

Elena Musolino¹
**Life at the Margins:
Chronicles from Inner Areas of Calabria²**

1. Villages

1.1 *Inner areas, the future in wrinkles*

The international debate on issues of territorial regeneration is mainly based on the need to improve the quality of life of marginalised and degraded areas, both physically and socially. There is no doubt that the logic that governs contemporary societies and economies produces increasing forms of marginalisation and new types of peripheral territories (Harvey 2003; Sassen, 2011; Brenner, 2004). The phenomena of polarisation of economic activities generate social changes of enormous magnitude that are reflected in complex and differentiated forms on the territories, in different scales and typologies even between the different nations of the global North. A heterodox approach, capable of elaborating a critical reflection on modernisation processes that for years have imposed a univocal and ineffective vision of change processes for territories, introduces a method for planning based on socio-territorial organisation. In this sense, the territorial prism is intent on tracing a horizon for settlement models that can ensure the lasting sustainability of contemporary places, taking communities and their relationships with their environments as reference, in order to outline future trajectories of local development. If in past decades the tendency towards extreme urbanisation of production processes ended up relegating the *peripheries* – in the broadest sense, understood as areas peripheral to production centres – to supporting roles, what is needed today is a process of re-territorialisation that favours a community exercise in which a *pact of care* with the territory and the environment can be determined, in open and supportive forms (Magnaghi, 2000). In this sense, we intend to reflect on the inner areas as a component of what Magnaghi (2020) calls an “urban bioregion”, i.e. a system composed of several parts including cities, towns and villages, connected in a synergic and functional manner. But first of all, what are these areas?

The concept of *inner areas*, as it has been identified within the innovative public policy dealing with development and territorial cohesion, defines peripheral areas as areas that are distant from any offer of essential services of mobility, health and education, often characterised by strong depopulation (Partnership Agreement, 2013). The development perspective of inner areas is part of the revision and implementation of urban and urban-rural policies of the Europe 2020 Strategy, of which it represents a particular chapter – the Urban Agenda or “Amsterdam Pact 2016” – which originates from the Territorial Cohesive Agenda 2020. In the vocabulary of the European Union, the term *cohesion* refers to a political vision aimed at reducing the gap between the development levels of the various regions and to contrast the backwardness of less favoured regions, in order to promote social and economic development for all areas. In 2013, in Italy, the debate took the form of a strategy, at the initiative of Fabrizio Barca – Minister for Territorial Cohesion at the time – with a Southern-derived approach (Barbera, 2015), inheriting the assumptions of economists such as Saraceno and Rossi Doria (Zoppi 2002; Bevilacqua, 1998b). The specificity of Italian territories, characterised by

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a spatial organisation largely based on small centres, motivated the Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale (Agency for Territorial Cohesion) to adopt a specific policy to reactivate these remote municipalities. This is the “Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne” (National Strategy for Inner Areas) – called SNAI – introduced in the National Reform Programme (NRP), a policy founded on a place-based approach (Barca, 2012; Angelini, Bruno, 2014), to counteract population decline, employment reduction, declining supply of public and private services, land consumption, hydrogeological instability and degradation of the cultural and landscape heritage (Barca et al., 2014). These are rural places, not easily accessible, often abandoned in favour of urban areas, but which nevertheless express a strong unused territorial, natural and human capital, considered strategic for the relaunch and growth of the Italian country system. SNAI intended to intervene to protect, recover and revitalise inland areas, overcoming the urban-rural dichotomy and giving a new meaning to the concept of accessibility to services (Lucatelli, 2016; Lucatelli, Tantillo, 2018). Therefore, inner areas are defined as areas that are substantially distant from the centres offering services and characterised by processes of depopulation and degradation. The concept of the inner periphery is being defined, starting from the reading of the global centre-periphery system described by Immanuel Wallerstein (1991), to observe a space within the “centre” where new forms of marginality develop. The growing debate on the polycentric form of the national territories has highlighted the presence of centres of service supply around which gravitate areas characterised by different levels of spatial marginality (Carlucci and Lucatelli, 2013; Saccomani, 2014; Pezzi, Punziano, 2017; De Rossi, 2018), affirming the centrality of the concept of accessibility for the reading of the elements that characterise the specificities of places.

