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WHICH MODEL OF LANDSCAPE RELAUNCH?

The Umbrian case of Postignano

Abstract
All of the Italian villages which have historically based their own economy on traditional production systems have been disadvantaged on the socio-economic field, during the last century, by changes connected to modernisation. These areas' economic weakness produced abandonment, depopulation and negligence through the local environment – with risks linked to hydrogeological instability. The Italian Government attention towards this situation recently materialized the attempt to localize these areas and to realize a strategy for their relaunch. This concentration result is the *National Strategy for Inner Areas* which gives a certain relevance to social empowerment in addition to economic relaunch. The case of Postignano, and its possible developments, could be relevant because, although its distinctive feature is the totally private leading of its economical relaunch instead of public, it confirms that the social side of rural development can't be disconnected by the economical one.

Keywords: inner areas, territorial redevelopment, local community rural innovator, village

Introduction
This work, beginning with an analysis of a case study, offers a reflection on the actions aimed at transforming the internal imbalances upon the national territory and accomplished to reinterpret both the territorial heritage and territorial capital [1], [2] of European outlying rural areas. This research, particularly, points out the relevance of local culture and identity during a regional relaunch project, even in the particular situation in which an enterprise starts it with no population living in the considered place: such is the scenario in Postignano (cf. next subparagraph). Attention, therefore, goes to a useful case to observe some typical processes of the relationship between society and marginal territories. Among these, the phenomenon of "a return to the land" is particularly important, where understood as a «general return to sustainable and long-lasting living condition of human societies on earth, pursued through a re-territorialization project capable of generating a new synergistic co-evolution between human settlement, environment and history, giving innovative forms to the territorial heritage» [3]. The central strategy of many recent redevelopment

projects, indeed, is providing a response to the growing sense of social disorientation through the construction of new livable and common spaces in which to try to satisfy the "desire for community" [4], [5].
As a consequence, the marginal areas experience globalization in trying to transform the traditional agricultural economic order towards one based on the commercialization of rural space [6], [7]. For outlying areas, it has become indispensable to create narratives, integrated with new technologies and with attention to design, presentation, image and organizational innovation [8]. In this way, an attempt is made to attract new consumers, mainly tourists from national or international urban populations (*Ivi)*. The recent proliferation of regeneration initiatives focused on creation and communication of attractive rural images is not accidental [9] and confirms the idea that rurality itself is now a social representation rather than an economic order [10]. *Place branding* strategies, however, risk reducing places to tourist landscapes rather than spaces to live. The communication strategies of the territory risk attracting new snobbish, exclusive communities, creating spaces which distance the previous territorial community and which weaken the possibility of building a significant capital of space.

Community, local identity and innovation in valorizing interior areas
The strategic enhancement of marginal areas' potential reflects a renewed cultural interest in rurality which stimulates new social practices and demand [11] which, in turn, can lead to competition between rural territories [12]. Local identity becomes a fundamental component of territorial capital to be invested in this competition; their landscape becomes one of production and consumption of identity; and thanks also to the affirmation of an economy of services, the places therein become increasingly residential and recreational. In this complexity, internal areas seek a new role by obtaining visibility through techniques that become fundamental for their socio-economic development [13]. Not all marginal rural territories compete however. Some do not have the human and material resources necessary to undertake their relaunch. The economic rehabilitation of these areas is governed and participated by actors of different natures; some private, others public. The latter, generally, intervene precisely where

endogenous forces are to be stimulated or exogenous forces are to be attracted to restart the development of the territory. The Italian case is particularly interesting, because the territorial imbalances are clear and profound and because clear and systematic choices have been made to address them, implemented in the National Strategy for Internal Areas (SNAI). The criteria chosen for the identification of the "internal areas" allow them to coincide with what we have so far called "outlying areas". It concerns a mode of action that intends to enhance the potential of the territorial capital spoken of so far, but which does not necessarily aim at the total inclusion of the local communities for its commencement. This package of government interventions aims to initiate co-design development paths that are not based on the idea that the community knows what it needs, despite being the custodian of local knowledge and of the relationships forming part of the territorial capital. Rather, SNAI is based on an analysis aimed at identifying the internal, institutional, citizen and entrepreneurial living forces[1]; and relevant actors – including external ones – through focus groups and scouting [14] – [15] – [16]. In the scope of SNAI, therefore, the identification of innovative subjects and the stimulation of a *"supportive social context"* is fundamental [17]. The local innovator" will be understood, in this article, as described by the literature dedicated precisely to this type of figure in marginal rural contexts both in Italy and in Europe. The "local innovator" [17], [18], [19]:
-    is often not local;
-    generally, garners little attention from local elites;
-    has the ability to exploit the external environment;
-    has the ability to establish internal and external connections and to generate knowledge in doing so;
-    is often an immigrant equipped with greater training and greater entrepreneurial skills;
-    demonstrates ability and propensity to use ICT (Information and Communication Technology).
The "local innovator", however, often faces a context that cannot be said to be welcoming, from an entrepreneurial and innovative point of view. The bottom-up approach was passed over by SNAI precisely because in the internal areas the enemies of development are often locals

