have helped to prevent a mass emigration of mountain people to the valleys.

Revelli divides and organizes the testimonies in *The World of the Defeated* and *The Strong Link* by the geographical areas in which peasants live: the countryside, hills, mountains, and the Langhe area, today internationally known for its red wines like Barolo, Barbaresco and Nebbiolo. This organization of peasants' testimonies is Revelli's way to establish that the landscape and natural settings, up to that time, influenced, or better, dictated and shaped the actions and choices of humans in this area, and not vice versa. "The differences between a small landowner of the mountain and the high Langhe, or between a small landowner of the country and a low, Langhe is often enormous. Not distinguishing, even verbally, the distinctive forms of agricultures, means to confuse the bone with the meat, melting in the same pot the most disparate and contrasting realities"²³². Today, when pondering the landscape of the Cuneo area from a train window, or driving by car toward Val Stura, it is still possible to admire the green valleys and mountains, but the results of industrial investments that began in those times are also felt. Warehouses, small and bigger factories, some active and some abandoned, often obstruct the landscape's view and,

²³² Nuto Revelli, *L'anello forte*, XX. "La diversità tra un piccolo proprietario terriero della montagna o dell'alta Langa ed un piccolo proprietario della pianura o della bassa Langa è sovente enorme. Non distinguere, sia pure solo verbalmente, le varie agricolture, vuol dire confondere 'l'osso con la polpa', mettendo in un calderone unico le realtà più disparate e contrastanti."

factory smells, coupled with the ones emanating from chemical fertilizers in the fields, distract our senses and thoughts away from what has been erased.

The short excerpt from Paolo Gobetti's documentary offers a glimpse of Paraloup in the eighties, and affords an understanding of Revelli's personality. In a reverse shot, we hear the voice of Galante Garrone commenting to Revelli how the reality of Paraloup is replicated in the many stories narrated in *The World of the Defeated*. The camera slowly focuses on Revelli who, with a tone of voice in between indignation and rebellion, comments, "There are realities that almost push you again... (pause)" Revelli interrupts his sentence and while is looking at Galante Garrone, he smiles slightly. The silence delivers a message stronger than the words, and infers the same passion that must have guided him during his partisan choices. A silence that recalls the early anger he felt when he was working on *The World of the Defeated*. He then continues, "to come back to these areas... (pause), realities that do not make sense, at 25 kilometers from Cuneo you find realities that... (pause), scream vendetta". The last word is pronounced softly, as if a part of the author doesn't want to link it to the war, death and violence. Revelli is witnessing an almost irreversible process of depopulation and abandonment of rural areas. As an historian and organic intellectual whose ideas are, as Gramsci stresses, grounded in experience, writing and listening to the testimonies become, for Revelli, his new weapon to defend his valleys and mountains.

From the sixties to the eighties, the Cuneo rural areas become one of the centers of the new industrialization process of northern Italy. Many young

peasants leave their family land to go to work in the new factories. Land loses its value as a point of reference for rural families both in economic and cultural terms. Most of the time, elders continue working on the farms keeping alive small local agriculture. In this phase of social and economic changes, from a traditional and family oriented peasant culture to a newer phase of industrialization, the new generation leads a life in between. Often young people work in the factories during the week and on the farm during the weekend. Revelli acknowledges that it would not have been possible for peasants to continue to live such a miserable life. If the big industry had not developed, Revelli comments, most of the young people would have immigrated to foreign countries, like in the past²³³. Yet, witnessing the local administration doing nothing to offer possible alternatives to a continuing wrecked life and the disappearing of peasant culture does not create a feeling of resignation but, on the contrary, encourages Revelli to continue his research and documentation.

Revelli's attitude anticipates the anger and disgust of future environmental activists toward the ecological and social damages caused by industry. Witnessing this very dramatic moment in Italian history, the price is visibly paid, at that time, by the disappearing world of peasants and their natural environments. With these words Revelli echoes the politics of Michelin industry, "The area of Cuneo interests us [Michelin] because is rich of water. But the "richness" Michelin is referring to is not the water of the Stura River. Michelin aims to recruit thousands of workers, and he would like them all to be

²³³ Nuto Revelli, *Il mondo dei vinti*, L.

peasants”²³⁴. The new industry obliterates Gramsci’s hoped for collaboration between peasants and workers as predicated in *The Southern Question*. And Revelli cannot help but notice that, “there isn’t any attempt to save at least a minimum equilibrium between the city and the country”²³⁵ or, as he states more optimistically in *The Strong Link*, “my obsession was that we had to save an equilibrium between agriculture and industry, before it was too late”²³⁶. The abyss provoked by industry and capitalism permanently reached Italian soil. From a statement of denouncement, as presented in *The World of the Defeated*, Revelli transforms it, in *The Strong Link*, into a mission to accomplish in the name of a social group that carries the memories and knowledge of a culture forgotten for centuries and is threatened to disappear for ever.

Yet, something has survived, and has resisted. Like heirloom seeds left under the soil, the testimonies gathered by Revelli have been, and are still, slowly germinating, and giving their fruits, in different forms and ways. The “partisan bicycling tourist” in 2015 reached the small mountain village of Paraloup. This small peasant village, once a partisan base, in 2013 has officially returned to life. Through a patient, methodical and attentive work of balancing history, culture and environment, today Paraloup is a place of living memory, an example of eco-sustainable development, and a mountain refuge, a place

²³⁴ Nuto Revelli, *Il mondo dei vinti*, XXIII. “La zona di Cuneo ci interessa perché è ricca di acqua. Ma la ‘ricchezza’ di cui parla la Michelin non è l’acqua del fiume Stura. La Michelin si ripropone di arruolare migliaia di operai, e li vorrebbe tutti contadini”.

²³⁵ Ibid, XXIV. “Non si tenta nemmeno di salvare un equilibrio minimo tra la città e la campagna”.

²³⁶ XVIII. “Il mio chiodo fisso era che si dovesse salvare un equilibrio tra l’agricoltura e l’industria prima che fosse troppo tardi”.

connecting humans and non-humans. Paraloup today is a place that connects past, present and future. “The stories come out from the ruins, ... , almost naturally unharmed. They free a new sustainable era. These stories vibrate in the air and transform an inhabited site into a place”. It is in those mountains huts, “a little hybrid”, as Antonella Tarpino gracefully points out, “that the many narratives of Paraloup will find shelter, walking through the ruins”²³⁷. The Nuto Revelli association has created a project called “The School of the Return”. In 1999, Revelli received by the Laurea Honoris from the University of Turin. He concludes his discourse addressing and dedicating his work to the young generation, “I wanted the young to know, to understand, to open their eyes”²³⁸. As in *The Strong Link* written in the eighties, women today are the protagonists of a renewed vision and interpretation of rural life in Paraloup. Three young women manage the refuge and guarantee its availability to the public all year around. They recognized that it was not an easy beginning and that winters are long in the mountains. In a recently published newspaper article on women returning to the country, the three women from Paraloup say that “life in the mountains creates conflict: you desperately love them, but sometimes you also hate them”²³⁹. The memories left by peasants have inspired, and continue to inspire, new generations of farmers, and have contributed to a slow but steady process of repopulation and re-evaluation of rural and mountain areas.

²³⁷ Antonella Tarpino, *Spaesati*, 88.

²³⁸ Nuto Revelli in *L'Ateneo*, Newsletter of the University of Turin, Italy, year XVI, n. 6, December-November 1999, p. 70.

²³⁹ http://www.iodonna.it/attualita/in-primo-piano/2016/03/16/le-donne-resistenti-di-fa-la-cosa-giusta/?refresh_ce-cp

A few years after Revelli's passing in 2004, documentary film directors Andrea Fenoglio and Diego Mometti traced back, in over five years of work, the places where Revelli's interviews were conducted and linked, in the documentary *The people who are missing*,²⁴⁰ past generations and realities with the contemporary ones. As professor Marco Revelli, son of Nuto Revelli, states, the merit of this documentary is to have contextualized, and given habitat to the testimonies, by offering images of the places where these communities lived for centuries. Overlapping the voices recorded by Revelli in the seventies, with the contemporary landscape, the abandoned villages, and the beautiful mountains tops where those voices were recorded, the documentary reveals the emptiness of the people who are missing. On the other hand, it also explores new realities of the new peasantry and farmers who, in some places, live in the same areas and work the same land cultivated and inhabited by peasants at the beginning of the twentieth century. More importantly, something else resists, endures in the collective recounting of the world of the defeated, a deep respect for the land, for the work put into it and the livelihoods dependent upon it. "A vocation to slowness and depth, - or at least a deeply rooted mistrust for shallow speed – a lesson learned from the mountain landscape, that does not admit shortcuts, and punishes those who run."²⁴¹

²⁴⁰ Andrea Fenoglio and Diego Mometti, *Il Popolo che manca*, DVD, 2009.

²⁴¹ Marco Revelli, booklet included in the DVD *Il Popolo che manca*.

CHAPTER 4:

Rural Traditions, Environmental Activism and New Forms of Resistance in Food Cultures: Slow Food and Terra Madre

In 2015, Italy hosted the Milan World Expo, a food-focused six-month long event whose motto was “Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life.” Since its conclusion, I keep wondering what, and if, a few years from now, Italy, and the countries involved in this exposition, will remember the promising, central focus of the event. During my one-day visit, what I mostly recall is a 270-acre former industrial site in the outskirts of Milan transformed into a showcase of pavilions representing the richest countries of the world and featuring their most characteristic foods. The various countries also competed for the architectural beauty and originality of their pavilions. In the main lane, near all these beautiful pavilions, industrial food brands and the most powerful food chains, such as MacDonald’s, were also located. It was only at the margins, on the narrow, peripheral areas of the Expo location, that small stands or clusters could be visited. These small stands featured stories of food and its biodiversity in relationship to the planet’s climate, geography or environmental and ecological characteristics. All the countries that could not afford to be displayed in one of the magnificent temporary constructions were literally collapsed on the fringe of the Expo.

The Expo shifted from its noble ecological oriented proposals to its ultimate manifestation, and then focused mainly on attracting a distracted and

superficial public. This direction reflects some of the criticisms that social ecology and Murray Bookchin addresses regarding the contemporary social and ecological crisis. Bookchin, a theorist with a history of activism in several American radical movements since the end of WWII, and with a Marxist cultural and political background, argues that the development of human society is related to the development of hierarchy and domination. Consequently, according to him, every ecological issue is “also a social issue”²⁴². In his criticism of contemporary economic systems, the theorist proclaims that, “capitalism today has become a society, not only an economy”²⁴³. The very promising and environmentally conscious theme, “Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life,” advertised before the Milan Expo 2015, became, during the event, simply a slogan to attract distract consumers.

Nevertheless the original idea inspired eighty-six national and international organizations and institutions to collaborate in drafting the Milan Protocol on Food and Nutrition. The institutions involved in writing and signing the protocol ranged from local and international non-profit organizations to the food industry, among which Slow Food, WWF, National Geographic, Jamie Oliver Food Foundation, Legambiente, Eataly, Findus, COOP, Confagricoltura and Barilla, also appear.

The first edition of this document was issued in May 2014, and the last update is dated December 31, 2015. In the introduction we read,

²⁴² Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom. The emergence and dissolution of hierarchy*. (New York: Black Rose Books, 1991), xxx.

²⁴³ *Ibid*, xviii.

We, drawn by the theme “Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life” of the World EXPO 2015 in Milan, have come to realize that the links between people, the planet, and food need to be at the center of our considerations, as they are the critical foundation of the sustainability of the earth and of humanity alike: climate change, agricultural productivity, water management, dietary habits, urbanization, and population growth. The causes and consequences of these critical issues for our planet will ultimately depend on management of food systems in socioeconomic and environmental frameworks, currently afflicted by three major global paradoxes.²⁴⁴

The three major paradoxes the document refers to are food waste, sustainable agriculture and coexistence of hunger and obesity. The document offers details of the current situation of these issues, for example, the edible food wasted compared to the numbers of people suffering from malnutrition worldwide, or how food production and access to water is unevenly distributed. It then unveils why these three paradoxes need to be addressed from the parties involved in writing the document, through a series of specific commitments.