From a methodological point of view, the territorialisation of inner areas is divided into two main phases: the first is the identification of poles capable of acting as supply centres for essential services; the second is the classification of the remaining municipalities into four types – peri-urban areas, intermediate areas, peripheral areas and ultra-peripheral areas – based on the travel time needed to reach the poles (Barca et al, 2014; Barbera, 2015). The potential beneficiaries of the policies and funds envisaged by the SNAI, are therefore those municipalities classified as *Intermediate* (between 20 and 40 minutes), *Peripheral* (between 40 and 75 minutes) and *Ultraperipheral* (over 75 minutes) on the basis of the road distance separating them from inter-municipal poles, i.e. those capable of simultaneously offering all secondary schooling, a hospital emergency reception department and railway stations. Interventions must concern the protection of the territory and the safety of the inhabitants, the promotion of cultural and natural diversity and polycentrism, and the revival of development through the use of untapped or poorly exploited resources. The latest ISTAT report (2022) states that “Nearly half of Italy's municipalities are in the country's Inner Areas”, without reporting all the new numbers in the paper, but it is sufficient here to point out that a comparison between the 2014 and 2020 maps provides important indications of how our territory presents itself in terms of accessibility to essential services: the most evident result is that the majority of municipalities (5,336, or 67.5% of the national total) have maintained the same classification, although inland areas in Southern Italy are on the rise.

These numbers offer an insight on the scope and centrality of places that cross the entire country, a margin that is not on the margin, where connections must be cultivated and dominant visions decentralised. These so-called “wrinkled areas” (Dematteis, 2015), come to be read as spaces of valorisation of a territorial heritage where we can “reverse the view” (De Rossi, 2018) and where we can look for possible laboratories of innovation and future (Carrosio, 2019).

Within this framework, the paper gives an overview of the situation in the inner areas of Calabria, identifying some elements that seem to characterise the local ruling class today, according to the preliminary results of the research which show a certain discordance between the dominant representations of inner areas and the narratives of the inhabitants of the *margins*, useful to direct future strategy interventions for these places, in an even more place-based perspective.

1.2 A South among the Souths: the inner areas of Calabria

Geographical tendencies in international trade have had a strong impact on European territories. In Italy, the shift of the industrial axis towards the North-East has had enormous radical effects on the regions, producing new polarisations. Gianfranco Viesti (2021) describes a “new Southern question”, analysing the demographic and industrial transformations that would have produced the “intermediate development trap”, i.e. *Mezzogiorno* is contextually less competitive than the North in terms of innovation, and less than the East in terms of production costs.

Calabria's social transformations and political strategies since the Second World War have pursued the mystified belief that the evolution and prosperity of the Southern regions depended on their ability to emulate the production models and lifestyles of the industrial regions. After the political turnaround of 1948, the ruling class called upon to govern the country started a political process to favour industrialisation and modernisation, planning interventions on the economic and socio-cultural conditions of Southern Italy and especially Calabria. A cultural conversion was imposed on social values themselves, everything seemed to have to respond to the demands of interest and profit in order to achieve an economic efficiency capable of restoring well-being, abundance and happiness. *Growth* and *development* were the watchwords, in an emulative ideology to make areas with a traditional economy resemble those transformed by technical and productive innovations and social changes induced by triumphant capitalism (Bevilacqua, 1998). In this way, from the Fifties, the anthropological rubble was accompanied by the emergence of dependency economies that often devastated local ecosystems to make way for phantom infrastructures. Development narratives – in the South, in Calabria, or wherever it was exported – followed one another as authoritarian plans that invested populations and their anthropological and cultural background. Or it has generated forms of capitalism in a hostile environment, characterised by specific practices of social conflict (Arrighi, Piselli, 1987).

In the current world-economy picture, Calabria continues to be a peripheral region, described by macro-economic indicators as a land in a perpetual structural crisis. But if we look at social relations, daily life is in direct contrast to the scenarios proposed by GDP and per capita income, due to informal compensatory mechanisms that have both a positive and a negative side: such as small agricultural activities of self-consumption, remittances from migrants, exchange of goods and services between families; but also regressive adaptations that put large amounts of money into circulation: organised crime, widespread illegal economy, underground economy, undeclared work, tax evasion etc. (Piselli, 2017).