Fig. 1. The hamlet of Postignano (source: www.flickr.com/photos/viaggioroutard/19675923443/sizes/l/).

[19], specially their élite. For the environment around the innovator to be called *"supportive"* there must be critical mass, specialized services, electronic infrastructures and people able to use them [8].

Case study, research questions, hypotheses
The case study selected is that of the redevelopment of the medieval village of Postignano (Fig. 1). It is a fraction of the Umbrian municipality of Sellano, classified, within the SNAI, as "peripheral": an internal area village.

This village, founded in the thirteenth century reached its maximum expansion in the sixteenth century, with a population of 400 inhabitants. Its demographic trend remained stable, encountering alternating phases, until the twentieth century, when it experienced the dynamics of progressive depopulation that affected many hill villages of the Apennines, until it reached total desertification in the late sixties. The village remained deserted until 1992.

In that year, the acquisition of the entire village began by a real estate company which purchased one property at a time from the heirs of prior owners. The business idea is to give new life to the village through its complete renovation and reselling it when the work is finished. Today the company still owns a large part of the village, half of which is a scattered hotel and half intended for sale.

The reasons that make this specific experience particularly interesting are related to the problematic events that have accompanied the almost thirty years of life of this project. An entrepreneur devoid of any identity link with Umbria, as well as the main partners and collaborators, faces significant costs and complications in order to complete the project. Between 1992 and 2020, some events have impacted the area: in 1997 an earthquake demolished a large part of the village; the use of the internet has spread; in 2008 the global economic crisis hit the real estate sector hard; in 2016 another strong earthquake occurred in

this area of Umbria. Within this complexity our research is trying to understand what is the role of the local community in the redevelopment of an internal area, if in our case study the figure of the innovator corresponds to the profile traced and finally what importance do the values of civil inclusion have in territorial redevelopment actions.

Methodology
The method used to investigate the regeneration dynamics of the village of Postignano is the semi-structured qualitative interview. The subjects to be interviewed were chosen by combining two different sampling techniques. The first was chosen according to the criterion of reasoned choice: the current director of the hotel facility present in Postignano. The following were chosen using the snowball sampling technique, asking the first interviewee to indicate the key subjects to be interviewed in order to continue the investigation. A total of 5 key-subjects were selected: all of them are strictly involved in the project design for Postignano. This approach achieves the narration of the entrepreneurs and of figures close to them, which allows reasoning upon fundamental and interesting issues regarding the theme of the territorial regeneration of a village in the internal area.

Results
The research mainly led to the emergence of an important first question: the "new" village of Postignano is perceived as "different" with respect to the territory, as if coming out of its abandonment it has disconnected from the context in which it is located. This is expressed in various ways in the narrative of the interviewees: the envy of the locals because they did not think of taking the same initiative and the feeling that the village has become the seat of an elite community due to the expensive properties purchased by high profile foreigners and the sophisticated cultural proposals. The origin of the owners who come from another

region also contribute to the sense of estrangement of the project.

