

The agricultural Cooperative Coraggio (Courage) and the dispute over access to public land:

From the Roman coordination to the miracle of Borghetto San Carlo

By Giacomo Lepri

Thanks all for the invitation and interest that our activities and engagement have sparked in the Transmango research . Special thanks to Luca and Stefano, with whom we shared these years of work and with whom a beautiful human relationship was born.

I am Giacomo Lepri, president of the agricultural Cooperative Coraggio in Rome. My background is in anthropology studies and I have many years of experience working as a chef. Since 2009 I have dedicated myself to agriculture, since 2011 to disputes over land access and since 2015, with the Cooperative, to the management of the 22 hectares of public lands of the Borghetto San Carlo. The variety of professional and academic backgrounds is something many members of the Cooperative, and young people going back to farming have in common; in both cases rarely do people have farming backgrounds. This is an element worth considering, given the critical features of the movements of access to public land in recent years, and the many innovative efforts of the agricultural sector. These initiatives, in order to survive, are starting to look beyond food production only and moving towards the idea of multifunctionality.

It is precisely the need for access to the land and the will to realise agricultural parks - that are productive, provide jobs and training, and protect the environment and biodiversity - which, in fact, have been the driving force for access to public lands in Rome and the Lazio region, and the agricultural cooperative Coraggio.

1. Fuori dal seminato

It's now been six years since the beginning of the dispute over the assignment of public lands in Rome and Lazio; four years since the collection of the 10,000 signatures for the symbol of our battles, Borghetto San Carlo; two years since the area has been managed by the Coraggio Cooperative. These last few years have been years of difficulties, small victories, constancy and determination, with clear goals:

- . redistribute public land to skilled individuals who are otherwise unable to access it;
- . give citizens the opportunity to enjoy important "green areas" where to find good local food as well as environmental use and protection;
- . rebuilding the "green infrastructure" of city and country, preventing abandonment by favouring sociality, giving work.

We have strategically chosen to take the legal route for now, strategically excluding land occupation, in order not to appear troublesome to common people. It is indeed the common people who are both allies and recipients of the benefits we hope to obtain. For this reason, we have been calling for government to ease access to public lands for young people. We have demanded security for the difficulties of starting and managing a farm through minimum ten-year contracts. A great opportunity for young farmers. A huge opportunity for the credibility of Italian institutions.

Unfortunately, I would point out immediately that the Administrations of the city of Rome and the Lazio region have not fully captured this opportunity. The flagship case of Borghetto San Carlo, as well as the other pilot cases of public land grants which Luca quoted earlier, are ignored and abandoned, without any financial or administrative assistance. Neither we nor other young farmers who are renters of public lands have been in the condition to benefit from the 70,000 euros the "Rural Development Plan" allocates for the first settlements of young farmers on public lands. With this initial funding, land would have been more readily improved, to the direct benefit of the Lazio Region.

Where did we start, what have we obtained and what's needed for a radical change?

Thanks to the work we have accomplished over the past few years, 10 areas, totalling about 400 hectares, have been made available by the Rome Municipality and Lazio region, as anticipated by Luca. Borghetto San Carlo is one of these, between the city and the large archeological Parco di Veio, we are now growing 2 hectares of durum wheat, half a hectare of chickpeas, 1 hectare of vegetables, 1 hectare of sorghum, 1 hectare of olive trees; beehives, 2,000 square meters of community gardens, the picnic area and the children's playground area entirely made of reclaimed wood, the training courses and wooden structures that host the "Scuola diffusa della terra Emilio Sereni", a project built with a wide network of associations.

Where did we start from? 2. The birth and development of a brave dispute

In a poster on December 10 2011, to introduce ourselves to those that were getting to know us, we announced that...