Today, inner areas of Calabria continue to be places structurally deprived of basic collective services, which after the Second World War suffered a demographic collapse, in several cases irreversible. It means that the quality of citizenship remains the essential factor for a person in deciding whether to stay or leave an area: if work and income opportunities offered by that area are an important factor, the absence of infrastructure for daily life – schools, transport, health services, connection networks – is a challenge, especially for the young and for families with children of school age (Cersosimo et al. 2019).

Talking about the South and inner areas thus opens up a new *Southern question*, a South within the South, in which the major demographic issues take on particular importance and the need for investment strategies in infrastructure for the territories and internal mobility becomes more urgent (Fortunato, Gambardella, 2020). There is still the belief that Viesti (2014) calls the “Southern theorem”, according to which the lack of development in these areas is explained by the ineptitude of the ruling class, rather than by ambiguous policies, incapable of recognizing that the economy cannot take off without a significant investment in the social sphere, which is what can definitively bridge those civil gaps that are determinants of development (Cersosimo and Nisticò, 2013; Bianchi, Fraschilla, 2020).

Here we intend to focus on how part of the local ruling class succeeds in triggering social practices to manage its present and future, expressing the permanence of social and community ties, together with cultural traditions and a “world of life” resistant to the total economy (Alcaro, 2003).

1.3 If we need a village, what village do we need?

When talking about villages one always comes across this Cesare Pavese's quote from *La luna e i Falò* (1950): everyone needs a village to leave from and return to. However, reading the novel in its entirety, the conflictuality of places arises, finally realising that the road to emancipate and transform the community is a long one, however small it may be in a society. It is necessary to fight back those rhetorics that authorise policies based on a state of emergency and the progressive advance of forms of mass touristification, de-territorialisation and development models capable of creating wealth only for certain places, social classes and people³. These same rhetoric has tended to describe a North where innovative forces, enterprises and laboratories of the future constitute the geography of development, and the South as an eternal place of backwardness, immobility and abandonment (Barbera, 2020).

With the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) approved in June 2021, providing for sectoral areas that are rarely crossed with territories, there are some resources earmarked for inner areas. These are financing instruments that will need the leadership of the municipalities to be implemented. However, these same administrations, which are called upon to take action, have suffered in recent years a drastic reduction in staff, which is now of elderly age and with a limited degree of education. The resources will hardly be able to be absorbed and create a real economic and social impact and improve the quality of citizenship in inner areas (Cerruto, et al, 2022).

So what village is needed? First of all, we need to deconstruct the folklore of nostalgia-ridden communities and closed identities, bucolic visions of nature and those forms of apologia for the past (Bindi, 2021; Clemente, 2018; Teti, 2022). Instead, there exists a “Bruttaitalia” (Ugly-Italy), made up of abandoned, crumbling places, criss-crossed by conflicts and diatribes and conservative impulses, where one succumbs to anonymity as soon as one takes a wrong turn (Barbera, Dagnes, 2022). However, in these places there are people who do not want to leave, who choose to stay, who deserve and demand policies that enhance the quality of daily life regardless of the beauty and heritage of the land they occupy. So we return to a vision for planning that disavows places as isolated particles, but sees them as part of a whole, of a system that only works if set up in a synergetic way. The village lives if it is based on the interconnections between housing, production and political systems (Magnaghi, 2020). A good local project can work, from the perspective just described, if it starts from what already exists, and in this sense the research presented here is intended to be useful, providing a first impression of some of these places, namely villages in the inner areas of Calabria.

2. Villagers

2.1 Research and Methodology

For over a year now, a large interdisciplinary group of researchers from the Department of Political and Social Sciences (DISPeS) of the University of Calabria, coordinated by Domenico Cersosimo

³ See the important works published thanks to the commitment of the group promoting 'Riabitare l'Italia', which animates the scientific and political debate on the theme of inner areas, between abandonment and reconquest, in order to deconstruct all those toxic representations to give back to people the substantial freedom to stay or leave, and to give places the opportunity to be inhabited again. (https://riabitarelitalia.net/RIABITARE_LITALIA/ - December, 2022)

and Sabina Licursi⁴, has been conducting in-depth research on the living conditions of residents, the ruling classes and the quality of services, in the four SNAI pilot areas of Calabria. The research – *Quality of life in the inner areas of Calabria* – was born out of the collaboration between the DISPeS School of Public Administration Sciences and the Calabria Region's Nucleus for the Evaluation and Verification of Public Investments, and aims to identify possible ways to counter the depopulation of these areas and to find the most appropriate strategies for sustainable local development.