Slow Food, an international non-profit organization and movement, which seeks to refocus world attention on the value of food, its producers and biodiversity, is among the organizations that signed the Milan Protocol. Slow Food participated with skepticism and a polemical note in the Expo 2015 since, as its founder Carlo Petrini has stated several times “it doesn’t pay to leave an empty chair”²⁴⁵. The Slow Food “chair”, as the one of the clusters and the stands mentioned before, was at the margins of the Expo, and was much less visited

²⁴⁴ A downloadable pdf file of the official document is available, both in the English and Italian version, at www.milanprotocol.com.

²⁴⁵ *Il Manifesto*, 06-05-2015. “Petrini: Expo è il trionfo del capitalismo ma siamo tutti lì, la sedia vuota non serve”. <http://ilmanifesto.info/petrini-expo-e-il-trionfo-del-capitalismo-ma-siamo-tutti-li-la-sedia-vuota-non-serve/>

compared to the large more visible pavilions. This “chair” recalls the peripheral position occupied in Italian history by peasants. The unsolved political debates and interventions on the agrarian question which emerged in the last half of the eighteenth century in Italy, and continued in the twentieth century during fascism and after WWII, all pointed out the necessity to support peasants conditions to help the agrarian economy. Although the importance of solving this problem was recognized, the conditions of peasant poverty were never fully addressed or solved and they continued to be left at the margins, or, as Revelli pointed out, forgotten. Similarly, the Milan Expo 2015 could have been the opportunity to bring awareness on a global scale to the ecological, environmental, and social issues related to food and agriculture. The primary purpose of Expo 2015, “Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life”, thus became secondary, and instead the six-month event was transformed into a showcase of food products from all over the world, presented as an elegant and attractive international food fair.

The Milan Protocol was sponsored by Barilla Center for Food and Nutrition, an organization started in 2008, independent of the Barilla industry, and composed of experts and researchers in economic, social, environmental and scientific fields working together to increase knowledge and awareness on issues tied to food and nutrition around the world. The object of the Milan Protocol, a twenty-five-page document, was to create the premises for the Milan Charter, a final document to be presented to Ban Ki-moon, secretary general of the United Nations, at the end of the Milan Expo. The Milan Charter was meant to represent

“the legacy of Expo”²⁴⁶ but it became a short and very general document that listed good intentions without stating, as the Protocol proposed, possible and practical solutions. Topics like people’s inequality, land grabbing, GMO, the patenting of seeds, loss of biodiversity, as well as water and climate change are not present in the Milan Charter. Slow Food, together with other organizations such as Caritas and Oxfam Italia, withdrew their support of the final document. As pointed out by these organizations, the Milan Charter ended up being a “diplomatic document”²⁴⁷ that only speaks the language of the rich and industrialists.

In October 2015, when the Milan World Expo 2015 concluded, the authorities involved in the organization of the international exhibit and public opinion, focused mainly on the dismantling of the space, to what would have happened and who would have taken the beautiful pavilions, privileging the economic impact of the six-month event²⁴⁸. Very little was said on what kind of awareness the Exposition created. Hunger, ecological and environmental disasters caused because of and by the industrial food industry, sustainable

²⁴⁶ *Corriere della Sera*, 10-17-2015. “Milano Expo. Da Caritas a Slow Food “Solo buone intenzioni, noi non ci accontentiamo”.

http://milano.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/15_ottobre_17/milano-expo-caritas-slow-food-solo-buone-intenzioni-non-ci-accontentiamo-717cdad0-74a1-11e5-a7e5-eb91e72d7db2.shtml

²⁴⁷ *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 10-31-2015. “Expo 2015. La carta di Milano che divide”
<http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2015/10/31/expo-2015-la-carta-di-milano-che-divide-afferma-diritto-al-cibo-nessun-obiettivo-concreto-su-riduzione-sprechi/2176678/>

²⁴⁸ I am referring to newspaper articles, many of which are available online, specifically articles in the newspapers of La Repubblica, Il Manifesto, Il Giornale, Il Corriere della Sera, Il Fatto Quotidiano. http://www.repubblica.it/argomenti/expo_2015/;
<http://www.ilgiornale.it/speciali/expo-2015.html>; <http://www.corriere.it/expo-2015-milano/>;
<http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2015/05/08/expo-2015-si-puo-criticare-senza-essere-black-bloc/1663456/>;

agriculture, food as an expression of culture and peasant culture, food as the nourishing substance that can reconnect us all to the soil, lands, regions, landscapes, water, climates, natural surroundings, cultures and histories were relegated to the margins. Therefore, what was really left at the margins of the Expo and the Milan Chart were not simply the clusters and stands, but the opportunity to consider food, besides as a primary source of nutrition for humans, also as a link that connects people to their ecological environment, and most importantly, to those who work the land to produce those foods that sustain us. Food, from this perspective, reflects history, tradition and culture of people around the world and, most critically, creates a higher awareness of related current ecological, environmental and social issues.

In this chapter, I focus on the international movements of Slow Food and Terra Madre and regard them through the lenses of social ecology as presented by one of its main theorists, Murray Bookchin. I also deem the ideas and work portrayed by its founder Carlo Petrini, and the farmers and peasants he supports through its international movements, as contemporary manifestations of Gramsci's organic intellectual and who have their cultural roots in the intellectuals of the Resistance.

In presenting social ecology, Bookchin offers a dialectical interpretation of human history, culture and evolution and argues that, since the emergence of human society, and consequently the emergence of hierarchy and domination,

every ecological issue has become “also a social issue”²⁴⁹. By arguing that the contemporary ecological problems are rooted in social problem, social ecology’s basic premise is, as Eirik Eigladd well summarizes it, “to re-harmonize the relationship between society and nature, and to create a rational, ecological society”²⁵⁰. According to Bookchin poverty, hunger, economic and social issues are all directly related to the ecological crisis and need to be addressed simultaneously. In dialogue with Deep Ecology, but also criticizing its “biocentric”²⁵¹ position as the only premise to revalue humans’ impact on the environment, Bookchin argues that humans are biological and social beings, and proposes a relationship of complementarity between nonhumans and humans²⁵² in which “each species, be it a form of bacteria or deer, is knitted together in a network of interdependence”²⁵³.

It is the cultural and social aspect in humans that, according to Bookchin, makes humans beings responsible and accountable for the contemporary ecological issues. His critical approach to social issues proposes a renewed and creative human attitude toward technology and science in order to develop a better ecological society. We read, “... we need profound cultural changes and a new sensibility that will teach us to respect non-human life-forms; that will create new values in the production and consumption of goods; that will give rise to new

²⁴⁹ Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom. The emergence and dissolution of hierarchy*. (New York: Black Rose Books, 1991), xxx.

²⁵⁰ Murray Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Communalism*. (Oakland: AK Press, 2007), 12.

²⁵¹ Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, xxxi. Bookchin stresses several times that according to biocentrism, as Deep Ecology would often define itself, all life forms share an “intrinsic value”.

²⁵² *Ibid*, xlviii.

²⁵³ *Ibid*, 26.

life-fostering rather than destructive ones; that will remove conflicts between human populations and the non-human world; and that will abet natural diversity and evolutionary development”.²⁵⁴

Carlo Petrini, Slow Food, and the network of Terra Madre have been working in this direction. The ideas and practices toward food and the culture of food portrayed by Slow Food and Carlo Petrini, and the central role given by Terra Madre to the so called food cultures, the producers of food, offer shape to what Bookchin referred to as “a new consciousness and sensibility”²⁵⁵ that would transcend “poetry and science”²⁵⁶, in other words humanities on one side and science and technology on the other, “into a new realm of theory and practice”²⁵⁷. Through their activism, Slow Food and Terra Madre represent concrete alternatives to the contemporary ecological, environmental, social and economic crisis.

Between the seventies and the nineties, Bookchin called on the need to be imaginative in order to find new modes of thinking that would help to address the social and ecological crisis²⁵⁸. Slow Food, since its foundation, has worked in this direction. Vandana Shiva, comparing her work as an activist to that of Carlo Petrini, acutely encapsulates how their work converges today in ethics and values, even if their premises are different.

²⁵⁴ *Defending the Earth. A Dialogue between Murray Bookchin and Dave Foreman*. Edit by Steve Chase, (Boston: South End Press, 1991), 129.

²⁵⁵ Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 20.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

Carlo Petrini started from the culture of food, I started from the ecology of food production; but it was inevitable that the celebration of taste would lead Carlo to biodiversity and to the small producers, and that the protection of biodiversity and sustainable agriculture would bring me to celebrate quality and taste. The convergence of the two movements connected to food – one originated from the land, the principles of ecology and sustainability, the other from the pleasure of the table, from the quality of food, from the variety and uniqueness of food cultures – has liberated new forces, new possibilities, a new creativity.²⁵⁹

A trained physicist with a PhD dissertation in quantum physics, Vandana Shiva has been actively engaged over the last thirty five years as an environmental activist and intellectual, both in India and around the world. One of Shiva's main goals has been to demonstrate that multinational agribusiness corporations pose serious ecological threats and that what they call "efficiency and productivity"²⁶⁰ is, in reality, a "theft from nature"²⁶¹, and paradoxically to human beings as well. Her organization, Navdanya, which in Sanskrit means "nine seeds", supports local farmers, crops and plants that are at risk of extinction. Navdanya is also involved in the revival and protection of indigenous knowledge and culture.

4.1. The Beginnings: The cultural and literary landscape of Slow Food

Petrini has always been a gourmand and wine expert, and is very connected to his land, the Cuneo area and the Piedmont region of northern Italy. Nevertheless the background and beginnings of the Slow Food journey

²⁵⁹ Preface to the Italian edition of *Slow Food Revolution*. Milano: Rizzoli 2005, 9. The English translation is mine.

²⁶⁰ Vandana Shiva, *Stolen Harvest*, (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000), 17

²⁶¹ Ibid.

originated in Montalcino, Tuscany, in 1982, when Carlin (his Piedmontese diminutive) and his friends decided to join a lunch organized by the historical antifascist people's association Arci. Bad food and uncomfortable tablemates, "a *ribollita*²⁶² that is best forgotten, ... All the while a crowd of people on the grand staircase waits to be seated,"²⁶³ are some of Petrini's memories of that famous lunch which sparked the idea of the first oeno-gastronomic league, Arci Gola. The cultural magazine *La Gola*, whose first edition came out in the same year, inspired this name.

Arci Gola was officially founded in 1986 in Piedmont, as a specialized branch of the historical antifascist people's association "Arci". It soon after changed into Arcigola, and transformed the historical Italian association, "Arci", into a prefix reinforcing, in this way, the idea of "gola" as gourmet and food connoisseur²⁶⁴. In Arcigola, the idea of a deep connection of food with culture, its land and landscape, its producers and environment is, in its broader significance, already present. Published in an article in one of the first numbers of *Gambero Rosso*, Petrini's words contain the seeds that will sprout into Slow Food, and all the different organizations born from it in the following years. We read:

I have the great luck of having been born and living in an extraordinary part of southern Piedmont, the Langhe, which borders on the end of the Ligurian Appennin foothills and is surrounded by the slow and sinuous course of the Tanaro River. In this sub-alpine part of our beautiful country, we grow up having conversations and

²⁶² A traditional and popular soup dish from Tuscany.

²⁶³ *Slow Food Revolution*. Trans. by Francesca Santovetti. New York: Rizzoli International, 2006. Print, 4.

