

“Two Baskets for Change”

Mariarosa Dalla Costa¹

At the time of Fordist production I was particularly moved by a passage of Marx's, one which I read over and over. In it, he suggested that “as soon as the working class, stunned at first by the noise and turmoil of the new system of production, had recovered its senses to some extent, it began to offer resistance, first of all in England, the native land of large-scale industry.”² Reading it, I heard the roar of machines and felt the power of that great reawakening, that of a new chapter in the human story.

The passage returns to mind as I observe another great reawakening: one that is being enacted by farmers and citizens (who are challenging their role as merely “producers” or “consumers”) against the great machine of industrial agriculture and the politics that bolster its delivery of noxious foods, environmental devastation, economic crises, rural exodus, and above all its negation of the relationship between humans and the land. If it is true, as Marx suggested, that “the expropriation of the agricultural producer, of the peasant, from the soil is the whole basis of the process”³ then these wills that have been set in motion *already contain the seeds of another possible world*. The forms of expropriation have obviously become more refined and diverse - these days one's relationship to the land can be subject to expropriation even without a physical expulsion having taken place.⁴ The negation of such a relationship, in its multiple

1 Transcript of a presentation delivered at the Terra e Libertà/ CriticalWine, Fiera dei particolari, held at the LeoncavalloSocial Centre in Milan, December 5-7, 2003. Published in Italian in Angelini, M. et al. 2004. *Terra e Libertà/Critical Wine*. Rome: DeriveApprodi.

2 Marx, Karl. 1990 [orig. 1867]. *Capital: Volume 1*. New York: Penguin: 390.

3 Marx, Karl. 1990 [orig. 1867]. *Capital: Volume 1*. New York: Penguin: 876.

4 I am alluding to when, while remaining on their land, farmers or live-stock

forms, remains to this day the basis for the process of capitalist accumulation. To reinstate this relationship is therefore a fundamental way to disrupt of a mode of production that has upended and commodified the very mechanisms of the reproduction of life.

At the heart of this rural and urban rebellion and its construction of networks and initiatives is the need, to use an agricultural term, for a *regrafting*. Amidst the fallen illusion of technology's abilities to provide solutions a discussion has reopened around care, care for the earth. Since people have begun to say enough to the *risks* involved in such (bio)technological leaps, but above all to the continuous interruption and upheaval that these inflict upon the forms and networks of life's spontaneous reproduction of itself.

J. Bové and F. Dufour⁵ describe how their breeder comrades felt they had reached their lowest point when they became conscious of the economic and ecological aberration inherent in the practice of separating the calf from its mother who was supposed to feed it in order to administer feedings of regenerated milk. This product had been subsidized to the point that it was now more competitive than the natural variety. For them that moment was critical to sparking a reflection on the purpose of labour, one which brought them to the concept of peasant-based agriculture. In order to qualify as such, the farming must have a particular approach (made concrete through the adoption of ten principles) and it must have a perimeter, within which one can explore the observance of limits and test the principles.⁶

raisers, in the global North or South of the world, in actuality become workers in large companies. The case of the agistment is typical. An agistment is a contract by which two partners agree to follow in the raising of livestock. While the farmer owns the land and any structures on it, the entrepreneur generally provides the livestock, the feed, the medicines, etc. According to this kind of agreement the farmer, for example, may raise chickens but cannot make any decisions with respect to their feeding, medical treatment, or any other aspect of the practice.

- 5 J. Bové e F. Dufour, 2001 (orig. 2000). *Il mondo non è in vendita*. Milan: Feltrinelli: 128. In English: Bové, Jose and Dufour, Francois. 2001. *The World is Not for Sale*. New York: Verso.
- 6 Bové and Dufour's work offers a better, if nonetheless partial, idea of the these binding principles: the perimeter, or space in which to explore the observance of limits refers to the verification of the limits such farming must abide by in order to adequately respond to the needs of the society – limits, for example, such as the maximum nitrogen level allowable per hectare, the maximum land size per farmer (so as to allow other farmers the possibility to work), the maximum quantity of animals the land can sustain and other measures that are needed in order to avoid falling into the trap of intensification and productivism. The approach, Bové suggests, is the manner, the direction, the compass, and the horizon towards which we need to be heading regardless of the particular situation of one's own company... in the document the approach is represented by ten principles of peasant-based agriculture (177)... this is a result of the contemplation of three dimensions: the social one above all, that is, that founded upon employment for and solidarity between farmers, across world regions, and the fact that it must also be economically efficient and respectful of both consumers and nature (176)... the triad of peasant-based