All the interviews, albeit with varying nuances and presenting small contradictions, inclined towards revealing a dichotomy between the new village community and the pre-existing one, which lives close by. According to the interviewees, the first is a present, welcoming, lively community: it is there. It is made up of the owners, employees and house buyers, who have established an authentic bond and which prompted everyone to use the term *community* at some point in their interview. The surrounding community, on the other hand, is depicted as a group of people initially skeptical of the project, but today more involved; now fond of his or her own landscape, now completely out of love with the territory. The rhetoric of falling in love emerges when the interviewees refer to the owners with terms such as «passionate», «fond of [the village]», «in love», while on several occasions it became natural to change the signal of this semantics, when talking about the local community, "out of love". One of the interviewees goes so far as to argue that the lack of liaison services and the dissolution of local historical memory suggests that the local community «is just not there».
«Postignano is a 100% common good». In interviews this topic frequently rests on the description of the cultural events that take place in the village, but that some of the interviewees themselves recognise increase the perceptual gap with the surrounding area: «They feel out of place. They ask me: "How should I dress to come to your jazz concert?"».

The theme of the new local identity, on the other hand, is strictly connected to the discourse on the modernization of the village and on the paradoxical one of a non-existent territorial branding project. The idea is expressed. on one hand, that the village cannot live on the idealization of the past (Fig. 2). According to the interviewees, the welcoming and loyal staff, the culinary proposals of typical products, the craftsmanship and the respect for the housing tradition of the place are elements to be enhanced, but which must never lead to the creation of a «fake scenario». The success of the village, however, is determined by the search by externals for a typical scenario tied to the imaginary that, according to all the interviewees involved in the project, needs to be developed. The paradox, therefore, emerges when they affirm that the intention is to avoid any museum display or romantic narration, but also that they have never completed a full communication plan that would provide the public with the answer to the question: *what is Postignano?* To make them more competitive. Particular attention was then paid to the figure of the social innovator investigating whether in the case studied this figure contained elements that matched any outlined in the most recent literature.
The account of the internal area entrepreneurs we interviewed largely confirms their adherence to the profile of the marginal rural area innovator described above:
-     they are two highly educated individuals; they are not local and have had difficult relationships, on some occasions, with some local administrators, although the collaborative element has prevailed;

Fig. 2. The Hamlet's reading room between present and past (photo credits: Paola De Salvo and Marco Pizzi).

- the external environment is increasingly becoming the resource of this village and the investment that company directors are making to strengthen connections with the surrounding places and people, also in terms of communication (cf. new section of the website: "surroundings") is not casual;
- they had been interested since the nineties in cabling the village and all had come to the conclusion that today «there is no living village without internet connection and without technology», demonstrating an inclination towards the creation of a favorable environment for the use of ICT.

Finally, the research activity focused its attention on the importance of the values of civil inclusion in the actions of territorial regeneration. The communications officer in particular has shown himself to be sensitive to the issue of including the citizenry with a long-term view and civic inclusion. His work is trying to involve above all the younger generations in the life of the village, with the aim of bringing this place into the future memory of the surrounding community.

The words of all the interviewees make it clear that the project did not begin with the aim of redeveloping the socio-economic fabric of a marginal area, as much as that of winning an interesting «architectural challenge», from which to obtain a pleasant place to sell, making a profit. The same interviewees, however, insist very much on the rhetoric of passion and affection towards the territory, demonstrating how, over time, the nature of the business has changed. Two earthquakes, the advent of the internet and a global real estate crisis have forced the entrepreneurs to rethink their approach. The company is now half hotel and half real estate. Both sectors, however, have put

the managers in front of the inevitable problems tied to the internal area enterprise: one cannot think of requalifying a marginal rural area without redesigning its identity, without involving the existing community and without thinking about the features that it will have that are intended to be installed. This statement is based on the reflections conducted on communication dynamics and territorial branding aimed at increasing local competitiveness [13]. The intangible characteristics that make a territory attractive are tied to the liveliness of the local community. This itself however, cannot make any contribution to the development of projects it perceives as extraneous. The inclusion of the local community - i.e. its active participation in the life of a place - determines the presence of what Dinis [8] defines as *supportive social context* that can only be achieved if interesting opportunities are created, such as those that Postignano can offer, to those who live the territory. To base the attractiveness of the territories on the identity of the places implies requalifying them with a view to sustainability of intervention and improvement in the quality of life of the whole community. It means acting in an integrated perspective where financial (public and private), territorial and social capital come together. Finally, the reputation and credibility of the valorization actions of the territories is given by the sum of the social relationships. The quality of a place, in fact, is not only the result of its tangible features, but derives essentially from all those very aspects of human experience which are primarily relational and of which the local community is the first expression.

Acknowledgments

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NOTES

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