

Italian Farmers and Migrant Farmworkers: Food Activism and Food Justice in the Time of COVID-19

APRIL 25, 2020: TAMPA, FLORIDA

The current pandemic has brought to the foreground critical challenges within the agri-food business, prefiguring global ecological changes that will likely affect food practices and power relations of food production and consumption. This context of crisis is adding urgency to and redefining the interpretation of food security, food sustainability, and food sovereignty issues on a global scale. Now more than ever, it is relevant to address how their common understanding is constructed through dominant narratives as well as to render visible how closely they are tied to each other and not in opposition. The Italian geographic, economic, and ecological context draws special attention to the issue, given the impact of the pandemic on the changing dynamics of land use for small-scale farmers and on the over six hundred thousand undocumented migrant farmworkers largely employed in near-slave conditions in the Italian agribusiness sector.

A couple of weeks ago, an appeal of the peasant activist association Terra/Terra discussed how small independent farmers, not recognized by law with the organic certification given to industrial food-processing, are now unable to cultivate their land or sell their products to consumers because of the current restrictions that are instead “sending consumers to the grocery stores.” Their “clandestine” food—that is, produced with transparency in small quantities through traditional pesticide-free organic agricultural methods and whose quality is superior to the food that “follows the rules” sold in grocery stores—is now going to waste, and points to the invisibility of farmers from the dominant discourses.

Once thriving rural communities of Italian farmers, belonging to the Genuino Clandestino network, a coalition of independent farmers not officially certified whose members sell their products through “clandestine markets” and through forms of personal partnership with the consumers,

are struggling to survive with the closure of local markets. The governmental narrative claims that consumers should purchase their food at grocery stores rather than at rural peasant markets for safety reasons. As a consequence, local cheesemakers are stopped by the authorities for carrying two pieces of ricotta cheese in their cars and reported to the health department. Yet they produce their cheese with all-natural products and time-honored methods but have not been able to invest in obtaining the official organic certification and are not registered with a Partita Iva, which is the tax identification that is required for businesses in Italy. Farmers whose land falls outside the town limits are unable to go to their fields because of the lockdown. They are gripped by uncertainty surrounding the state of their crops. They are unable to meet with the same consumers who have supported them for years and want to keep supporting them because they prefer their products and because they trust them.

All of these farmers, who belong to the Genuino Clandestino network as well as Terra/Terra, Campi Aperti, and other similar regional movements, engage in grassroots food activism and a model of food sovereignty that considers human relations in terms of mutual dependence, cultural diversity, and respect for the environment. These peasant activists are linked to the political network of the centri sociali autogestiti (“self-organized social centers”) that emerged in Italy from the occupied universities in the mid-eighties and early nineties.¹ Their ambiguous label is ironically mocking the way in which food is certified as “genuine” by juxtaposing two words, genuine and clandestine, whose meaning contradicts one another with the purpose of opposing the official labeling of food products and their certification. There is an underground genuineness in their “clandestine” products that, however, cannot be bought in a grocery store. They are distributed by the producer in person to the consumers or through the Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale (Solidarity Purchasing Groups).

The authenticity of their products is based on a renewed sense of trust and solidarity and their hygiene standards are higher than commercial products because they are produced ethically.

These accounts raise thorny questions and point to the contradiction and unviability of favoring the “legal” intensive agricultural model while opposing “illegal” independent informal agricultural practices of food production and distribution that are instead informed by a model of “just sustainability.” In the midst of the current health crisis, the intensive agricultural model is less resilient than the local network of farmers and will likely face disruptions of supply chains, not because of food shortages but because of its reliance on and exploitation of undocumented migrant laborers who are key in harvesting produce and who are currently affected by the coronavirus crisis.

In fact, in recent days, the Italian news reported cases of coronavirus in Selam Palace, a nine-story building that used to house the Department of Philosophy of the University of Rome Tor Vergata and in 2006 became a squat for refugees and migrants. The building has been locked by the Italian military as over fifty cases of coronavirus have been reported among the four hundred occupants living in the same precarious conditions as the migrant agricultural workers in the Pontine Marshes and in other regions of Italy. They are exploited as part of a highly organized and profitable illegal system that is hidden in the folds of legality. It is the dark side of Italian agriculture where illegal immigrants are the victims of environmental violence caused by corporate colonialism. Frantz Fanon’s anticolonialism in *The Wretched of the Earth* today speaks as an ecological cry toward the eco-social devastation of human interaction with the soil: “European opulence is literally scandalous, for it has been founded on slavery, it has been nourished with the blood of slaves and it comes directly from the soil and from the subsoil of that underdeveloped world” (101–2).²

In these uncertain times overloaded with burning debates, ecological vulnerability is tangible. Nature has become a

political force and there is the need to be more attentive than ever to the intellectual and political implications of these submerged environmental testimonials. The timeliness of this discussion is critical when changing the current food system and giving people the right to participate and decide how food is produced and distributed becomes imperative. 

NOTES

1. In the winter of 1985, militant left-wing students occupied a number of buildings on different Italian university campuses to protest against the elitist Italian academic system. Later, they moved to buildings in the suburbs, which then became the so called *centri sociali autogestiti*. I write extensively about these social centers in my book *Uno sguardo al Sud. Vent’anni di movimenti, storie, conflitti e trasformazioni nella città di Napoli. 1990–2010* (Naples: Liguori Editore, 2013).
2. My thinking is informed by postcolonial theory and cultural studies. The intellectual contribution of Frantz Fanon acknowledges that ongoing forms of colonialism not only perpetuate inequalities, such as the precarious labor relations in conditions of semi-slavery described above; they also impact sovereignty over food and natural resources.

REFERENCES

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