

RURAL LANDSCAPES AND LANDSCAPES AT RISK OF DEPOPULATION

Abstract

To speak of rural landscapes today means to have in mind a whole gamut of highly different contexts on a cline between urban and rural, nearly always endowed with a rich legacy of material and immaterial contexts. Many are the cultural landscapes at risk of depopulating, since the younger generations tend to leave the interior regions with weak economies. The loss is mostly in terms of human resources -- small communities which have perpetuated cultural identities throughout history. This legacy is gradually vanishing due to the lack of adequate policies for the survival of material and immaterial resources as well as the lack of natural processes conveying knowledge and competences. The elderly population, and its virtual support of new ways of developing and valorising the territory, could help safeguarding the agrarian landscape, which can be so relevant in preserving the values of territories, landscapes and local economies.

Keywords: rural landscape, depopulation, communities

Foreword

Over the last few years, also on account of the efficiency of the *European Landscape Convention* [1], a new way of looking at landscapes has been gaining ground, which takes more and more into consideration physical, chemical, biological and socio-cultural elements as components in an open and dynamic system, produced by a continuous interaction between natural and anthropic factors. It is in this light that a reflection is growing more and more necessary, and also a new collocation, of "rural landscapes" and whatever is revolving around the concept of "rurality".

Speaking of rural landscapes today means bearing in mind a whole gamut of highly different contexts on a cline between urban and rural, nearly always endowed with a rich legacy of material and immaterial contexts. Most of the time these are intermediate realities, of a semi-urban or semi-rural nature, originating from different phenomena, consequent to spreading urbanization, or, for instance, of the processes gradually leading to small urban nuclei being abandoned, or of the scattered proliferation of small businesses and new ways of living the territory.

Cultural landscapes at risk of depopulation exist all over Europe, often featuring demographic as well as economic decline. In Italy, there are numerous and extensive such

cultural landscapes, both urban and agrarian, at risk of depopulating. Mostly located in marginal and scarcely accessible areas, somehow removed from the main dynamics of development which have characterized the territory from the post-war period onwards, their cultural, physical and historic character has rarely caught any attention. As a result, an inexorable process of self-extinction seems to have set in, indeed putting at risk their variegated resources. Their rural areas and their historic centres are almost never taken into consideration when development plans are devised; they are increasingly marginalized and at risk of being actually abandoned, particularly by the younger generations. There is no doubt that these contexts on the one hand need to be adequately considered in the new general development plans and, on the other hand, particularly need new forms of attention combining development and protection, to avoid further loss of the competences and forms of knowledge they are endowed with. Briefly, they must not be considered "dead weights"; rather, they constitute peculiar cultural and economic resources, precisely because of the role they could play in giving new strength to the general economy and more specifically the economy of these territories.

Rural areas

The fast pace of processes inducing change, owing to the new technologies and more generally to the ensuing modifications in lifestyles and social relations, makes the neglected state of rural areas located in the *central regions* different from that of depopulating territories where the influence of the past is still quite strong. For years now economic recession has been hitting the internal areas of many nations featuring a weak economy, often leading to a severe reduction of employment *in loco*. Thus the younger generations (and their crucial energies) have moved, while the better health conditions of the ageing population -- the true depositories of traditional cultures and technique - have been exasperating the effects of abandonment in many such territories. The loss in terms of human resources has been mostly felt in the small communities, which have perpetuated cultural identities throughout history. This legacy is gradually vanishing due to the lack of adequate policies for the safeguarding of material and immaterial resources as well as the lack of natural processes conveying knowledge and competences.

Indeed, the increasingly difficult life conditions in many large metropolitan areas, owing to the hardships in public health and welfare services etc. -- also in the light of many recent events -- could make us more easily perceive new and interesting inputs, and also lead us to reconsider many nearly forgotten areas of the territory, so as to focus their potential and their capacity to trigger new development processes, including economic processes.