This paper offers a reading of some of the data collected within this extensive research, to which the writer had the opportunity to contribute. A preliminary study was carried out in order to acquire knowledge of the socio-economic context in the inner areas of Calabria, collecting a set of ecological data (Pintaldi 2003). Thereafter, twenty-four semi-structured interviews were conducted with community members of the places selected as the object of analysis. The questions posed were aimed at exploring the following dimensions: the role played, representations of the socio-territorial context and evaluation of SNAI. The arising contents were analysed by encoding the transcription of the interviews to identify recurrent patterns, themes and narratives. Additional information was gathered through a screening of online and offline SNAI-related resources, informal conversations with key actors and the direct participation in a set of meetings and activities.⁵

2.2 Places

Starting in 2015, and once the Partnership Agreement was signed with the European Commission, the State – through the Inner Areas Technical Committee – and the Regions carried out the necessary work to select the territorial contexts for the strategy's intervention under the 2014-20 economic policy, and identified 72 “project areas” or “pilot areas” distributed throughout all Italian regions as well as the autonomous province of Trento. Overall, the areas of intervention concern the *essential services sector* – education, health and mobility –, to which approximately 44% of the allocated resources are devoted (509 million euro), and local development, providing for the remaining 56% (658 million euro). The greatest financial weight is allocated to the *mobility* sector, which can be traced back to the upgrading of the road network (Cresta, 2019; Mattarocci, Cerasoli, 2020; Bacci et al., 2021), and to the *nature, culture and tourism* sector, useful for tourism development and the enhancement of the natural-cultural heritage and landscape (Campolo, 2016; Battino, Lampreu, 2017; Epifani et al., 2021). The Regional Operational Programme (ROP) Calabria European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) 2014/2020, adopted by the European Commission in 2015, includes the provision of a Regional Strategy for Inner Areas (SRAI) to be implemented in territories with particular disadvantages through the instrument of Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI). The Regional Strategy, in adherence to the principles and objectives of the National Strategy, has identified four areas of intervention: 1. protection of the territory, essential services and local communities; 2. enhancement of natural and cultural resources for the development of sustainable tourism; 3. sustainable mobility; 4. manufacturing, craftsmanship, agricultural and agri-food production⁶. In Calabria, there are four pilot areas: Grecanica (11 municipalities, 435 kmq), Versante

⁴ For more on the approach, perspective and references of this study, see *Riavvicinarsi al paese. La Snai come politica-metodo per l'Italia lontana* (Cersosimo, Licursi, 2022), it is the first essay published as part of the research on inner areas coordinated by the authors.

⁵ The interviews were carried out between April 2021 and November 2022, a period in which the limitations for the covid-19 emergency imposed the use of alternative tools for research. They were then agreed on and carried out remotely, on a video platform.

⁶ See <https://www.agenziacoesione.gov.it/strategia-nazionale-aree-interne/regione-calabria-aree-interne/> (December, 2022)

Ionico Serre (14 municipalities, 450 kmq), Sila and pre-Sila (19 municipalities, 1058 kmq), Savuto Reventino (14 municipalities, 345 kmq), for a total of 58 municipalities⁷.

2.3 People

Within the complex framework of the above-mentioned investigation, an action has been dedicated to the study of local elites. As we were taught a long time ago, only the “democratic development” of Southern Italy (Villari, 1978) offers the opportunity to activate a significant investment in the social sphere that once and for all unhinges those civil gaps that are determinants of development (Cersosimo, Nisticò, 2013). Therefore, it is necessary to critically question the functioning of local institutions and the quality of the ruling classes and use the lens of social capital, to finally look at those numerous actors that have the capacity to express an aspiration that turns into change and future (Appadurai, 2004).

In the first instance, the intention was to focus the research on the role of the traditional ruling class, but later it was decided to extend the investigation to include other figures capable of influencing local communities, such as the family doctor or the village parish priest: authoritative people who do not hold explicit institutional leadership roles, but who do hold informal power in the local community, economy and culture. This paper crosses the experiences of twenty-four inhabitants of inner area villages: six mayors, six municipal secretaries, six family doctors, six parish priests. We approached these people in order to reconstruct their socio-biographical profile and to understand how they exercise their community role, by investigating their professional mission, the representations and vocations of the area they live in, the idea of innovation and of a possible future, and finally the perception of the sense of responsibility and in the case of parish priests the role of the church in the local community: a very long set of questions was used which produced interviews with an average length of two hours.