²⁶⁴ Although some of this information is now common knowledge, a more detailed story of the beginnings of Slow Food is available in the third chapter in *Slow Food Revolution*, "The ideas: 1986-1989".

discussions about good wine, the typical dishes of our tradition, and about food as a redemption from our ancient misery. Fenoglio, Pavese, Lajolo, and Nuto Revelli are our literary legends; in their works we can read our story, our way of being, and also the extraordinary development of the local wine industry, once poor and dispossessed.²⁶⁵

“Having conversations” about wine and food, while enjoying it, as Petrini says, reminds us of convivial gatherings. The English adjective convivial, in fact, means a festive atmosphere or event. Both “convivial” and the Italian noun “convivio” stem from the Latin adjective “convivialis” and noun “convivium”, convivere, living together and both terms associate the idea of living and dining together. A synonym of the Italian noun “convivio” is, in fact, banquet, although when thinking of banquets our imagination takes us to lush feasts for rich commensals. On the contrary Massimo Montanari reminds us that food recipes and food inventions do not have high origins, do not come from luxury or rich people, but can originate out of necessity, and poverty²⁶⁶. As Montanari observes, we cannot be deceived by the noble origins of the word, as the tradition of eating together has also peasant origins. In the the Middle Ages, “Even the peasant family defines its own identity at the table. ‘To live on one bread and one wine,’ that is, to share food, is in medieval language an almost technical way of signifying that one belongs to the same family”²⁶⁷. The act of eating together then is not related to a social class, and for the peasant it also implies a moment of connection and recognition of one with the other.

²⁶⁵ *Slow Food Revolution*, 55 (English version).

²⁶⁶ Massimo Montanari, *Food is Culture*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 17.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 94.

Petrini recognizes his cultural roots in the intellectual fervor of the post-war. The partisans and authors of the so-called literature of the Resistance constitute the literary landscape Petrini refers to in his article. In Pavese, the landscape of the Langhe and its inhabitants are constantly present, even when his characters present an intellectual distance from the local peasants, as in *La casa in collina*. The hills are described as “a way of living”²⁶⁸ – and the protagonist, a teacher who works in Turin but goes back in the hills during the war, has primordial reminiscences similar to Montanari’s observations on the origins of convivial eating as well as Petrini’s pride in eating in company. The protagonist adds to the description a nostalgic note when reflecting on the life style of local people, “There was in those people, in the young, ... in the easygoing cordiality of company and wine, something familiar, ... and in the coolness of the hill, in that emptiness, in that anxiety that kept you alert, I found again a more ancient flavor, peasant, remote”²⁶⁹.

This body of literature for Petrini, and Piedmontese in general, is also a means to redeem the past poverty of the Langhe, to reclaim its peasant history and a way to root the spirit of activism of the organization in the local history of resistance. Fenoglio in his writings often includes names and details of the small villages of the area of Alba, as they are a world of their own, independent and isolated from the rest of the world. Sometimes he uses nostalgic or sentimental

²⁶⁸ Cesare Pavese, *La casa in collina*, 3. English version is mine. The original Italian version says, “un modo di vivere”.

²⁶⁹ Ibid, 8. The original version reads, “C’era in quella gente, nei giovani, ..., nella stessa cordialità facile della compagnia e del vino, qualcosa che conoscevo, ... E sul fresco della collina, in quel vuoto, in quell’ansia che manteneva all’erta, ritrovavo un sapore più antico, contadino, remoto”.

tones, but often the villages and the landscapes are documentation and stories of peasant misery, as in *La Malora*. Other times, his stories unveil details of the first ecological consequences due to the post-war industrialization phase, revealing in the author a form of environmental and social consciousness. In *Un giorno di fuoco*, the uncle is describing to his nephew the near village of Gorzegno, where a series of crimes were just committed, but his attention shifts to the river down the valley, “Have you ever seen Bormida? Its water has the color of clotted blood because it carries away the waste of the factories of Cengio, and on its banks, grass no longer grows. It is such dirty and poisoned water, that you feel cold in the marrow of your bones, especially when you see it in the moonlight. The castle, in the lower part of the valley, used to be more beautiful than the one of Monesiglio, and now is crumbling and the county is allowing it.”²⁷⁰

The Bormida River crosses the regions of Piedmont and Liguria and, as a sub-tributary of the Po River and tributary of the Tanaro River, is one of the longest rivers of Piedmont. At the end of nineteenth century a dynamite factory was built in the county of Cengio, an area between the regions of Liguria and Piedmont. The waste created and thrown in the Bormida River by the Cengio industry was so poisonous that, at the beginning of the twentieth century the magistrate of Mondovì declared the water of the river undrinkable. Since then the

²⁷⁰ Beppe Fenoglio, “Un giorno di fuoco” in *Romanzi e Racconti*, (Torino: Einaudi, 2001), 213. The text is in Italian and the English version is mine. The original says, “Hai mai visto Bormida? Ha l’acqua del color del sangue raggrumato, perché porta via i rifiuti delle fabbriche di Cengio e sulle sue rive non cresce più un filo d’erba. Un’acqua più sporca e avvelenata, che ti mette freddo nel midollo, specie a vederla di notte sotto la luna. E poi c’è il castello, sempre nella parte bassa, che una volta doveva essere anche più bello di quello di Monesiglio, ma adesso se ne va in briciole e il comune ce lo lascia andare”.

Bormida River, the valleys it crosses and its residents, both human and non, have suffered deadly effects to the point that, as Fenoglio stated in the sixties, not even grass grows on its shores.

After almost fifteen years, in spite of the visible consequences, the situation has actually worsened, and Revelli could only denounce the ecological disaster once again. “In Bormida Valley, the river polluted by Cengio’s industries is like a snake of disgusting sludge that poisons the environment. The fog of Bormida kneads with the poison, rises toward the sky and where the fog arrives, so does the plague. The factory owners impose a ruthless and cruel blackmail: ‘Do you want your sons in the factory? Enjoy the poison’²⁷¹. As Revelli recounts, air pollution has reached such a toxic level that in contact with the white vapor, pollution transforms a natural weather condition into a deadly and scary invasive plague. Water, both from the river and the mist of the fog, has converted from a source of life into a source of death. In a paradoxical atmosphere where history repeats itself, slow violence manifests once again in the poor²⁷². The young generations of peasants, hoping for a change in life, are now the new disposable victims at the bottom of the industrial social class. Inheriting an attitude of resistance and activism from the partisan movement toward injustice and

²⁷¹ Nuto Revelli, *Il mondo dei vinti*, (Torino, Einaudi, 1977), xxix. Italian version: ““Nella Valle Bormida il fiume inquinato dalle industrie di Cengio è una serpe di melma schifosa che avvelena l’ambiente. La nebbia del Bormida si impasta col veleno, sale verso l’alto, dove arriva la nebbia arriva la peste. Il ricatto che i padroni impongono è spietato, crudele: “Volete i figli in fabbrica? Godetevi il veleno”.

²⁷² Serenella Iovino offers an interesting reading of the ecological disaster of the Bormida Valley and the dynamics of violence that surrounds the peasant world in terms of slow violence, a concept developed by Rob Nixon in *Slow Violence and the Environmental of the Poor* (2011), that Iovino further expands in her chapter “Slow” in *Ecocriticism and Italy, Ecology, Resistance and Liberation* (2016).

oppression, Carlo Petrini transforms the history of the poverty of peasants from his land into strength, so as to reclaim its tradition through the culture of food.

4.2. Slow Food and the Globalization of Food

The eighties also marked the rise of fast food chains in Italy with McDonald's being the first, opening near the famous Spanish steps in Rome. Set in a very strategic area of the city, McDonald's was one of the first visible signs of globalization of food in Europe and Italy. As Ariès points out, the success, at a world level, of the chain was, and is, possible because McDonald's was the same in each country, even while featuring certain specific characteristics, from interior design to some particular menu items from the country. Although originating in America, and offering American food, according to the author, McDonald's does not identify a specific nation, but represents the modern way of eating,— “that is to say, of the man who reached the era of a globalized world”²⁷³. Nowadays people, especially in industrialized societies, eat everywhere and at any time, and fast foods have represented, for decades, the most popular answer to this life style, and to a form of globalization defined by Ritzer as “the globalization of nothing”²⁷⁴. Ritzer very concisely defines “nothing” as a “social form that is generally centrally conceived, controlled and comparatively devoid of distinctive substantive content”²⁷⁵. In fast food chains, food is prepared in the same way

²⁷³ *I figli di MacDonal'd's*, 15. “cioè dell'uomo giunto nell'era della globalizzazione del mondo”

²⁷⁴ *The McDonaldization of Society*, 167

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

everywhere, served in a recognizable atmosphere which is apparently suitable and comfortable for the so called western tourist, but in reality, empty of any connection to its cultural or natural origin. Bookchin's ideas of a society based on ecological principles clearly oppose Ritzer's "globalization of nothing". The theorist of social ecology proposes the concept of "ecological wholeness"²⁷⁶ as a principle based on "a dynamic *unity of diversity*"²⁷⁷. "In nature", the author continues, "balance and harmony are achieved by ever-changing differentiation, by ever-expanding diversity"²⁷⁸. Food and its cultivation were fostered, until the emergence of multinational corporations, mainly through small scale and diversified production.

Petrini and Slow Food present food in a new dignified form, as a material element that can redeem the land and its people. A sense of pride in belonging to the Langhe is translated as a sense of belonging to the local, a very important aspect that Slow Food will further develop in its philosophy. From the tradition of civil resistance of the partisan in WWII, to the literature of resistance, Slow Food initially became known as a form of resistance to the spreading of MacDonald's and the fast food chains. While industrial food and the fast food chains worked toward a standardized way of presenting, producing and, in general, conceiving of and consuming food, Slow Food understood that it is necessary to work on a local scale to counteract the virus of the 'sterile' food industry. Similarly, Bookchin stresses that "Ecological stability, in effect, is a function ... of complexity and

²⁷⁶ Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 24.

²⁷⁷ Ibid. The italic is in the original text.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

variety”²⁷⁹, and refers to the ecological strategies of small crops cultivation, as an example of supporting a “mixed population of plants and animals”²⁸⁰.

Petrini’s answers in a private interview, released in the form of a written correspondence, help to understand the Italian cultural, historical and environmental landscape when Slow Food was established.

After WWII, the increase of intensive industrial agriculture changed the shape of our countryside, especially in the more modern areas of the Po valley, while the marginalized areas were inevitably depopulating. Everything was changing, but we were as though anesthetized, not fully aware of what would be the eventual price to pay. The prevailing social ambition of the time was to abandon the countryside in order to look for a better life style in the city. In the collective imagination, the rural areas had always represented misery, ignorance, and a hard life. ... It took a while to connect the dots, to understand that to lose peasant culture also meant to weaken local economy, meant to change farming and landscapes, to forget and destroy traditional farming knowledge, and consequently deteriorate the social strata.²⁸¹

Petrini here links the Italian history of the last seventy years by regarding peasants as keepers of a cultural tradition that did not have a voice, and that today has the power to recuperate, rediscover, and revalue through revived practices the Italian agrarian past and culture of food. While the first part of Petrini’s answer focuses on the twenty years following WWII, the second part recalls Revelli’s testimonies of the seventies and finally moves to the eighties and the social, cultural and environmental consequences inherited by the Italian “economic boom” of the fifties and sixties. Within this context, Slow Food

²⁷⁹ Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 24.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ This quote is part of Petrini’s answer to my first question. The complete interview is included in the appendix.

represents the other side of the coin, the counterpart, and a new form of resistance to the threats of industrialized food and international food chains and a new form of awareness. Moreover, while having a new understanding of Italian peasant history, Slow Food and later the various branches and movements born from it, recognize farming not only as a fundamental component of Italian culture, but also as the deep connection between peasants and landscape.

Fast food chains, indeed, have not always found a fruitful response in the Italian cultural landscape. Sometimes traditional cultures related to food prevailed, and creatively regained terrain, as in the story of the small southern city of Altamura in the region of Puglia. In Altamura, McDonald's lasted less than two years and closed in 2003 thanks to the cultural activism of the residents of the city, the same year that Altamura bread was recognized by the European Community as a P.D.O.²⁸² product. The Altamura bread roots its origins in the old agricultural and pastoral culture of the High Murgia land, and its fame reaches the entire Italian territory. The bread is made only from local varieties of durum wheat semolina and is cooked in wood burning fire ovens. It was indeed a bread product related to the Altamura bread, the focaccia of Altamura (or Pugliese) from a small bakery near McDonald's that forced the big chain to close.