"Distancing" and a slower pace are on nowadays, long with a new appreciation of memory, traditional values and cultural identities, of which these gradually abandoned landscapes are particularly rich. In these contexts, it is maybe even easier to conceive of innovative approaches in the tourism industry, sustained by the new configurations and uses of leisure time. Old time visions and their logic can, in other words, be revisited and reconsidered.

The vocation of tourism for the historic and cultural heritage, up to now mostly focussed on great cities and cities of art and culture, can resume an interest in forms of experience relying more and more on local cultures.

However, policies targeting the development of these areas cannot rely on plain "do-it-yourself" approaches, involving a heavy risk of putting at risk the actual socio-cultural peculiarities of local resources [2].

In many respects it is, then, important not to underestimate this risk in rural and agricultural areas when trying to save and protect the depopulating historic centres with new forms of "rurality" on the one hand, and with new prospects of local development on the other. The re-vitalization of these landscapes could involve actions on cultural and architectural legacies, which would otherwise be dispersed and destroyed, and also slow up the processes which alter and destroy peri-urban landscapes, thus triggering a dynamic positively affecting even the ecosystem in the vicinity of over-populated areas.

The elderly population, and its virtual support of new ways of developing and valorising the territory, could help safeguarding the agrarian landscape, which can be so relevant in preserving the values of territories, landscapes and local economies.

The rural landscape

Landscape suffers alterations over time, due to environmental changes (also caused by human actions) and changes in the substratum. Thus, a sort of rural geography, or rather a specific rural landscape develops. In the light of our

new conceptual framework, we can say that a possible definition of *rural landscape* must necessarily take into account an agro-systemic dimension of the territory, inclusive that is of the forms of the natural landscape as much as of the anthropic action carried out by man throughout history on agricultural lands. The American geographer Carl Sauer wrote «The cultural landscape is fashioned from a natural landscape by a cultural group. Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape is the result» [3]. Fifty years later, Emilio Sereni formulated a definition of agrarian landscape in which the role of agriculture became finally clear: "... the form that man, in the course and for the purposes of his own activities of production, imposes on natural landscape" [4].

The landscape of agrarian territory can be interpreted using several approaches, including those of geographers, geologists, agronomists, urban architects, botanists, zoologists and economists. Rural landscapes are also functional to growing specific crops. From the latter have sprung a number of manufactured goods, which may appear to be typifying elements of landscapes. Over the course of time, traditional choices in a number of landscapes have often been replaced by modern forms depriving artefacts of their function, notably when lack of proper maintenance and slow decay have more or less radically modified architectural structures and functions. Just like in other landscape contexts, events even alien to agricultural activity have over time supported multiple changes, for instance in relation to economic and cultural as well as social behaviour. In the areas characterized by a less dynamic economy, the landscape on the whole has not been significantly altered and its persistence may take on the value of a testimony worthy of protection in the interest of the community [5].

Far from an inactive static "hibernation" perspective, the prior logic today should be eco-sustainable and look at *resources* trying to identify their peculiarities and aiming for valorisation, whilst favouring the acquisition of forms of awareness of the potentialities and values that are available, so as to contribute to improving the life conditions of future generations. Within this new perspective, the agrarian landscape constitutes a seminal foundation. The idea of eco-sustainability leads us to think not only in terms of protecting the environment and the as well as the agricultural and artisan artefacts therein produced, but also in terms of promoting business enterprises exploiting widespread forms of knowledge as much as highly local traditional produce. The agrarian landscape could be revisited as a poly-functional milieu featuring its own local products amongst the socio-cultural attractions for new approaches to leisure.

New roles for the elderly

Over the years, and notably since the inception and serious treatment of the concept of *cultural heritage* [7], [8] "a deep-seated interdependence" has been developing "between the intangible cultural heritage and the tangible cultural and natural heritage» [9]. Unfortunately, globalization processes make people forget that "communities, in particular indigenous communities, groups and, in some

cases, individuals, play an important role in the production, safeguarding, maintenance and recreation of the intangible cultural heritage, thus helping to enrich cultural diversity and human creativity" [7], viz. there is no adequate consideration for the diverse roles played by communities and the values they have been accumulating over time.

