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TRACK 16: TERRITORIES UNDER PRESSURE: GEOPOLITICS AND PLANNING

IS RURAL SEDUCTIVE OR THREATENING? TOWARD A RE-FRAMING OF THE “RURAL MYTHOLOGY” IN TWO NORTHERN ITALY TERRITORIES HIGHLY SPECIALISED IN AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION (260)

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This contribution calls for a re-framing of the dominant and essentially positive mythology that structures discourses and planning policies as regards rural territories. In the long run, a taken-for-granted seductive narrative has led to the construction of the imaginary of the countryside almost as an “Eden”, with planning tools conceiving rural areas primarily as contexts to be protected from the growth ambition of cities and infrastructures. Yet, today this vision is being severely challenged in territories that have undergone massive land-use and socio-economic changes as a result of the intensification of specialised, export-oriented agricultural productions (Brenner and Katsikis, 2020). In what we call “territories of monocultures”, specialised agro-industry has triggered significant environmental, landscape, and social impacts, as well as health issues connected to the massive use of chemicals. Frictions and contradictions between different narratives, values, and territorial aspirations (i.e. economic development, promotion of tourism, landscape conservation, and citizens’ demand for a higher quality of life) have here become evident through growing social conflicts and protests.

However, the impacts generated by the expansion of monocultures have been given little academic attention within urban studies so far. In particular, the contemporary debate on planning does not adequately consider the land-use modifications caused by specialised agriculture, and hence the rising social demands for public intervention. Research on the territories of monocultures has two aims: i) to re-frame the urban/rural dichotomy, in both planning theory and practice, by stressing the need to manage the negative impacts of agro-industries on urban settlements; ii) to reflect on the evolution of the rural mythology from an “agrarian romanticism” (Patel, 2016) to a mental space that offers seductive geographies for recreation and tourism, till different scenarios for a renewed quality of life that balances farmers’ and citizens’ needs (Vallerani, 2021).

To do this, this study adopts a qualitative research method. Through the analysis of planning documents and interviews with key actors, this contribution investigates two cases of premier territories of monocultures in Northern Italy, where specialised agriculture is currently generating increasing conflicts between environmental movements and local producers (Basso and Vettoretto, 2020). The first case, located in the Veneto Region, is the hilly production zone of the globally known Prosecco wine, recently recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site; the second coincides with the most important mountain valleys for apple production: the Non-Valley in the Trentino-Alto Adige Region.

Two conflicting narratives take shape: on the one hand, the dominant mythology that frames the successful productive countryside as a *bel paesaggio* (beautiful landscape), a nice place to stay (for tourists) and live (for locals) linked to the imaginary of Made in Italy; on the other, the different perspective – mainly promoted by grassroots citizens movements – that sheds light on the unsustainability of such productions, from both an environmental and social perspective. This last issue calls for a general reflection on the role of planning tools in addressing the interactions between agricultural and residential zones more effectively.

The first narrative refers to the sustainability of production (especially from an economic perspective), energy savings, the beautiful landscape created through agricultural techniques, and the opportunities for tourism promotion; the second focuses on the quality of life, public health related to intensive agro-industry, environmental, landscape, and cultural issues. Empirical evidence clearly shows a clash among the aforementioned mythologies.

In conclusion, different interests and values have led to an evolution of the meaning of rural. In territories of monocultures, this can no longer coincide with the imaginary of a “peasant countryside”, but with a context where agro-industry also generates significant impacts on human settlements and needs thus to be regulated.

Keywords: rural mythology, monocultures, capital-intensive agriculture, urban-rural, social conflicts

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