A cultural battle between tradition and modernity where food was the weapon and, as the baker Onofrio Pepe ironically stated, the "... bullets were

²⁸² P.D.O. stands for Protected Designation of Origin. Altamura bread was the first P.D.O. bread awarded by the European Community under the category "bread and bakery products". P.D.O. refers to agricultural and food products produced, processed and prepared in specific geographical areas, using traditional methods and consequently acquiring unique properties.

focaccia. And sausage. And bread”²⁸³ (web article). Although initially fast food attracted the curiosity of a moderate number of people, gradually the inhabitants of the small city went back to buy the homemade focaccia, leaving the big chain almost empty. “McDonald’s didn’t get beat by a baker. McDonald’s got beat by a culture”, said the resident Patrick Girondi. Girondi’s words display a form of cultural resistance toward the uniformity proposed by the food industry, and reflect a sense of local pride toward food traditions similar to that expressed by Petrini in his early eighties article in *Il Gambero Rosso*. The story of Altamura, although it may represent the exception compared to the homogenization of industrial food, establishes that food in Italian culture, as well as in most cultures with a strong peasant tradition and history, exemplifies a sense of belonging among communities sharing their deep connection to the local histories and ecologies. As Bookchin often highlights, this story also proves that social and ecological crises produce new sensibilities through which new ideas and counter actions take form and counter balance the massive exploitation of land resources and labor.

Fast food chains embody a depersonalized mentality and culture as well as the homogenization of nature and ecologies of food. As Petrini understood since the beginning, this phenomenon needed to be counteracted on a local scale. Only locally is it possible to “render fertile both the biodiversity of nature and the cultural diversity that results from it. For food culture -and not only food

²⁸³ Ian Fisher, “The Bread is Famously Good, but It Killed McDonald’s”, (The New York Times, 01-12-2006)
http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/12/international/europe/12italy.html?_r=2&

culture- has to be formed in connection with context, with the resources available in local areas, with ecosystems, with one's relationship with one's neighbors. ”.

²⁸⁴ Through a slow, careful process of bringing knowledge and awareness, together with pleasure and quality, on specific local food, Slow Food conceives food diversity as a source of richness and an opportunity to recover and rediscover humans' cultural and biological roots. With local as a key concept, Slow Food created, in the last thirty years, over 450 presidia in the world, of which 262 are in Italy, through which to sustain food quality production risking extinction, revitalizing traditional food cultures, native breeds and local native plants. Today, the small red snail symbol on a food product is a guarantee of quality both for those who produce and consume the food.

According to Andrea Segrè, professor of Politics of international agriculture in the University of Bologna, founder of Last Minute Market and signatory of the Milan Protocol, Slow Food has the merit to have eradicated the ignorance toward some practices of industrial food, but it has also created prejudices toward industrial food production in general. The proliferation of etiquettes protecting the quality and origins of food, including the growth and success of the Slow Food presidia, has increased the dichotomy between two food categories, industrial and junk food on one side and gourmet food on the other. As a supporter of what he calls “cibo medio”²⁸⁵, middle food, neither too

²⁸⁴ Carlo Petrini. *Food and Freedom. How the Slow Food Movement is changing the World through Gastronomy*. Trans. By John Irving. New York: Rizzoli Ex Libris, 2015. Kindle ed., 91.

²⁸⁵ Andrea Segrè. *L'oro nel piatto*. (Torino: Einaudi, 2015), 14

high nor too low in terms of quality, Segrè sees a possible solution to hunger and food waste in the creation of a food industry of higher quality than today, of what he calls middle quality. But will middle food, industrially produced, really solve hunger, as Segrè claims, or will it continue to support the global North, marginalizing those who provide for the food we eat, the land and the its workers? Peasant cultures, farmers and all those who, on a smaller scale, work daily to produce the food we eat, are often invisible and still considered, in Gramscian terms, subaltern classes. Agroecology, a discipline developed in the seventies, employs ecological theory to study and manage agricultural systems, and seems to be more in line with Slow Food principles. Through a transdisciplinary approach, agroecology recognizes that agriculture cannot be considered separately from environmental, social, cultural and economic issues. The work of agroecology centers on linking farmers' knowledge, social science, and rural social movements. The three keywords identifiable with Slow Food philosophy and practice, "good, clean and fair", reclaim justice, not only for food "di per se", but also and especially for the land and its workers.

Working to support local farming economies and food products through ecological and sustainable practices does not mean refusing to recognize that we live and move daily in a world globally connected, where local and global constantly intersect and interact. Terra Madre has been the next step which Petrini and Slow Food took to recognize, make visible, give space and a voice to the food communities from all over the world, while supporting the idea of reviving local realities. As Petrini claims, "Terra Madre is a concrete way of

putting into practice what has been defined as ‘glocalism’: a set of actions carried out on a local scale to generate major repercussions on a global scale²⁸⁶ Terra Madre has always been thought of as a network among the rural communities, from farmers, shepherds, to fishermen and all those who, through their work, respect and support biodiversity, while working in harmony with their environments. The first gathering of Terra Madre was held in Turin in 2004 and featured around 5000 people coming from 130 countries²⁸⁷. Today Terra Madre is a biannual meeting where food communities meet without any aim to prevail upon or compete with each other, but to exchange and share their practices and knowledge. The term global, according to Petrini, can be understood using a more holistic approach, and as Shiva claims, instead of a global system ruled by corporations and industry, global can refer to “our universal values as humans. ... It can refer to humans as one species among many, which both differentiates us from, and connects us to, other species. We can experience the global belonging to the earth family”²⁸⁸.

The networking promoted by Terra Madre and food communities does not freeze in time and space in Turin, but are part of a web that slowly and constantly works to promote cultural changes similar to those that Bookchin and social ecology envisioned. The 2016 Terra Madre gathering is experiencing some

²⁸⁶ Carlo Petrini. *Terra Madre. Forging a New Global Network of Sustainable Food Communities*. Trans. By John Irving. (White River Junction (VT): Chelsea Green Publishing, 2010), 1.

²⁸⁷ Carlo Petrini, *Terra Madre. Come non farci mangiare dal cibo*. Bra: Slow Food editore; (Milano: Giunti editore, 2009), 22.

²⁸⁸ Vandana Shiva. *Earth Democracy. Justice, Sustainability and Peace*. Cambridge (MA): South End Press, 2005), 82.

crucial changing. The two biannual events, Salone del Gusto, which promotes quality and diversity of food, and Terra Madre, both supported by Slow Food and hosted in Turin, Piedmont, during the same period, will become one single event under the name “Terra Madre Salone del Gusto”. The purpose of unifying the two events is to make clear that “there cannot be gastronomic pleasure without responsibility and sustainability”²⁸⁹. In addition, the event will not be enclosed in the space of a convention center, but will take place throughout some of the most historical and prestigious sites of Turin. The thousands of farmers and food producers from the world will meet and mingle with the city residents and make, as Petrini hopes, “visitors and foreigners even more aware of the need to preserve our common heritage”²⁹⁰. The common heritage is not only the local region of Piedmont, with its vineyard landscapes, hills and mountains, history and culture, but it also our host planet, from the rivers to the oceans, woods, valleys, plains, deserts, mountains, and all nonhuman inhabitants.

Starting from food, a very concrete and material human need and source of pleasure, Slow Food and Carlo Petrini propose a new intellectual perspective and material culture: a political, social, economic and more importantly, ecological paradigm shift coming from below, from the margins, from the South of the world, wherever that might be, as a form of liberation from poverty, hunger, inequality, and ecological and human exploitation.²⁹¹

²⁸⁹ <http://www.slowfood.com/terra-madre-salone-del-gusto-2016-steps-outside/> (Visited on 04/03/16)

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Carlo Petrini. *Cibo e libertà*, 7.

4.3. Ermanno Olmi's Terra Madre

In 2006, before the second gathering of Terra Madre in Turin, Petrini contacted the Italian film director Ermanno Olmi and invited him to make a film documentary that would narrate the stories and the people of Terra Madre. Olmi accepted the proposal and through his art, talent, and experience in narrating peasant stories the result was, and is, a faithful documentation of Terra Madre. In addition the images, sounds, and narrative, offer a very personal and ecologically mindful interpretation of the deep connection of humans to the planet we live in.

A poet of cinema and a very sensible artist, Olmi deserves a book or a chapter of his own. Olmi's cinematic production has, in fact, contributed greatly to the history of Italian cinema. In particular, many of his films can be perceived through the growing field of ecocinema, a branch of critical scholarship that investigates the intersection of cinema with environmental understanding. As Scott MacDonald emphasizes, "The job of an ecocinema is to provide new kinds of film experience that demonstrate an alternative to conventional media-spectatorship and help to nurture a more environmentally progressive mindset"²⁹². It is necessary, thus, to briefly trace Olmi's career and contribution to the understanding of the world of Italian peasants in order to establish how Terra Madre cannot be considered just a simple film documentary on the movement,

²⁹² Rust, Stephen, Monani, Salma, and Cubitt, Sean, eds. *Ecocinema Reader : Theory and Practice*. (Florence, KY, USA: Routledge, 2012), 20.

but a work of art of its own. The protagonists of the film documentary are, as Olmi calls them, “horticulturists of civilizations”²⁹³.

Born in northern Italy in 1931 to a family of humble peasant origins, Olmi begins his artistic cinematic career shooting a series of documentaries for the Italian electric company Edisonvolta. Toward the end of the fifties, he debuts in the film industry, and in 1978, writes and directs his first film depicting the Italian rural world, *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, which wins fourteen awards, including the Palme d’Or at Cannes. Like Revelli, Olmi witnesses in person the abandonment and weakening of the countryside and the rural economy. Without sentimentality, the film poetically centers on peasant life in the countryside and valley of Bergamo at the end of the 1800s. His attention to the human condition is always combined with a careful consideration of the environment, natural and non, where he sets his stories. With words that involve all our senses, Olmi gracefully recalls, “That rural world, poor and yet as enchanted as my childhood memories, entered my life like a chorus enters an opera: always unstable sceneries in the flow of seasons. The breath rich of fragrances that, like light, makes you discover the beauty present on this Earth”.²⁹⁴ Olmi’s films and documentaries often connect historical or fictional events with literary references

²⁹³ Carlo Petrini, *Ortolani di civiltà* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2010), 10. This book comes with the DVD of the film documentary *Terra Madre* by Ermanno Olmi and includes several contributions from ecologists, farmers, journalists and film directors.

²⁹⁴ Ermanno Olmi, *L’apocalisse è un lieto fine. Storie della mia vita e del nostro futuro*. (Milano: Rizzoli, 2012) ebook version (“La pianta di pomodori”). The English translation is mine. The original says, “Quel mondo rurale, povero eppure incantato quanto lo sono i ricordi d’infanzia, è entrato nella mia vita come il coro in un’opera lirica: scenari sempre mutevoli nello scorrere delle stagioni. E il respiro dell’aria densa di profumi che, allo stesso modo della luce, fa scoprire la bellezza che c’è sulla Terra”.

and combined with the cinematic elements, inspire a timeless vision in which reality is brilliantly intertwined with imagination. His short documentary *Along the River*, shot in the nineties along the Po River, uses a narrative voice and reads from famous literary works to remind us of the deep connection between humans and our natural environment.

A strong believer of the countless possibilities of cinema, in 1982 Olmi founded the school “Ipotesi Cinema”, a sort of collective laboratory where professionals do not teach in the canonic way, but pragmatically share their experiences. Students work together in writing the screenplay, directing, shooting, and editing the film. Since 1978 “il Maestro” (the Master), as he is often called, has won multiple film awards among which are *The Legend of the Holy Drinker* and *The Profession of Arms*, and in 2008 at the Venice International Film Festival, Olmi won the honorary Golden Lion for his career. His last film documentaries, *Rupi del vino*, shot on the rocky mountain slopes of Valtellina; *Terra Madre*; and *Our host Planet*, a short documentary presented during the Milan Expo 2015, all focus on the intersection of farming cultures, food, and climate change. The cinematic style of his film documentaries creates a constant and powerful intersection between reality and poetry in which the images involve both our emotions and intellect. Olmi’s stories and his artistic representation of the peasant world and its culture are a form of resistance toward humans’ exploitation of nature, and often inspire new creative forms of activism.