The immaterial heritage is the end product of a long and composite chain of processes, strictly connected with the trajectory of their respective communities. This heritage affects the morphology of architectures and of landscapes and it also identifies with a number of identity traits which contribute to configure the harmonious development of the community. It is deeply connected with the wellbeing of the community, since by expressing its values it supports sharing, good relationships and therefore cohesion. Conveyed from each generation to the next, it is constantly reshaped and reinforced by the communities and social groups, in a total synergy with the life milieu.

Social groups, in fact opt for collective behaviours in terms of logics, knowledge attitudes and traditions which they have matured over time and produce cultural specificities with an impact on spaces and artefacts, viz. lifestyles, so that the landscape actually comes to reflect their lifeway and its expressions. The immaterial heritage, that is, triggers processes, which involve the material one. In other words, we can claim that the former originates the latter, configuring its functions over time and favouring its adequate protection. Safeguarding and valorising the intangible legacies, therefore, will quite likely affect the tangible ones and the actions aiming to recuperate, restore and revamp their specificities. When the values involved in the intangible heritage are neglected, the legacy itself is annihilated and lost, causing at the same time the inception of a process leading to a decay of the entire heritage: neglect of the intangible leads to destruction of the tangible property. The intangible cultural patrimony is therefore invaluable for its specificity, which cannot be replicated. It can be safeguarded and valorised only by keeping it alive by stimulating the natural process of conveyance, which though subject to constant adjustment and change, can nourish the cohesion of a community and configure new value systems. These, in turn, together with the cognitive and cultural heritage, can feed also new forms of economic development into the community.

If the younger component of a community is tempted to migrate, there will inevitably follow a rupture between the community, its places and products, so that a strong risk will ensue of a loss of the entire heritage, both because abandonment erodes the natural transmission of community values/competences and because alien models will be imported, which will not be likely to meet the actual needs and aspirations.

Concluding remarks

In different areas, the rural landscape in Italy still reflects the brief but highly intense relations between land and housing in the past. There was a time when farmers owned small portions of land maybe two or three hectares at the most. Agricultural produce was mostly for household consumption, thus the dimensions of

property was coherent with the owners' workforce. These smallish properties provided a variety of typical produce (cereal, fruit, oil, grapes, vegetables) which would guarantee autonomy and direct exchange between families, autonomy in terms of nutrition being compulsory because of the isolation due the scarcity of roads for transport. This close connection between place of residence and the workplace originated landscape settings nearly always characterized by small villages, usually close to one another, and by a few houses scattered over the countryside. The rural context and traditional, ecologically highly compatible techniques originated peculiar products, now considered of high quality. The limited potential of agriculture as rewarding economic activity is usually attributed to the small dimension of farms and of the workforce available, the ageing of the population devoted to farming on a business scale and the modest generational handover. These factors are indeed responsible for the poor circulation of products in external markets and, overall, for the limited capacity of agricultural business. This is why it is important, for instance, to stimulate forms of cooperation and association amongst small and very small farming businesses, as well as improving the circulation of agricultural goods over long-range destinations, using new technologies and marketing strategies. These assumptions also justify and require policies in support of rural agriculture to necessarily stress the role of landscape as a vital resource endowed with peculiar forms of knowledge, closely shaped by the local ecosystems, which have not been significantly modified. Such courses of action are also congruent with fast developing forms of tourism. The limited accessibility of a high percentage of the abandoned structures and buildings, usually thought of as a "weakness", in a renovated context could acquire new "strengths". Difficult access cut these territories off from the principal productive and economic dynamic over the last 100 years, yet this contributed to safeguarding the landscape and the territory itself against the most devastating effects of development, so that they are now open to forms of tourism targeting ecologically compatible tourism for nature lovers. Such areas are ideal for experimenting new models of development for low density, low impact forms of tourism. The high percentage of dismissed architectural structures, on the one hand can start a move in support of "zero ground consumption" architecture restoring what is already there, while promoting on the other hand new professions, aiming to recuperate and give new life to old building techniques for which the middle-aged and the older generation still has the necessary knowledge and competences. The development of the tourist industry to be sought is not the one targeting the masses or large numbers of people in any case, but the kind that relies on "diffuse presence" that is the tourist-friendly small villages, which can revitalize the existing structural heritage and involve the local communities and their knowledge for the benefit of newcomers. Such intrinsic systems of resources can favour adequate synergies supporting historic centres by turning them into new modes of living the territory. These re-purposed villages can attract new stable