Here it is not as much the worry about health risks but indignation over the upending of the spontaneous forms of the reproduction of life that creates the conditions for reflection on the meaning and purpose of labour, that generates a desire to change one's direction. It is the same indignation that provoked a desire for the pursuit of other relationships in labour and in life for many other sectors of the world's population, that which provoked a response of "ya basta" towards this model of development and subsequently resulted in the opening up of communication aimed at experimenting with other paths. It is this indignation that has sparked the creation of concrete alternatives.

Yet the *Confédération Paysanne* is only one node, albeit one of the most significant amongst those in developed regions, of the vast *Via Campesina* network that links very diverse farming communities in the North and the South of the world. These communities are connected by a commonality of goals and approaches. First amongst these is the construction of food sovereignty in its various expressions (above all that of different kinds of relationships between producers) of which I spoke at the preceding conference in Verona.⁷ There I suggested that, explicitly or implicitly, there is increasingly emerging from such situations the articulation of a need to re-localize development and re-ruralize the world. I will try to expand upon some aspects of this while attempting to allow for the greatest possible freedom to the reader's imaginary. This need for the re-localization of development, in conjunction with a series of other initiatives that I will not mention here for the sake of brevity, is not solely addressed to the thematic of agriculture, but in any case the latter has reacquired the centrality it used to enjoy, and because of that I will focus on it here. Re-localizing development is a need that, emerging in particular from the discontinuities provoked by neoliberal globalization in developed countries, has led to a series of efforts to retain and valorize at a local level money, professional skills and above all agricultural labour, against their continual de-localization and the resulting misery of citizen inhabitants of these settings.

agriculture is to produce, provide work, and preserve (121) ... the development of peasant-based agriculture requires at least two conditions: a political context which instead of favouring industrialization and concentration must sustain farmers, as well as the personal choices of farmers in their own companies in order to have a space for initiative and responsibility (177-178).
Translator's note: page references are to the Italian version.

- 7 This is a reference to Dalla Costa, M. "Riruralizzare il mondo... per recuperare lo spirito e la vita," a paper delivered at the *Terra e Libertà, CriticalWine* convention held at the *CentroSociale La Chimica*, Verona, April 11-13th, 2003, and published in Italian in M. Angelini et al., 2004. *Terra e Libertà/Critical Wine*. Rome: *DeriveApprodi*.

Now in the attempt to read these two needs by relating it to a context that is closer to our own, but not only this, I could say that if I had two baskets, one with which to re-localize development and the other with which to re-ruralize the world, in the first I would place four things: 1) the right of access to the land; 2) short-cycle farming and one that is sustainable in every respect; 3) the practice (one that is growing in numerous countries) of the recuperation of varieties that have fallen into disuse as well as of their modalities of cultivation and consumption; and 4) a focus on policies that contrast the extroversion of development. In the second basket I would put another four things: 1) the diffusion of an agriculture such as the one defined above; 2) the adequate remuneration of farming, including that practiced in more challenging areas; 3) the reintroduction of diffuse free-range livestock rearing; 4) the promotion of a culture, but above all of a politics, that gives pride of place once more to an agriculture redefined in this manner. Obviously these factors only provide a bottom layer for the baskets. Let us take a closer look at each of them.

1. The right of access to the land in the areas in which one lives: this is obviously a matter that needs to be articulated according to the geographical context in question. For areas in the global South it means above all the ability to have or maintain access to the land (through common rights or individual ones, for small and medium-sized farmers) against the continual expropriation practiced by large investors or the state. The availability of land where life is guaranteed by subsistence agriculture or via small-scale sustainable agriculture makes the difference between the possibility or impossibility of survival. If in various regions of the world the scope of this problem gestures to the necessity of agricultural reforms that have always been promised but rarely enacted, it is nonetheless important to recall the gains achieved on this terrain by the large-scale movements for the appropriation of land, above all the *Sem Terra* who in the last 20 years have contributed to the settling of 250,000 rural families on 8 million hectares in almost all Brazilian states. For developed areas, beginning with Italy, access to the land requires above all that the land has maintained a price that is accessible to the farmer. In our case this is no longer possible when land is particularly close to important tracts of highway or when there are tourist-industry interests or other profitable investments nearby, thanks to which the price rises so much that it is no longer accessible or amortizable within an agricultural