The first images of *Terra Madre* are very revealing. After seeing some children playing in a vegetable garden and gathering apples from the soil, the

scene changes and we see a detail of three apples on a wooden table: “Musetto” apple – medium size, “Gran Alessandro” or “Prussiana” apple - large size, and a wild apple – a very small size²⁹⁵. Olmi opens his documentary of the movement with an extreme close-up of these apples, set on a rustic table by the wrinkled hands of an old farmer. Small cuts on his hand display visible traces of dirt and serve as a testament to the physical work performed by peasants. This simple act of the farmer's hands, the hand made wooden table, and the three different kinds of apples, two of which represent centuries of human interaction with nature, reveal the depth of connection, dependence, and alliance of humans and the land. The aged hands suggest the wisdom and knowledge gained by the long, direct experience of humans in the fields, and introduce the sequences that follow.

Music bridges the following scene, where images of nature and countryside are accompanied by a voice-over narrating a few verses from Virgil's *The Georgics*: “For ‘neath the shade of towers, where the river laves the fields,/ an old man I saw who had few acres of neglected land./ Yet he, the while his meagre garden-herbs planted,/ and all around white lilies, vervains and lean poppy set,/ in pride of spirit matched the pride of kings./ He was the first to cull the rose in Spring,/ He the ripe fruits in Autumn./ And home returning not till night was late,/ with unbought plenty heaped his board on high.”

²⁹⁵ This and some other frames from the film documentary appear as reference at the end of this chapter.

The main characteristic of *The Georgics* is the constant recall of the original pact between humans and the land, and of the farmer's work in the fields as the basis of human society. Olmi's poetic images of the countryside, and the contemporaneity of Virgil's lines describing the farmer's struggle in nature, contain the seed of the documentary and anticipate the main message of the movement Terra Madre.

Olmi's documentary was released in 2009 after the second gathering of Terra Madre in Turin, Italy. After Olmi's poetic introduction, while the opening titles scroll on the right side, a little screen on the left shows a few images of the first 2004 Terra Madre meeting. Extreme long shots reveal a crowded conference hall with people of different ethnicities, as Carlo Petrini's voiceover announces, "There are 1,022 communities here in Turin, with a total of 4,888 delegates". Against medium long shots of the delegates walking in the hall, Olympic-games style, we hear Petrini's voice saying "129 countries are represented", and listing all present. Even before the film fully unfolds, with these first introductory minutes, the viewer feels the impact of the presence of farmers, which this gathering represents in the industrialized city of Turin.

The film, through the lens of the director, is an important reportage of the interventions of thousands of world delegates in Turin, and constantly confronts us with the contradictions and paradoxes of the current societal and economic system. While the titles are still scrolling, Vandana Shiva's little interview concludes the mini reportage of the first 2004 Terra Madre meeting. Her words resonate as a wake-up call, like our conscience or inner voice, engaging us, and

reminding us of something we are all aware of, but often prefer to ignore: “How many lies can they tell when they starve the African child and create a skeleton body, yet they malnourish the American child and keep creating an obese body? The obese body of the American and the skeleton in Africa are products of the same exploitative food system and both are avoidable”. After almost twelve years, these words still reflect an ongoing global reality.

Locked within daily routines, people in the so called industrialized countries often consider problems, especially those associated with food and nutrition, as a product of life styles, and as consequences of a rushed and alienated rhythm, into which we naturally and inevitably fall. We often all fail to consider that by perpetuating these habits, we are simply doing nothing to change them. In this global market economy, this attitude bolsters and perpetuates the poverty and exploitation of the so-called global south. Similarly, Bookchin often points out that a radical ecological movement needs to propose solutions toward the suffering of people²⁹⁶. “We should never lose sight of the fact”, Bookchin stresses, “that the project of human liberation has now become an ecological project, just as, conversely, the project of defending the Earth has become a social project”²⁹⁷. Shiva's comment during the first minutes of the documentary while the opening titles are still running, is a message of authorship that Olmi seems to want to offer her. As does the entire film, Shiva's provocative

²⁹⁶ Murray Bookchin, *Defending the Earth*, 131.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

words cry out for new possibilities, and underscore the potential and responsibility for different behavior.

The documentary proceeds with Carlo Petrini's opening discourse to the second Terra Madre meeting in 2006. On one level, his speech advances the mission of Terra Madre during its second convocation, and on another, it promotes Slow Food's message of the need to support local economies. A medium long shot frames Carlo Petrini at a red podium with the Terra Madre logo. International guests sit in the back, and in the audience, the camera frames Sergio Chiamparino, then mayor of Turin, and Sergio Napolitano, the President of the Italian Republic. Their presence can be interpreted as a sign of the political implications and necessary alliances with institutions in organizing the biannual event. Petrini's discourse continues, "What are the seeds we should sow? I thought about it and I believe that Terra Madre's strongest seed is the use of local economy, to shorten the distance between producer and consumer. The local economy is in perfect harmony with nature. Communities are first and foremost a place. A place and people. People from a place."

These words refer to farmers and people whose livelihood is strictly related to their land. Petrini's simple yet direct, incisive and charismatic personality defines a farmers' reality historically subordinated to feudal systems, landlords and political interests that today more than ever, have the power and the knowledge to restore the lost balance with our environment. By emphasizing the fact that the local economy is in harmony with nature, Petrini is not going back in time, or ignoring the fact we live in a globalized reality, but is encouraging

an economic system that strengthens the market of local small farming and factories, and supports local cultures and natural food resources.

Different images accompany Petrini's speech, encouraging our senses and feelings to connect with the message of his words. At the words "to shorten the distance between the producer and consumer", we see a long shot of a farmer spreading seeds in a plowed field. A studied choice of images, edited with a rhythm that follows Petrini's discourse, gives the audience a better sense of the interdependence of humans with the fruits of the land. In a medium close-up, a farmer in a field lets go of a few grains from one hand, while in the other he holds a sickle. Due to necessity, human intellect has, through centuries, designed and produced technological devices to help deal with nature and find ways to work with nature. With these images, Olmi guides us through this journey, and when the farmer drops the last the grains in the soil, a sharp cut shows a close-up of hands mixing flour with water on a wooden table. The movement of the hands toward the right of the screen connects to the next shot, a close-up of the two arms pulling out, from right to left, a loaf of bread from a wood fire oven. This last image concludes the sequence and accompanies Petrini's last words, "the local economy is in perfect harmony with nature", thus reinforcing the message of the intimate dependence of human sustenance to natural resources.

4.4. Terra Madre: A New Paradigm Through Food Cultures

The economic, environmental and political movement known as "de-growth", developed in the last decades in Europe, presents similar arguments

proposed by Terra Madre. Both Petrini and the de-growth movement accentuate the importance of revitalizing local economy and point out that, if on one level it is imperative to stop using natural resources as if they were limitless, it also is necessary to generate an economic system respectful of the environment and focused on a better living and life style of people. Although the term de-growth is relatively recent, the French theorist Latouche traces its ideas with Thoreau's first remarks on the need to live with less, and in more contact with nature, and with the cultural and the environmental critiques of economics portrayed by the Club of Rome²⁹⁸.

In 1970, the Club of Rome, an international group of distinguished personalities from the fields of science, politics, and academia, commissioned a group of scientists from Massachusetts Institute of Technology to conduct a study on the possible future scenarios of the world. The first edition of *The Limits to Growth*, reported that "global ecological constraints (related to resource use and emissions) would have [had] significant influence on global developments in the twenty-first century"²⁹⁹, and pointed out that the human ecological footprint was beyond the capacity of the planet to absorb it³⁰⁰. The report scientifically demonstrated, for the first time, the possible and catastrophic consequences of unlimited growth on a limited planet. Forty years later, while these notions have circulated widely, and their scenarios have often materialized in the form of

²⁹⁸ Serge Latouche, *Farewell to Growth* 13.

²⁹⁹ Donella Meadows, Jorgen Randers and Dennis Meadows, *Limits to Growth. The 30-Year Update*. (White River Junction: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004), x.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

natural disasters, global economy and industry still behave as if the planet's resources are infinite, and humans have unlimited control and rights over other forms of life.

According to Latouche, local economy, all that is produced and consumed within the ratio of sixty miles, supports small farming, is seasonal, fresh, follows traditional methods, and can “perfectly substitute the big distribution”³⁰¹. While considering the accelerated damage caused to the environment, our health and living conditions in the last seventy years, the de-growth program offers a valid and radical alternative to the dominant economy without having to renounce our wellbeing. The realization of this program implies what Latouche calls a decolonization of our imagination. In order to do so, we need to be ready to change our values, beliefs, mentality, and life styles, and start thinking about practicing a life style based on different principles, other than those of consumerism³⁰². Politics of de-growth and local economy include supporting a re-evaluation of local farming, both in the North and in the South, and creating more independence and autonomy to local realities, cultures, and traditions.

The aspirations of Terra Madre's Petrini meet some of the ideas portrayed by de-growth and, through its network of people, go beyond an idea. Terra Madre, in fact, has been able to put into practice its goal to unite, and create a sense of pride in all the people who, traditionally, have forever been considered

³⁰¹ Latouche, *Come si esce dalla società dei consumi*. (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2011), 59.

³⁰² Latouche, *La scommessa della decrescita*. (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2010), 118.

humble, marginal and the least significant around the world³⁰³. Peasants, historically treated and considered no more than outcasts and a labor force, are keeping alive the ancient knowledge of agriculture, and the traditional natural way of treating the land and its fruits. Both in the North and in the South of the world, farmers and peasants have been relegated for different reasons. The farming community in the North has gradually disappeared, due to a change toward a more industrial economy. In the South, peasants have always been seen and treated as a mass to exploit and manipulate for economic or political reasons, but not worthy of a dignified life. Terra Madre is aiming to create a community and network of people that will re-establish sustainability, sobriety, and a more human and real economy³⁰⁴.

Both Petrini and Latouche realize that their discourse needs to be disseminated and practiced both in the North and South of the world. De-growth, as Latouche emphasizes, is not an alternative, but a matrix of alternatives³⁰⁵. Aware that the function of de-growth is not going to be the same in Europe, Africa or Latin America, and that homologation of cultures means simply declaring their deaths, Latouche is supportive of diversity and pluralism³⁰⁶.

Terra Madre stands for the diversity of food cultures and the maintenance of their differences, which means, by consequence, to have a holistic vision of the world of food. To Petrini, rural communities are strongly interconnected with

³⁰³ Petrini, *Terra Madre*. (Bra: Slow Food, 2009), 28.

³⁰⁴ Petrini. *Terra Madre*, 29.

³⁰⁵ Latouche, *Come si esce dalla societa' dei consumi* 59.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

the way food is distributed, shared, and valued³⁰⁷. Petrini realizes, in fact, that besides proposing a political and economic program, or the meeting and support of food cultures, at stake are cultures and civilizations that risk disappearance. These cultures and civilizations represent the contrary of that which capitalist mentality supports, and are the real answer to the crisis in which we are currently living. He often predicates the need for a paradigm shift in which values like quality of life, relationship with nature, social justice, education, health, and the common good, are prioritized. Although his ideas are very similar to de-growth, he prefers not to associate directly with the movement and instead, with food and food cultures as points of reference, he looks at more pragmatic alternatives and realities.