2.4 Narratives

The analysis of the interviews resulted in the identification of certain attitudes of the actors involved in the research, for whom a different posture in the role they held led to a different perception of the future for the inner areas. As can easily be guessed, a greater commitment and involvement of the actor on the territory corresponds to an optimistic view of the future of their places, also due to a greater confidence in the opportunities for the realisation of innovative projects. On the contrary, those who describe their role in a resigned manner and limit to acting within the confines of their tasks are more sceptical and rooted in pessimistic and discouraged rhetoric. In the same way, it is characterised by rootedness in the territory, trust and the conditions of belonging and connection to one's village. With the intention of bringing out some of the cognitive aspects that characterise the members of the community under analysis, below are some narrative postures that emerged, capable of telling certain traits of the inhabitants' perception and representation.

Spirit of sacrifice. The analysis of the research material mostly confirmed the assumptions about inner areas in the literature: all those involved referred to a number of discomforts ascribable to the low quality of everyday life in these places. Firstly, men and women interviewed recounted and described a sense of abandonment, both related to depopulation and distance from services. In almost all of these places – country, city, sea and mountain villages – residents are not guaranteed access to basic services, from schools to health facilities, from transport to internet connection. Immediately

⁷ For an in-depth study on the specificities of the Calabrian pilot areas – resilience, capacity for association of municipalities, presence of lack of development vision, planning maturity, awareness of needs in terms of service development and willingness/capacity to attempt innovative solutions, existence of leadership – see the report on the Istruttoria for the Selection of Inner Areas Region CALABRIA, 2020 https://www.agenziacoesione.gov.it/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Istruttoria_calabria_DEF.pdf (December, 2022)

afterwards, they recall the lack of jobs. They tell us the story of those who decided to stay, people who decide to live suspended in that dimension of “*restanza*” (“staying there”) described by Vito Teti (2014, 2017), in which waiting is mixed with the courage of the alternation between those who leave and those who remain. It is not a dichotomy between leaving and staying, but a symbiotic bond, a contamination between memory, oblivion and a future that is already past and one yet to be built. Futuristic imaginaries that define an identity dimension and belonging to a place and its heritage. Among these *villagers* in many conversations, a spirit of sacrifice is evoked to describe the choice to inhabit inner areas:

M.3 - Living in inland villages means *sacrifice*. When we take roads, we have to know that we have arrived there with *sacrifice*, many *sacrifices* were made by our parents. And equally on our part we face problems.

M.04 - Here, unfortunately, everything is not easy. Who knows, maybe we might all really succeed in making our ability and our *sacrifice* prevail a little.

M.21 - Getting there is a great *sacrifice* even for a priest! [...] To get there is a big sacrifice even for a priest! I do everything with love because the parishioners are very collaborative even if there are inconveniences, they listen to my urgencies, my needs and so we agree on the timetable, on the meetings to be held and so there is a lot of collaboration, a lot of work, a lot of *sacrifice* rewarded by loving them. I love them and they love me.

M.02 - Here people have changed their way of life, the life of their families with the *sacrifices* they have made to stay here, sometimes even building a house for themselves but also for their children.

M.21 - Is a village that has invested a lot and with a lot of *sacrifice* on two things: on the culture of the children and the new generations, all families today study. At the very least, there is a university graduate in the home, if not all the children, and consequently, once they graduate, they have to leave.

The term *sacrifice* derives from the Latin *sacrificium*, which is a combination of the words *sacer*, meaning something set apart from the secular or profane for the use of supernatural powers, and *facere*, meaning “to make”⁸; generally implying an attitude of submission to the sacred and the desire to establish a relationship with it. In our case, it is as if the inhabitants attribute a kind of sacredness to the place, where the choice to stay would mean consecrating their village. Which representation then is closest to the plane of reality? The dominant point of view speaks to us of inner areas as places of nostalgia, closed identity or local folklore (Bindi, 2021), or more recently of an equally toxic narrative of *salvific places*, spaces of refuge from pandemics and climate change (Cersosimo, Licursi, 2022). Those who live in these places recognise their hardships, envy, resentments and loneliness, but continue to celebrate their *sacred* belonging. A strong inner tension that certainly offers us a vision of the *possible elsewhere* (Teti 2004, 2011, 2017), from which to start in order to orient future initiatives.