process. This has been a typically Italian phenomenon, one that, due to the greater availability of land, is not as much the case in Spain, France or Germany. Yet in our case this is an added obstacle for the possibility of a diffuse presence of agriculture. And, obviously, a problem that aggravates the matter and is substantial in our area with respect to the issue of access to the land is that of a justly remunerative agricultural income, especially when managing a type of farming that is other than the productivist and industrial kind. Another important aspect of being able to access the land is that relative to the lands upon which there persist practices of common usage (often this dates back to medieval times), a necessary corollary of the breeding of livestock and farming. These lands are diminishing in Italy as well, where they are sold or hoarded by private companies or individuals also thanks to negligence in their cataloguing or in the conservation of land records.

2. Short-cycle farming, one that is sustainable across its various dimensions, is the only kind capable of guaranteeing freshness, authenticity, and the traceability of the food. Freshness and authenticity have increasingly become a part of the demands made by movements of farmers and citizens in the most developed regions, beginning with the United States where from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific "fresh and genuine food for the community's nutritional security"⁸ has been the banner of networks like the Community Food Security Coalition. Another emerging demand has been that the food be produced and distributed with methods and organizational networks that can guarantee moderation in its pricing and therefore its accessibility for customers with less income at their disposal. To this end agreements are stipulated between the producer and the consumer, according to which an amount of agricultural product is purchased in advance with cash or through offering other forms of labour in exchange. Another important phenomenon that, significantly, is growing in the United States (but not only) in past years, is the possibility for producers to directly sell their products in farmers' markets in cities without resorting to costly intermediaries. In Italy fair trade buying associations have been growing. GAS (Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale), which has roughly 2 million members, has adopted 5 basic principles: 1)

8 Dalla Costa, Mariarosa. 2002. "The Native in Us, the Land we Belong to," in *The Commoner* n.6, 2002. URL: <http://www.thecommoner.org>

respect for human beings, so the purchased products cannot be the result of social injustice but rather must actively contribute to a sustainable social development; 2) respect for the environment, or the choice of products obtained in a manner that is respectful of nature while trying ensure the least possible transportation; 3) respect for health, which comes in the form of choosing organic products; 4) solidarity, or choosing to purchase from small producers who otherwise would be crushed by larger ones; 5) respect for flavour, as a part of returning to natural rhythms by eating seasonal foods such as organic products, which beyond having greater nutritional capacity are notoriously better tasting. It is significant that the new ethic that is appearing involves the economic, social, and environmental aspects of the question. Here too there is the desire to declare “*ya basta*” in the face of the modalities of this kind of development and their consequences, the desire to affirm other relations. In this way initiatives such as that of the [prezzo sorgente]⁹, or ensuring a registered designation of origin, including the new forms of local designation, (De. Co., or “*Denominazione comunale*”, is a simple and inexpensive method created by the municipalities) guarantee transparency and traceability, valorize the location of production against the invisible or uncertain place of origin, and valorize the locality of production and the difference of relations that flow from it, not only between producers and consumers, but between citizens. These practices obviously re-familiarize humanity with the local, which is valorized as the fragment of a common good and therefore as something accessible to everyone.

3. The series of projects in many countries that for some time have been organizing in order to recuperate varieties of foodstuffs, and their relative methods of cultivation and preparation, that are at risk of being forgotten or becoming extinct. This is a reclaiming of cultivation, of cultures and of knowledges against the disappearance of varieties and the

9 “*Prezzo sorgente*” is an expression that emerges from social movements, and refers to the original price or source price, that which is paid to the farmer. The proposal is that this be noted on the product’s label in order to discourage unjustified price hikes during the phases in which the product is transformed and commercialized. In this way the consumer can be aware of such price increases if they have occurred. The problem is that the farmer is paid very little and yet the end consumer pays a great deal due to the unjustified profits that are eked out during intermediate phases. Such distortions and price increases are caused by “long cycle” agricultural production.