The concepts and practices of agroecology seem, once again, to be more in line with Terra Madre's message. Gleissman, like Petrini, asserts that it is necessary to have a holistic understanding and ecological view of the food system in order to create the changes needed for a more sustainable food system³⁰⁸. Agroecology, a transdisciplinary science that focuses on "the application of ecological concepts and principles to the design and management of sustainable agricultural ecosystems"³⁰⁹, acknowledges the fundamental role of indigenous and local farmer's knowledge in the application of its principles. Agroecology recognizes that indigenous knowledge, relying on local natural

³⁰⁷ Carlo Petrini, *Terra Madre*, 26.

³⁰⁸ V. Ernesto Méndez, Christopher M. Bacon, Roseann Cohen, Stephen R. Geissman, *Agroecology. A Transdisciplinary, Participatory and Action-oriented Approach*. (Boca Raton (FL): Taylor and Francis Group, 2016), 23.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

resources, created agriculture “with a robustness and a built-in resilience that has helped ... [smallholder farmers] to adjust to rapidly changing climates, pests, and diseases”³¹⁰. This discipline identifies thousands of small traditional farms in most of the rural landscapes of developing countries, and argues that the “ecological rationale of traditional small-scale agriculture”³¹¹ offers a model of agriculture needed “to transition toward forms of farming that are more ecological, biodiverse, local, sustainable, and socially just”.³¹²

Olmi’s Terra Madre becomes an important visual testimony to the active engagement of the unrepresented farming communities that inhabit the planet. Especially in the South of the world, these communities are often the majority of the entire population. A close up of an indigenous farmer from Latin America speaking to Terra Madre’s large audience perfectly identifies the attitude and values behind Terra Madre’s project, and the political impact that this meeting has, at both the national and international levels: “I would first like to thank the President of Italian Republic, for welcoming all these indigenous peoples, the Quechuas, Aymaras, Guaranis, Atzecs and children of the Incas. ... We are humble custodians, guardians of agrobiodiversity. We want to defend the right to healthy food for the whole world, and we continue to fight for this food, and for the sovereign right to food, to share with all the peoples from the world.”

Both Altieri and Gliessman admit that traditional agriculture is the premise of the development of agroecology as a science, and that agroecological peasant

³¹⁰ Miguel Altieri, “Agroecology, Small Farms, and Food Sovereignty”, 103

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Ibid.

agriculture is a valid alternative and possible solution to the current food and environmental crisis³¹³. Similarly, the Terra Madre project understands that the current crisis is not simply financial and economical, but also social as well as ecological and in addition, identifies cultural and concerns civilizations at risk.

In 2015, Slow Food and Terra Madre continued to be actively engaged and participated at several events. The presence of Slow Food at Milan Expo helped to counterbalance the image and idea of food as a mere product to consume. Petrini participated as spokesperson of Terra Madre at the Second Global Indigenous Forum, organized by IFAD³¹⁴ and held in February 2015, and confirmed the fundamental role indigenous people have within the Terra Madre network. Petrini's discourse, on one level, can be interpreted as a speech in praise of local and indigenous communities, while in reality, offers key points to reflect on what he often asserts as a need for a paradigm shift. According to Petrini, the wisdom of indigenous people can be summarized in three main ideas: the sacred nature of food, respected and revered as a source and supporter of life; a life centered on the idea of community, be it the family, the village or beyond; and finally, indigenous peoples' caring for the planet, which includes all forms of life. Pointing to a free market of food and food production as one of the weakest points of the current global economic system, and how our lives are

³¹³ Miguel Altieri in *Agroecology. A Transdisciplinary, Participatory and Action-oriented Approach*, 115.

³¹⁴ IFAD, International Fund for Agricultural Development, is a specialized agency of the United Nations established in 1977 to finance agricultural projects for food production in developing countries. More information can be found at www.ifad.org. The speech of Carlo Petrini can be viewed on youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-4PC6s35ZE>.

based on greed and an indiscriminate consumerism, Petrini claims that we have lost “our” way and that the indigenous peoples can and must show “us”, the industrialized and so called first world, the way. The paradigm shift here is therefore represented by a call from the first world, to the third world, to recapture lost principles such as the value of food and food producers, the sense of community and of the planet we live on, in order to come out of the current global economic, environmental and social crisis.

In a parenthesis of ten minutes, Olmi takes us seemingly away from the Terra Madre movement, and brings us to three hectares of land at the margins of the small city of Roncade, in the region of Lombardy, in northern Italy. Images of a wild wood whose soil is covered by fallen autumn leaves are contrasted with details of the nearby dry and cracked agricultural land. Two very opposite ecosystems and habitats, one uncontaminated and the other manipulated by humans, are separated by a double row of wood stacks supported by poles and covered by dried grass. This is the wall which Ernesto, the inhabitant of the three hectares of land, built to create distance from the curious eyes of people. While the camera shows these images, we hear Vandana Shiva and other people discussing the condition of the two soils, life flourishing with the humus and humid soil in the wild wood, and the hard and lifeless soil in the ploughed and re-ploughed land across the street.

While filming the documentary, Olmi surprised Petrini and other experts by inviting them to visit the small farm of Ernesto. A story of volunteer isolation and solitude, of a man who separated himself from the rest of the world, lived for forty

years on this land and died a few years back, is portrayed through the images of Olmi, the comments of the invited, and the soothing voiceover of the narrator. The voiceover is the same narrator who reads Virgilio's lines at the beginning of the film and, while describing Ernesto's life, takes us back to ancient times, as if Ernesto were a character coming out from the *Georgics*. While showing us details of the wood and the small farm covered by vines, the voiceover continues, "His land's genetic heritage has remained intact for 50 years. His humble cultivations are a monument to knowledge and survival. He ate corn, potatoes, plums, cabbage – just what's essential, with no waste. Poor, yet rich. He knew how to get a lot from a little, the necessity to live in health and dignity." Resisting any contact with the external world, and also any technology that may help him in his work, Ernesto is able to build from scratch any tool for his needs, using the wood of the forest. He uses no electricity, has no car, and uses no technical device to communicate with the external world. He only grows food easy to produce and preserve, does not use pesticides, nor does he accept any kind of help from his family. We learn eventually that Ernesto died the winter of 2004 in his house, alone, after a summer of drought that ruined most of his small crops and prevented him from gathering enough supply for the winter.

Olmi does not want us to feel pity for the farmer, nor does he want us to judge the choices of Ernesto. The experts invited by Olmi wander around Ernesto's property and discuss the value of his story. The film director takes us inside the house where dishes are piled in the sink, a pan on the stove, and a panama hat on the table. Small objects and furniture are displayed as if someone

suddenly left the house. The accumulated dust over the years is the sign that, in this place, time stopped after Ernesto's death. Yet, even in Ernesto's absence, his presence is strong and palpable. "Some scientists begin to see his wealth, hidden in poverty", continues the voiceover, confirms that specialists from the most diverse fields, economy, biology, history, farming, and activism recognize, in Ernesto's life choice, a powerful message.

Seeing these images while listening to the voiceover, knowing that Ernesto lived only a few meters away from a twenty-first century, fully industrialized society, forces us to think and raise several questions. Some of the questions I asked while watching these scenes were, how does this story of extreme seclusion connect and relate to Terra Madre? Shall the wild wood and small farm of Ernesto be seen as a living museum, as a testimony of untouched nature, and as an example of a virgin eco-system with botanical and cultural value, or shall it inspire us to work toward what can be restored? I read Ernesto's story as an example, to its extreme, of resistance toward the indiscriminate and accelerated process of industrialization and development, and as a confirmation of the interconnection of social and ecological issues. Ernesto's story is therefore a reminder that a respectful coexistence of humans with the natural surroundings, in these times, is crucial and essential for the survival of both society and the planet. His wisdom and the knowledge to work with nature, without depriving it of its resources, is directly related to Italian peasant culture, but is also common to other rural and indigenous traditions, and reflects most of the principles predicated by Bookchin.

Many young people in Italy, indeed, are choosing to return to the land. In 2014, agrarian studies saw an increase in enrollment of 72%, and the university of Bologna for the first time introduced entry tests to limit enrollments³¹⁵. According to a study of Coldiretti, the leading organization of Italian farmers, in 2015 there was an increase in farming careers of 76% in females, and 27% in males, and under the age of 34³¹⁶. According to the study, many of them are first generation farmers. Half of them hold a university degree and are proud of their professional choices. Carlo Petrini, answering my question regarding the reality of new peasants and farmers in Italy, confirmed that the new generations are aware of what a rural life requires, “It is not the goal of these young generations returning to the land to invest in agriculture, and lead a wretched life like their predecessors. ... They decide to undertake a profession that corresponds to a life style capable of offering a dignified life and, at the same time, in harmony with nature. ... They often choose a multidisciplinary approach that allows them to integrate their revenue in diversified forms...”³¹⁷

Born in 2010 in Italy, “Genuino Clandestino” is a movement that fights for the right of “self-determination of food”³¹⁸. It is a self-organized, non-hierarchical movement based on practices of information, knowledge, production, and selling points where producers and “co-producers”, the consumer, can meet and create together new forms of local resistance against industrial agriculture. It does not

³¹⁵ Segrè, *L'oro nel piatto*, 11.

³¹⁶ <http://www.coldiretti.it/News/Pagine/77---4-Febbraio-2016.aspx> (Page visited on March 14, 2016)

³¹⁷ The complete interview with Petrini is available in the appendix.

³¹⁸ Michela Potito, Roberto Borghesi. *Genuino Clandestino. Viaggio tra le agri-culture resistenti ai tempi delle grandi opere*. (Firenze: Terra Nuova edizioni, 2015), 267.

have a leader or spokesperson, but is a matrix of several associations, small producers, farmers, shepherds, and other examples of rural economy throughout the Italian territory that consider the land, not only as a source of production, but also and foremost a life choice. Genuino Clandestino's practices, ideas, life style and relationship with the environment are in line with Terra Madre as well as Bookchin's social ecology. A new ecological society, according to Bookchin, "challenges the entire system of domination itself – its economy, its misuse of technics, its administrative apparatus, ... and seeks to eliminate the hierarchical and class edifices that ... defined the relationship between nonhuman and human nature"³¹⁹. Genuino Clandestino rejects the notion that legislations regulating the food industry cannot and should not be applied to small scale food production and packaging. As some of their members explain, the artisan characteristics of a product are manifested through the making of the product, in the flavor, and are strictly related to the place and cannot be standardized through a law. "How can you make a legislation on the care, attention, perfume, in the porous asperity of an old wine cellar of a mountain village, or of a wood?"³²⁰. Genuino Clandestino's questions evoke Petrini's holistic vision on the relationship between food, food cultures and biodiversity

In 2015 Genuino Clandestino published for the first time a collection of stories of different Italian geographical areas, from Piedmont to Sicily, as a testimony of their work. These pages narrate, through images and words, stories

³¹⁹ Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Communalism*, 46.

³²⁰ *Ibid*, 34.

of sustainable practices of agriculture from below, respectful of and, as Petrini points out in his discourses on Terra Madre and Slow Food, in harmony with nature. Lorenzo and Barbara, for example, hold degrees in herbalist techniques, and live with their families on a farm in Montecombraro, near Modena, in the region of Emilia Romagna. They cultivate herbs and produce natural lotions, herbal teas, preserves, and other natural products that sell in specialized stores and local fresh markets in Bologna. This and other alternative economies support local and traditional knowledge, and encourage a sense of community and connection with the consumers, those who support and co-produce the food, and the lands where the food is produced.

Like Genuino Clandestino, many forms of resistance and activism related to food and food cultures, and new realities outside the impositions of the global market, industrial agriculture, and multinational corporations, are sprouting and flourishing in the North as well as in the South of the world. They don't advertise false images of a happy and comfortable life, nevertheless they represent the survival of the plurality of knowledge and culture, of the land, and on the land. They develop differently according to their local histories, traditions, cultures, and environmental and ecological context. They demonstrate through their examples that a paradigm shift is possible and is already happening. The much hoped for coalition between citizens and peasants auspicated by Gramsci in the *Southern Question* seems, after almost a century, to take shape in the form of farmers' markets, Community Support Agriculture, "new peasantry", the empowerment of indigenous cultures, and the thousands of grassroots organizations and networks

that are constantly growing locally and globally. New forms of social ecology and environmental resistance, new relationships between humans, nonhumans and nature, agriculture and land use, landscapes and communities, are blooming in every corner of the globe. Narrative helps to create awareness and transforms practices into knowledge. To conclude, I would like to underscore the role of literature by quoting Wu Ming 2, member of the group of Italian authors known as Wu Ming. In his afterword to *Genuino Clandestino*, Wu Ming 2 says, “Telling stories enlarge a community that already exists. ... To understand what practices count and which ones are not important. ... Telling stories, therefore, to question ourselves and to clarify our ideas”³²¹.