Pro-action and self-government. The literature has offered plenty of analyses on the gaps of the *Mezzogiorno*, inner areas, and peripheries, focusing on the historical reasons behind the forms of dependence on public transfers, structural and institutional endogenous elements (Sylos Labini, 1974, 1993), the specificities of social contexts and the inadequacy of local institutions, together with cultural and political orientations (Trigilia 2001, 2019, Magnatti et al, 2005)), and in some cases, forms of independent dynamism (Bodo, Viesti, 1997). Weak and inefficient institutions are often described in economically fragile contexts that discourage and disincentive virtuous and innovative behaviour on the part of local economic actors, with important repercussions from the social point of

⁸ see: Faherty, Robert L., "Sacrifice". Encyclopedia Britannica, 30 Jan. 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/sacrifice-religion>. (December 2022).

view and in terms of territorial valorisation (Giannola, 2003). In our chronicles from the inner areas, alongside the pessimists, the discouraged and the sceptics, we encountered an encouraging posture: optimistic men and women with a proactive outlook and a spontaneous dedication to caring for their places. They are the protagonists of self-government – often bordering on the abuse of office, in the case of institutional roles – trying to find effective and immediate solutions to intervene in the territories, who have the desire to imagine fairer futures for them.

M.07 - We currently have a staff consisting of five employees, so one for each office, so you understand that the moment there is a need – the lights don't come on, the water, there's a problem, there's a pothole – that's when the mayor has to intervene himself. Then trivially you have to go and get petrol for the lawnmower and you don't have the employee and who goes? The mayor goes there to do this little task. I do it gladly because, since the doctor didn't order me to do it, I also knew what I was up against.

M.16 - In small communities, the Mayor becomes, especially after so many years, a family figure. So, there are the daily problems, the difficulties of some families at certain times because they may be going through a dark period from an economic point of view, or with regard to health problems, tragedies of various kinds, those the mayor necessarily faces because he is involved.

M.03 - Ours is a municipality that suffers from the problems that all municipalities have, which is that of not having staff, who can support the realisation, let's say translate the objectives of an administration into concrete facts, because then we administrators can only meet our goals if we are supported by offices that have staff. I am lucky, in the sense that there are only a few of us, but as they say, a few but good ones, with a lot of sacrifices, since we are dealing with people, with employees who are from the area and who therefore do their work not only to finish their hours, or to have a salary at the end of the month, but we have created a team, an administrative machine that thinks about what the needs of the community are and works for this reason.

M.24 - In our villages, the figure of the parish priest, as I can say, is still a figure taken as a reference, for whatever reason, whether religious or social. And, for example, we parish priests are a bit like the three institutions. Parish priests, mayors and police forces, let's say no, so religious, political and military. Is there communication between the three of us? Yes, we meet, at least once a month, even to have a coffee at the café, or sometimes I drop by the municipality to say hello to the mayor, to ask how things are going. Or if I know that there is some family in distress, I go to the municipality to say or the other way around, the municipality calls me to say there is this situation. There is cooperation, but there has to be, because we are few and we have to join forces, while in the cities there is dispersion and maybe everyone thinks about their own mill, in the villages there is not. We are tempted to stay closer, we have our difficulties, we have our opinions, it's not like we are the idyllic villages. But we try to join forces, each in our own sphere. We try to discuss. If an event happens, a good or bad situation. Now that we have had the problem of this virus, we have tried to face this difficulty together. This does not exist in the cities, because in the cities everyone rightly pulls the water to their own mill, even the parishes themselves, the associations, each association pulls the water to its own mill. In the villages we try to use a different way of life, to create a form of cooperation between the institutions in the area.

Community members through their own identities are able to recognize the right operational dimension and the most relevant goals and ways to achieve them. They bring a concrete and often innovative vision on how to realise and integrate resources according to the capacity of the territory at a specific time. These are the antagonists of that conservative elite interested in maintaining the stability of the economic and social benefits of marginality (Acemoglu, Robinson, 2012); antagonists with counter-narratives made of good practices from which to share and build policies based on everyday life and practical solutions.