The needs and problems we want to solve are:

1 – THE NEED FOR WORK

2- THE NEED FOR SPACE:

3- THE NEED FOR A LIVABLE CITY:

4- THE USE OF ABANDONED PUBLIC SPACES:

Well, after 6 years we can say we have stayed consistent with those aims. We helped prevent the sale of agricultural public properties in Lazio. We accompanied the release in 2014 of the first public property tenders after decades of inactivity. We have been recognised and rewarded as representatives of a new way to understand farming in the city. We have informed, trained and built contents to prevent the media from transforming agriculture in a temporary fashion, good for marketing only. Today we have a Cooperative founded by us, fully legal with ten members and many volunteers.

They are good results, but insufficient. If there are no strong interventions, either funding or administrative, we risk losing the enthusiasm of those people.

The Roman Coordination for Access to Land

Let's start from the beginning, from the spring of 2011, when groups of young farmers, aspiring farmers, agricultural cooperatives born from occupations of public spaces in Rome during the '70s, associations representing the agricultural interest, trade unions and environmental associations joined together in the Coordination for access to land in Rome.

We did sit-ins under the offices of Ministries and Local Authority Offices, collected signatures, proposed training events, seminars and awareness-raising through the media, planted trees in public flowerbeds and gathered proposals from citizens.

This gave us the chance to participate at institutional planning meetings: in those occasions we defended the principles of awarding access to land for disadvantaged classes (the unemployed and landless farmers) and the importance of multifunctionality. The tenders in 2014 did in fact respect some of these principles.

Borghetto San Carlo

At first, no one believed that we would also have freed Borghetto San Carlo: a piece of public land, given over to the municipality by one of the most important construction companies in Rome, which had planned to build villas and a shopping centre. Our mobilisation ultimately led to us being granted the management of the beautiful place where we now work.

In these last photos you finally see sown fields, gates open to citizens and young people at work. And these images are worth more than a thousand words. Yet, we still have no salaries and no big chance of structural investments due to the mistakes made by the Lazio Region and by the Municipality of Rome.

3. The administrations' response to our value

It is now necessary to deepen critical points on the absence of assistance from both of the Lazio Region, and the city of Rome.

Rural Development Plan measures are not designed for young people.

Among the Region requirements, a VAT number less than 12 months old and an entry income equivalent to 15 thousand euros per year (in practice 3 hectares of vegetable garden with greenhouses all working and running perfectly). These provisions harm any real generational change and show no commitment by the Region to ensure the success of these first major pilot projects.

1,400 square meters of abandoned historic houses in Borghetto San Carlo were to be refurbished thanks to the agreement between the former owner (a building company) and the Municipality of Rome by 2013, within the so-called compensation schemes. Works just started with 3 years delays, thanks to our constant insistence and vigilance.

Cooperative activities on the 22 hectares are therefore currently conducted without having suitable structures for the tractors and other tools. Further, we cannot provide catering, agriturismo and hospitality, as we expected at the onset of our project, which would most easily help us make an income.

. What has the administration achieved from our commitment?

We pay regular rent for an abandoned piece of land that was handed over to us.

Any improvement and investment we have made to the land and to the infrastructure on it, by contract, will not be recognised if we give up the land. The administrations have on the other hand earned something very precious to them: visibility. The Lazio Region in particular did not hesitate to fill the city with posters claiming "Lands to Young Farmers" for having granted those 300 hectares (not even 0.4% of a total of 80 thousand hectares of regional public land).

4. The future of open possibilities

After the Agricultural Reform of the 1950s and the land occupations of the late 1970s, ours was the first case of recovery of unutilised public land by young farmers in Italy. The question now is: how will we resist given the conditions described above? Cultivated fields, popular initiatives, agricultural and rural training, children on the playground, a successful dispute are all steps in the right direction, but they are not enough: how can be our model easily replicated by other young people?

If economic and institutional bodies are unable to see the value of what we would like to share with them, we will be back to the streets, with the strength of the hundreds of young people who follow us.

Ecology, multifunctional agriculture and food sovereignty, employment, training and quality of life is what we are achieving and what we are suggesting. This is a model that can be applied to all public lands in Europe. We know that change always starts from small groups and it takes time for it to be metabolised at the state-level, but we have started, and this is so much already. That's why we need... Coraggio! And as our motto says: Fuori dal seminato!