Chapter 4, in part, is forthcoming in *Landscapes, Natures, Ecologies. Italy and the Environmental Humanities*, edited by Enrico Cesaretti, Serenella Iovino, and Elena Margarita Past, to be published by University of Virginia Press by Fall 2016. I am the sole author of this article.

³²¹ Wu Ming 2, afterwords in *Genuino Clandestino*, 264.

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I established a deeper sense of the ways and means by which Italian history and culture is deeply rooted in the traditions of Italian peasants and how those peasants, representing the social group most connected to the land, are a fundamental cultural reference on contemporary forms of intellectual and environmental activism related to food and agriculture. The Resistance period during WWII has been my starting point in which to analyze peasant culture, and to reevaluate the role of the intellectual. This specific historical period typified a pivotal moment of engagement among people from different social and cultural backgrounds who were united by a common interest, which was the fight against the German occupation and the fascist domination.

By investigating the Resistance, I established that times of dire oppression and struggle produced a renewed function of the intellectual, more engaged and conscious of his social role and responsibility. Reading the works of authors presented in my dissertation through the lens of Gramsci's concept of the organic intellectual revealed a heritage affirming new practices of resistance toward contemporary ecological, social and economic issues. This legacy generated, and continues to produce, possible creative new alternatives to the controls exercised by agribusiness and multinational corporations.

The philosophical and environmental movements of Deep Ecology and Social Ecology, and the latest scholarly considerations on ecocriticism, informed my ecocritical reading of the primary texts. This approach has contributed to

broader understanding of peasant culture and tradition as the main referent when considering the human condition of isolation and disconnection from the natural environment. I argued and demonstrated that the new intellectual fervor which emerged from the Resistance, read in Gramscian terms and combined with an ecocritical approach, is a valuable methodology through which to re-read, re-discover, re-value and re-evaluate the impact of peasant tradition on Italian culture, and the contemporary environmental consciousness that is to be found among the new generations of farmers.

My ecocritical analysis in chapter 1 of Pavese and Viganò's novels confirms that the success of the partisan movement was strictly dependent upon the knowledge of the territory by the local inhabitants. While Pavese's descriptions of the natural elements emphasized a sort of symbiosis between the protagonist and the landscape, Viganò's characterization of Agnese as a woman, a peasant and a partisan, offered new aspects with which to understand and investigate the relationship of peasants, specifically women peasants, to the land, the natural elements, and the partisans.

In chapter 2, I assert that Alcide Cervi, in his memoir, embodies the role of the organic intellectual. Although the communist journalist Renato Nicolai, editor of the memoir, was using the leftist political goals to reach peasants, I determine that Alcide Cervi is able to invert this process in his favor. Through his simple language, rich with metaphors evoking nature, the Cervi father, indeed, uses the literary means to tell his story, a peasant story, and reveals through his experience and words, his specific reality and vision of the world.

Nuto Revelli's collections of testimonies in Chapter 3 depict peasant voices that disclose personal histories and stories of exploitations; stories that tell of hard labor, war, poverty, and of deep connections and the dependence of humans on the land. In this third chapter, I examined the degree to which Revelli's WWII contact with peasants not only changed his perception and understanding of the peasant world, but also contributed to the development of an ecological conscience in light of the economic and social changes of the sixties and seventies. Revelli's experience in the Resistance stimulated and influenced his literary production and intellectual engagement. In this chapter, Revelli's legacy continues to live in the present through the Nuto Revelli Foundation, and the revival of the abandoned mountain village of Paraloup, in Piedmont.

My last chapter pursues the historical and cultural traces of Italian peasant tradition lineage in the Resistance through the grassroots movements of Slow Food and Terra Madre. In this chapter, I demonstrated how these movements are directly connected to the Resistance intellectual tradition and by what means these movements support and revive the value of food, food traditions, food cultures and most importantly, the producers of food. In addition, I proved that these international movements, while working on both a local and global scale, contribute to the development of awareness among the consumers on ecological issues related to food and agriculture, while promoting sustainable methods of agriculture.

Throughout this dissertation, my Gramscian and ecocritical perspective of Italian peasant tradition succeeded in bringing to light an ecological understanding of peasant culture as bearer of values related to the environment, agriculture, and food cultures. While my dissertation examined peasant stories related to the Resistance and the northern regions of Piedmont and Emilia Romagna, this methodological approach could be implemented by further exploring Italian peasant cultures and realities in southern Italy, the relationship between food and peasant cultures, and the relationship between local and global peasant cultures.

I would like to conclude by emphasizing the extremely local and yet essentially global character of peasant culture with a quote from Ignazio Silone's *Fontamara*, and to invite reflection upon the value of peasant culture as the seed for a renewed awareness on issues related to environment, food, and agriculture.

Well, then, in many ways Fontamara is just like every other remote southern Italian village between the plain and the mountains, away from the highways and therefore a little poorer and more abandoned and backward than the rest. But Fontamara also has characteristics of its own. Poor peasants, who make the soil productive and suffer from hunger – fellahin, coolies, peons, muzhiks, cafoni – are alike all over the world: they form a nation, a race, a church of their own, but two poor men identical in every respect have never yet been seen³²².

³²² Ignazio Silone, *Fontamara*, trans. by Eric Mosbacher, (New York: New American Library, 1981), 13.

APPENDIX:
A Conversation with Carlo Petrini on
Italian Peasant Traditions and Slow Food

This exclusive interview with Petrini is the result of a personal correspondence started after a fortuitous encounter in 2013 during the summer festival “Una Torre di Libri” in Val Pellice (Pinerolo), in the mountains of Piedmont. During this book fair Petrini, in conversation with the writer Lella Costa, presented his book *Pappa di latte*. Slow Food and Terra Madre were already part of my research on the relationship between food and peasant cultures. Meeting Petrini became an opportunity to receive a direct response on topics that are rooted in our past, yet critically embedded in our daily life. The spaces between the paragraphs respect Petrini’s organization of his answers.

Carlo Petrini and my name have been abbreviated as follow: **CP**= Carlo Petrini;
ITM= Ilaria Tabusso Marcyan

- **ITM:** *In 2014, the landscapes of vineyards in Piedmont, in the area of Langhe-Roero and Monferrato, were nominated as world heritage sites by UNESCO becoming today, the 50th Italian site with this recognition. This acknowledgment not only generates a considerable touristic impact on the area, but also confirms how this landscape provides “an outstanding example of man’s interaction with his natural environment” (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1390>).*

What was the cultural, historical and environmental landscape when Slow Food established and started its journey? What is the relationship between the landscape of those times and the one of today? How have the environmental and cultural ecology of those places changed after Slow Food began, and how did Slow Food contribute to the Italian (and beyond) ecological vision of the places it relates with?

- **CP:** Slow Food's adventure started at the end of the eighties, in a very different cultural landscape than today. The economic growth, increase in consumption, and availability of goods were also the enthralling energy of society at the time. After WWII, the increase of intensive industrial agriculture changed the shape of our countryside, especially in the more modern areas of the Po Valley, while the marginalized areas were inevitably depopulating. Everything was changing, but we Italians were as though anesthetized, not fully aware of the eventual price to pay. The prevailing social ambition of the time was to abandon the countryside in order to look for a better lifestyle in the city. In the collective imagination, the rural areas had always represented misery, ignorance, and a life of toil.

Nevertheless, the first signs that something was going wrong were already becoming visible. We began to lose vegetable varieties and animals that, according to the new standards, were not producing enough. Farmers, abandoning the peripheral areas, contributed to the disappearance of the distinctiveness of certain areas. The vanishing of these vegetable varieties,

considered unproductive, resulted in the gradual disappearance of characteristic products and dishes of several local areas, a phenomenon that, until then, was not considered serious. It took a while to connect the dots, to understand that to lose peasant culture also meant to weaken local economies, meant to change farming and landscapes, to forget and destroy traditional farming knowledge, and consequently deteriorate the social strata.

The road ahead is certainly very long today, but there is more awareness of these topics. If Slow Food contributed to the change in perception on issues like production chains and landscape, I also hope that it helped in valuing rural areas as a source of culture, environmental safeguard, and the “real” economy.

- **ITM:** *Who are the new peasants and farmers in Italy today? What is the role of new migrants and how are they integrated into the Italian agricultural landscape?*

- **CP:** Italian rural reality today is very diverse. Most importantly, we are witnessing a return to the land by young generations, both in Italy and in other parts of the economically developed world.

It is not the goal of these young generations returning to the land to invest in agriculture, and lead a wretched life like their predecessors. These young people may have experienced the failure of the contemporary economic system, an economic model in which they don't believe or recognize themselves, and

being unprepared, decide to walk an unpaved/uncharted path. Today many educated young people return to the land because they understand that it is important to consider the quality of life in the equation of the future. They decide to undertake a profession that corresponds to a lifestyle capable of offering a dignified life and, at the same time, in harmony with nature. That is why those who decide to invest their own lives in agriculture choose more respectful farming techniques. They often choose a multidisciplinary approach that allows them to integrate their revenue in diversified forms such as, by supporting the farming production with the processing industry, or by adding forms of hospitality and catering.

And yes, there is the question of immigrants, without whom the renowned edibles, “product of Italy,” could no longer be produced. There are more than 36,000 legal immigrants in Italy today, plus all the undeclared. These range from Sikhs who take care of cattle in the Po valley, Macedonians who work in the vineyards, people from the Maghreb who attend to the mountain pastures, to the Africans in the fields of southern Italy.

It is therefore a diversified landscape, complex and in sharp change. As a civil society, it is our duty to make it possible for the young generations, as well as for the immigrants, to think and practice a future of this kind. We could, for example, facilitate access to the land to those who have not inherited from their families, and monitor contracts in order for farmers to avoid a life of abject poverty, if not that of a slave.

- **ITM:** *Since its beginnings, Slow Food worked for the protection and the valorization of farming, and production of local food. To have a Slow Food trademark on a food product of a regional or a specific area today is a guarantee of quality and goodness, both for those who sell and those who buy the product. Although your work and position have a democratic purpose, how would you answer the critiques of those who accuse you of promoting a message of elitism? What voice, visibility, and space do your producers have? By which culture is Slow Food inspired? What is the position of Slow Food towards the South (both Italian and global)?*

- **CP:** Quality food is not more expensive. It is simply more expensive than industrial food obtained from poor raw material quality.

The real issue today is that food has lost value, we can only recognize its price, and it has become a commodity. Yet this is not true. Being a source of life, food has, and needs to continue having, a value of its own. If we don't eat, we die. We are what we eat.

That is why, when we choose a food product, it is important to think about what we are buying, what are we paying for. Are we paying for quality food, for non-manipulated flavors - for food production respecting the environment? Do our food purchases respect people committed to the production chain, the people who support the local economy, who safeguard the territory, and keep alive artisan knowledge that risks disappearing? Or are we choosing industrial food produced using animal and vegetable species that are more productive, but that

undermine organoleptic and environmental quality, production whose revenues belong only to the few, while exploiting people and the environment?

I rarely hear people complaining about the price of a cell phone. I believe it is necessary to rethink our priorities. Today the industrial production of food is one of the primary causes of global pollution. This is the price that we are probably leaving for future generations to pay, but I can tell you right now, it is not saving the economy.