dweller or vacation – home dwellers, for instance [9]. Quality products, in a context of “diffuse” historic urban resources, can originate models of tourist development hybridizing urban and rural lifestyles, between cultural tourism and natural and rural tourism. Historic centres can become the pillars of multiple fruition of the territory, based on its articulate agricultural and natural resources. Crucial will be the new hybrid vocations originating from those already predominant in a territory. They can produce and reinforce the peculiarities, almost in a perennial regeneration. It is, however, important to set up plans, which are followed by actions in the communities aiming to promote awareness of their peculiar features and potentialities. The various forms of knowledge handed over from one generation to another will have different forms of positive impact besides reinforcing bonds across generations. It makes it possible to convey previously known procedures and techniques favouring the protection of the historic and cultural heritage while contrasting its loss. Further, it will help involving the elderly in the contexts undergoing transformation, supporting their integration as productive actors. They would thus be considered productive citizens, still capable of helping the community, instead of persons in need of help. Hence, it is crucial to sustain and promote synergies amongst different actors, so as to reinforce cohesion and pursue the social well-being.

To conclude, the current crisis requires to recuperate productive landscapes as soon as possible through an optimal use of their resources and a re-evaluation of their lifestyle in milieus combining low anthropic modification with high environmental and landscaping virtues. It is necessary to apply a synergic perspective to the rural-agricultural and the urban milieu, both forming one entire structure in terms of settlements and production and aiming for interconnecting cultural, environmental, tourist and functional circuits. Attention should focus on policies and strategies binding the processes of construction, maintenance and care of the productive landscape, based on safeguarding the values of agricultural land and thinking in terms of integrated economies capable of providing a supply for the growing social demand of ecologically compatible spaces and products. It is necessary to bring to a halt the dissipation of the potentialities of some territories, contrasting abandonment for instance, and promoting both knowledge transfer and the regeneration of resources involving productive competences, before it is too late. Actions aiming to favour well-balanced development of territories must therefore give priority to the acquisition of awareness concerning the values involved in immaterial cultural heritage, so that local communities will pay increasing attention to the highly significant role of the landscape.

REFERENCES

[1] *European Landscape Convention*, Florence, 20 October 2000 (<http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/cultureheritage/heritage>)

- [2] M. Stanganelli, F. Torrieri, C. Gerundo, M. Rossitti, “An Integrated Strategic-Performative planning methodology towards enhancing the sustainable decisional regeneration of fragile territories” in *Sustainable Cities and Society* 53, 2020.
- [3] C. O. Sauer, *The morphology of Landscape*, University of California Publication in Geography, 22 1925.
- [4] E. Sereni, *Storia del paesaggio agrario*, Bari: Laterza, 1961.
- [5] E. Petroncelli, Stanganelli M., “Place Values and Change” in *Landscape Values: Places and Practice*, 2018, Centre for Landscape Studies NUI Galway
- [6] UNESCO, *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*, Paris, 21 November 1972.
- [7] UNESCO, *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, Paris, 17 October 2003.
- [8] C. Gerundo, G.N. Adad, “Promoting Cultural Resources using GIS. The case study of Pozzuoli” in *International Symposium on New Metropolitan Perspectives*, 2018, Springer Cham
- [9] E. Petroncelli, “Stanzialità, turismo, territorio tra locale e globale”, in N. G. Leone (Eds), *ITATOUR. Visioni territoriali e nuove mobilità. Progetti integrati per il turismo nella città e nell’ambiente*, Milan: FrancoAngeli/Urbanistica, 2012.