standardization and the obliteration of flavour imposed by the nutritional dictatorship of the multinationals. This is connected to the right to variety (beginning with the variety offered by the land upon which one lives), which in turn is tied not only to the right to a variety of taste but also to the greater nutritional potential of a varied diet and the greater nutritional security that this provides considering the risk of species becoming subject to disease. In Italy in the most recent years, together with an emerging interest in the revalorization of some partially forgotten species, within the context of *Civiltà Contadina*, the activity of the Seed Savers is also growing.¹⁰ Yet without defining themselves as such, elderly people and farmers also act as seed savers, seized as they are with the preoccupation of "prolonging" the life of varieties of fruit and vegetables that have been absent for years from the catalogues of seed companies. Young women, with the ancient love for the reproduction of life, are seed savers as well. If some varieties lend themselves to being commodified in different regions others do not, as they might not be able to survive the trip, and therefore in such cases only the locality and the regionality of production and distribution could offer the pleasure of seeing and enjoying these species. Associations such as Pomona that are dedicated to the recuperation of ancient fruit also demonstrate another process these practices address: that of the survival of animal species that do so through the consumption of endangered fruit. The re-localization of development, therefore, geared towards the recuperation of some of the immense richness not only of vegetable, but also of animal biodiversity.

4. The necessity of revealing the falseness and to contrast the abuses of a neoliberalism that wishes to simply impose on all countries the erasure of borders for the benefit of a dictatorship of the strongest, the extroversion of development (that is, a strong orientation towards exports), and above all agricultural development (with the pretext of reducing international debt). In reality this model of development cannot but increase foreign debt and with it the difficulties for

¹⁰ *Civiltà Contadina* is an association that valorizes and protects farming traditions. Seed Savers are a group belonging to an international network that in Italy work within *Civiltà Contadina*, in the area of recovering varieties of seed at risk of becoming extinct or forgotten. Such a practice is exceptionally important given that it occurs in the face of tendencies that are destructive and commodifying of biodiversity, such as European Directive 98/95 that declares the free exchange of seeds illegal.

nourishment and for life. Next to the construction from below of a new agriculture there should also be the reclamation of a political regulation that promotes, protects and valorizes a local, regional and national agriculture (the qualification of such terms must be contextualized however) that is sustainable in every aspect, aimed at the maximum promotion of self-sufficiency as well as the conservation of biodiversity and the diversification of cultivation, all aspects that are subtended to the perspective of food sovereignty which alone can offer a guarantee against the growth of foreign debt. Food, as a fundamental rule for and right of citizens in the North as well as in the South, must not only be available, but above all it must not be alien to the history and the geographical context of those consuming it. Therefore, imports or exports, instead of constituting the driving axis of a nutritional system, ought to be a subsidiary measure with respect to that which cannot be produced locally or that which constitutes an excess.

As for the items placed in my basket with which one could figuratively re-ruralize the world, let us take a closer look at these.

1. The spread of an agriculture that is sustainable and diversified in every respect. In order to be able to spread, this farming must be oriented towards the creation of the maximum possible number of jobs and therefore to the refusal of the industrial model and the logic of the concentration of industry which is its bearer. Therefore an agriculture that is not only organically, but also socially oriented.
2. A type of agriculture with these characteristics ought to be maintained even in areas where the land presents particular difficulties, along with economic incentives that could assist in the remuneration of greater work. A landscape without agriculture is, in fact, a landscape with less life. Yet the landscape is a common good, and it makes sense therefore that everyone make it their responsibility.
3. The resumption of a widespread free range raising of livestock as a crucial element of agriculture, allowing the animals to graze, allowing herbivores to remain such, and maintaining in this manner the fertility of the land through organic fertilization. The reflections, honed and practiced by François Dufour, beginning with not keeping more animals than that

which the land which one has access to can sustain, seem quite illuminated to me.

4. The promotion of a culture, a diffusion of experiences of self-organization, the appeal for politics that concretely sustain the possibility of a broad agricultural re-conversion. In developed regions in particular, after the phase of Fordism and then post-Fordism in which agriculture was first considered the poor sister and then a degenerate daughter of large-scale industry, it is necessary to ensure a primary role for agriculture, one which it has had and which it must continue to have in human history. This must occur by allowing agricultural practices access to the means that can allow it to re-convert itself in its entirety to an agriculture that is healthy and sustainable in all of its aspects, the social one above all. In different situations one might discover that, as my students tell me, many people, instead of considering spending their lives amidst paper and plastic and in front of a computer, want to be farmers. Thus from the earth there has also begun to germinate a new imaginary.

Translated by Enda Brophy