- **ITM:** *We live in a world in which local and global realities intersect, sometimes integrate, creating new cultural and culinary synergies. Today is often possible to find exotic and international food items with competitive prices in local supermarkets. What is the position of Slow Food and Terra Madre regarding the relationship between traditional food and innovation, local and global food, in a world where distances become shorter and shorter, and where it is possible to find pineapples and avocados in the fresh market of Porta Palazzo in Turin?*

- **CP:** The principles of sustainability that Slow Food supports do not aspire to the total autocracy of regions and nations. Throughout the history of humanity, goods have always travelled the world creating infinite opportunities of contact and exchange among populations.

In the same way, we cannot forget that a tradition is a successful innovation. Think, for example, of tomatoes, corn or potatoes. They came from

the Americas and today are the cornerstones of our gastronomy. Traditions change, evolve and grow together with our history and stories.

The pace of this change is not sustainable today; goods that are travelling today are not surplus value goods, we put on our tables fresh vegetables and fruits that have travelled half the globe on the road.

The fact that these food products are cheaper than those produced and cultivated locally cannot but make us reflect on the perversions of this system, a system that exploits, pollutes, and obviously does not provide a reasonable living wage to the workers in the production chain.

Slow Food wants to support sustainable production, wants to help the producers value their products, to support those who, with their daily work, perform a public service by safeguarding local gastronomic biodiversity. This is what Slow Food works for, to provide alternatives that allow people to make sustainable edible choices.

Original Italian Version:

- **ITM:** *paesaggi vitivinicoli del Piemonte: Langhe-Roero e Monferrato sono stati dichiarati nel 2014 Patrimonio mondiale, diventando così il cinquantesimo sito iscritto dall'Italia da questo titolo. Questo riconoscimento non solo ha creato e crea un impatto turistico notevole, ma conferma come questa zona sia "un esempio eccezionale di paesaggio culturale inteso come prodotto nel tempo dell'interazione tra uomo e natura". Qual era il paesaggio culturale, storico e ambientale in cui Slow Food si è formato, è nato ed ha intrapreso il suo viaggio? Qual è la relazione tra il paesaggio di allora e quello contemporaneo? Com'è cambiata l'ecologia culturale ed ambientale di quei luoghi dopo Slow Food, e in che modo Slow Food cambia la visione ecologica, italiana e non, dei luoghi con cui si confronta?*

- **CP:** L'avventura di Slow Food inizia alla fine degli anni '80, in un paesaggio culturale sicuramente molto diverso. La crescita economica, il boom dei consumi, la grande disponibilità di beni su larga scala erano la forza trascinante anche della società. L'agricoltura intensiva che aveva preso piede nel dopoguerra aveva già largamente cambiato la conformazione delle nostre campagne, in particolare della sempre più meccanizzata pianura padana, mentre le zone marginalizzate si spopolavano inesorabilmente. Tutto stava cambiando, ma eravamo ancora come anestetizzati, non pienamente consapevoli del prezzo da pagare. Abbandonare le campagne per cercare uno stile di vita migliore in città era la norma, ed era considerata una giusta ambizione sociale. Le

campagne avevano rappresentato per tanto tempo, nell'immaginario collettivo, miseria, ignoranza, "vita grama".

Eppure cominciavano ad esserci i segnali di qualcosa che non andava: abbiamo cominciato a perdere varietà vegetali e animali poco produttive a un ritmo molto alto, e con l'abbandono delle zone marginali perdevamo tutte le specificità di quei luoghi. Il venir meno di queste varietà poco produttive portava alla scomparsa di prodotti e piatti tipici delle diverse zone, fenomeno che a prima vista forse allora non sembrava così grave. Ci è voluto un po' a mettere a fuoco tutti i passaggi, a capire che perdere la cultura contadina significava dire anche indebolire l'economia locale, vedere cambiare i paesaggi e le coltivazioni, dimenticare e distruggere un sapere tradizionale che può andare perso nel giro di un paio di generazioni, indebolire il tessuto sociale rurale.

Sicuramente oggi la strada da fare è ancora molto lunga, ma c'è una maggiore consapevolezza di questi temi. Se Slow Food ha avuto un ruolo nel cambiamento di percezione da parte delle persone sui temi della filiera e del paesaggio, spero che abbia contribuito alla valorizzazione delle aree rurali come bacino di cultura, di salvaguardia dell'ambiente, e di economia reale.

- **ITM:** *In che modo le radici storiche e culturali contadine italiane, che indiscutibilmente fanno parte della nostra identità, hanno influito sul fatto che Slow Food e Terra Madre siano un'idea e concetto partito da lei (Carlo Petrini), intellettuale ed attivista italiano ormai di fama mondiale, ma con profonde radici anche locali, per non dire piemontesi? Chi sono i nuovi contadini in Italia, oggi?*

Come s'integrano, secondo lei, e qual è il ruolo dei nuovi migranti, spesso di origine contadina, nel paesaggio agricolo italiano? Abbiamo pastori Sikh indiani nelle valli piemontesi e lombarde da decenni ormai, ma eventi più contemporanei si aggiungono nelle nostre campagne. Dopo la raccolta di pomodori, anche le vendemmie purtroppo si tingono di noir...

- **CP:** La realtà delle campagne italiane oggi è molto variegata. Per prima cosa assistiamo al fenomeno del ritorno alla terra da parte dei giovani, sia in Italia che in altre zone del mondo economicamente sviluppate.

Si tratta di giovani che non investono le loro vite in agricoltura per fare la vita grama dei propri predecessori, ma di ragazzi che hanno conosciuto (e magari sperimentato sulla propria pelle) il fallimento dell'attuale sistema economico, che in questo modello non si riconoscono e che decidono di tentare una strada meno battuta, ma senza essere sprovveduti. Oggi ritornano alla terra tanti giovani laureati che hanno capito che nell'equazione del futuro bisogna considerare anche la qualità della vita, e che decidono di iniziare un mestiere che di fatto è uno stile di vita che possa permettere loro di vivere una vita dignitosa e allo stesso tempo in armonia con i ritmi della natura. Per questo, chi decide di investire la propria vita in agricoltura oggi lo fa scegliendo metodi di coltivazione più rispettosi e spesso sceglie un approccio multidisciplinare che permetta una buona integrazione del reddito (ad esempio affiancando la trasformazione alla produzione, o aggiungendo alla propria attività l'offerta di ospitalità o ristorazione).

E poi, certo, ci sono gli immigrati, senza i quali molto del tanto famigerato made in Italy alimentare non potrebbe più essere prodotto: dai Sikh che curano le vacche in tutta la pianura padana, ai macedoni che lavorano nelle vigne, ai magrebini negli alpeggi, gli africani nei campi del sud. Si tratta di più di 36.000 persone in regola, più il sommerso.

Si tratta di un paesaggio variegato, dunque, quindi complesso e in forte mutamento. Come società civile è nostro dovere impegnarci affinché sia possibile per i giovani, e anche per gli immigrati, pensare ad un futuro di questo tipo, agevolando ad esempio l'accesso alla terra da parte di chi non le possiede di famiglia, e vigilando affinché nelle campagne si applichino dei contratti ragionevoli che non costringano i contadini alla miseria quando non alla schiavitù.

- ITM: Slow Food non è solo un movimento internazionale, ma anche un modo di considerare e valorizzare il cibo, dal gusto alla qualità, rispettando anche ed esaltando il suo luogo di origine. Sin dall'inizio Slow Food ha lavorato per la protezione, valorizzazione della coltivazione e produzione degli alimenti locali. In Italia oggi avere il marchio Slow Food per un cibo regionale e/o di una specifica area di una regione è simbolo di qualità, bontà e garanzia per chi vende il prodotto e chi lo compra. Come risponde alle critiche di coloro che, nonostante il suo lavoro e la sua posizione abbia obiettivi "democratici", lo accusano di promuovere un messaggio "d'élite"? Stiamo parlando comunque di cibi semplici, genuini e con radici legati alle tradizioni contadine povere. Quale voce, visibilità e

spazio ricevono i suoi produttori? A quale cultura s'ispirano i discorsi e le pratiche di Slow Food? Come si rapporta la filosofia di Slow Food e Terra Madre con chi ha parlato, anche in termini critici, di cultura contadina? Penso a nomi come Nuto Revelli, Pavese, e anche Antonio Gramsci; ma anche persone che guardavano al sud come Carlo Levi, Rocco Scotellaro, e oggi Franco Arminio, per esempio... Infine, come si pone il nord di Slow Food in relazione al sud (globale in genere ma più specificatamente italiano)?

- **CP:** Non è che il cibo di qualità costi caro, costa solo più caro di quello ottenuto industrialmente da materie prime scadenti.

Il problema vero è che oggi il cibo ha perso valore, ne sappiamo riconoscere solo più il prezzo, è diventato commodity. Eppure non è così, perché il cibo ha e deve continuare ad avere un valore di per sé in quanto fonte di vita. Se non mangiamo, muoriamo. E noi siamo quello che mangiamo.

Per questo quando scegliamo un prodotto da mangiare dobbiamo pensare bene a cosa stiamo comprando, cosa stiamo pagando. Stiamo pagando un prodotto di qualità, buono, prodotto nel rispetto dell'ambiente, prodotto nel rispetto delle persone impegnate nella filiera, che sostiene l'economia locale, che permette di presidiare un territorio o di mantenere viva un sapere artigianale che rischia di sparire? O stiamo scegliendo un prodotto industriale, prodotto utilizzando le specie animali e vegetali sempre e comunque più produttive a scapito della qualità sia organolettica che ambientale, i cui proventi vengono mal

distribuiti nelle tasche di pochi, nel più totale sfruttamento delle perone e dell'ambiente?

Non mi capita quasi mai di sentire persone lamentarsi del costo di un telefono cellulare, credo sia necessario ripensare un po' alle nostre priorità. Oggi la produzione industriale di cibo è una delle prime cause di inquinamento a livello globale. Questo è un conto che forse lasceremo da pagare alle generazioni future, ma di certo non è un risparmio.

- ITM: Viviamo in un mondo in cui realtà locali e globali si intrecciano e in alcuni casi si integrano, creando spesso nuove sinergie culturali e culinarie. È possibile trovare cibi internazionali ed esotici, spesso anche a costi competitivi con il mercato locale in negozi di quartiere. Qual è la posizione di Slow Food e Terra Madre nella relazione cultura tradizionale del cibo e innovazione, cibo locale e globale e nei confronti di queste realtà che accorciano sempre più le distanze e dove si può trovare l'ananas nel supermercato e l'avocado al mercato di Porta Palazzo?

- CP: I principi di sostenibilità ai quali Slow Food si ispira non mirano certo alla totale autarchia delle nazioni e delle regioni. Le merci hanno sempre viaggiato nel mondo, lungo tutta la storia dell'umanità, creando infinite occasioni di contatto e di scambio tra i popoli.

Allo stesso modo, non dobbiamo mai dimenticare che una tradizione è un'innovazione ben riuscita: basti pensare al pomodoro, al mais o alla patata, che arrivano dalle Americhe ma che oggi sono prodotti cardine per la nostra gastronomia. Le tradizioni cambiano, si evolvono, crescono insieme alla nostra storia.

Quello che oggi non è sostenibile è il ritmo al quale avviene questo fenomeno; oggi non sono solo più le merci ad alto valore aggiunto a viaggiare, ma anche semplici prodotti freschi quali frutta o verdura rischiano di arrivare sulle nostre tavole dopo aver attraversato mezzo continente su gomma.

Il fatto che questi prodotti possano poi risultare più economici di quelli prodotti localmente nel rispetto dell'ambiente non può non farci riflettere sulle perversioni di questo sistema, che sfrutta, inquina, ed evidentemente non riconosce il giusto compenso agli attori della filiera.

La posizione di Slow Food vuole essere quella di supportare le produzioni sostenibili. Aiutare i produttori a valorizzare il proprio prodotto, essere di supporto a chi con il suo lavoro quotidiano svolge un servizio pubblico di salvaguardia della biodiversità gastronomica locale è ciò su cui noi puntiamo per fornire un'alternativa e far sì che una scelta alimentare sostenibile sia possibile.

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