On beauty, against beauty. One last narrative that emerged from the analysis of the experiences, choices and attitudes of the protagonists of our research: the beauty that exists and the beauty that is missing. Many of those interviewed, when asked what trajectories of the future they hoped to experience for their village, answered how important it was to start from the enhancement of what already exists. This statement tells us a lot about how much the local communities' awareness of the territorial heritage of the inner areas has grown. What exists, however, is described in terms of beauty or absence of it, i.e. some list the specificities of their villages, their historical, artistic, landscape and

natural heritage, while others are conscious of living in fairly anonymous places, incapable of expressing any form of attractiveness. They are an example of the inhabitants of that “BruttaItalia” (Ugly-Italy) described by Barbera and Dagnes (2022), i.e. inhabitants of places that have nothing special to offer to a passing tourist, but which at the same time are rich in meaning and identification for those who live there.

M.09 - *Beauty* also serves to make people better. In my opinion, having a nicer house, living in a nicer place makes people happier because you live in a nice, clean place. [...] *Beauty* improves people because they are happier living in a beautiful area. And therefore it influences the economy.

M.12 - It is an environment where there is tranquillity and serenity. You can live in contact with nature. You live slower away from stress. It is a slow life, made of walking, of landscapes, made to know, to look at the sights. In short, it is a *beauty* to live there and no one bothers you. If, on the other hand, one thinks one wants to live a reckless life, as Vasco Rossi says, then this village is no good!

M.23 - I believe that it would be good to train people capable of knowing how to invest in certain forms that today need to be understood, known and appreciated, to discover and enhance the positive facts. Tourism, for example, should be valued; we have wonderful forests to organise routes that I would classify, perhaps in different ways: nature trails, we have wonderful vegetation, we are right at the beginning of the Sila, discovering *beauty*, knowing how to appreciate it. If we think many times about the work that was done in a certain way but did not produce much, by the way, the first job I did was to work in the forestry department as a farmhand, as a boy, and how much could be done to enhance the forests, to enhance the surrounding areas. To use the old paths, the routes that used to be there and to make a nature trail today, a historical nature trail.

The aesthetics of the place generates pride or frustration, leading to conflicting feelings where the connection to the village struggles between what it is and what it could be. What could be positive would be the attitude of a policy capable of translating this frustration into a political agenda that considers in its narrative not only picture-postcard villages, but also those where the tourist would not spend a moment but where there is still a living population, with its passions, desires and memories.

3. Villages tomorrow

In conclusion, in this little trip to the inner areas, we got to know some villages and their inhabitants, revealing a few of the narratives that are settling in those places that for too long have been part of the anthropology of abandonment. Mainstream policies now have the opportunity to engage in a debate that is becoming more sensitive every day, ready to break away from those localist and marginalist visions in order to make sense of the changes and mutations of the social body that populates the inner geographies.

However, even in critical debate, we must be careful with certain interpretative tools that can easily turn into potentially toxic narratives for the real improvement of conditions in these places. For example, if we recognise the importance of the depopulation theme, in order to identify counter-trend strategies, we must not think about how to bring in new populations, but rather question ourselves on the reasons for the abandonment. It is therefore fundamental to analyse the crisis of inhabitation in a functional sense, along with the processes of deterritorialisation, thinking about a renewed balance between humankind and the environment, considering human activities indispensable in fragile contexts (Osti, Jachia, 2020; Tarpino 2016; Viazzo, Zanini, 2014). Ethnographies capable of intercepting the actual and potential relational system of the regions concerned will therefore be necessary in order to identify those elements useful for defining an endogenous and continuous local project, sustainable both economically and socially (Magnaghi, 2010).

Future research will have to investigate the reality plan of these places in greater depth, and it will be necessary to refine the tools of observation to identify both the innovative processes underway and the social fragilities with their needs. Thinking of the territory as a prism revealing a very strong

emotional and identity meaning, will prove useful to intercept in the inhabitants' descriptions an overview of the symbolic representations of the areas under study: the beauties and the misfortunes of the present and, finally, to identify the wealth of the possible (Gorz, 1998).

Finally, in sacredness, self-government and search for beauty there is always a strong need for physical and relational proximity that should direct planning towards forms of building community nodes that facilitate socialisation and aggregation practices. In this sense it would be appropriate to direct policies both towards improving services and the relational dimension, favouring civic activism, as a response to the needs of citizenship, capable of triggering inclusive community dynamics of intergenerational and intercultural proximity.

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