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A processual approach to community agriculture: Between structuralist and individualist explanations

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Abstract

Community agriculture describes the practice of land commoning for food production. Communitarian food systems are explained as determined by neoliberalisation for being either prompted by global processes of environmental degradation or dissolved in submerged networks of everyday politics. While consistent with neoliberal critiques, the article advocates for their historicization through a processual approach to community agriculture. The analysis builds on the historical-comparative scrutiny of land commoning in the Italian peninsula through the selection of secondary sources and draws a longue durée periodization from late antiquity to the present. Analytical results highlight three temporal macro-sequences of food transformations that contextualise structural and agential influences on communitarian food systems: delegation, privatisation, and commodification of food production. The historical trajectories of community agriculture in the Italian peninsula offer valuable insights into three key areas of debate and potential avenues for future research. The first concerns the divides between structure and agency, contentious and everyday politics; the article also contributes to classical analyses that emphasize the crucial role of food in capitalist development and finally, it advances the processual framework as an adaptable analytical tool.

INTRODUCTION

The last decades witnessed the strengthening of community agriculture and food organizations in Europe (Bravo & de Moor, 2008; Desmarais, 2002; Torres & Rosset, 2010). Such an increase in practices of food activism has been either interpreted as a reaction to neo-liberalisation (Apostolopoulou & Cortes-Vazquez, 2018; Vivero-Pol et al., 2019) or allocated to the private sphere of individual lifestyle politics (de Moor, 2017; Haenfler et al., 2012). In either case, the neoliberal framework to collective political action has been more often presumed

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than analysed and seemed to solely provide the settled background against which agri-food movements can emerge, succeed or fail.

The present contribution challenges the exhaustiveness of these sociological explanations through a processual approach to community agriculture (Darnhofer, 2020; McMichael, 2014; Schiavoni, 2017). My analysis takes a longue durée perspective and it intentionally avoids delving into micro-level details. Rather than a limitation to the study, this represents a deliberate analytical choice motivated by the research question (Pettigrew, 1990; della Porta, 2002). The goal here is not to oversimplify the complex historical events spanning two millennia into a linear narrative but to emphasize recurring patterns in land commoning practices that have consistently influenced food systems and peasant collective action. The focus on the Italian peninsula is likewise motivated by the wealth of empirical insights it offers in understanding the development of contemporary food systems.

Given the existence of communitarian food systems long before the 21st century, the aim is to understand whether and how land commoning has persisted in the Italian territory as an action in progress, a modular repertoire of contention that has continuously redirected its frames, organisations, and impacts. The investigation is implemented through a systematic search of secondary literature and focuses on the historical trajectories of land commons in the Italian peninsula since late antiquity (ca. 3rd century CE). The analysis builds on three temporal macro-sequences (Bidart et al., 2013): (i) delegation, (ii) privatization and (iii) commodification of food production. The sequence of delegation extends over late antiquity (ca. 3rd – 8th century CE) and accounts for how the Roman civilisation and the feudal system organized the production of food surplus through social and economic hierarchies. In this phase, community agriculture transitioned from the most diffuse food system among village communities to compensation from private land ownership. The transition towards mercantilist economies characterizes the sequence of privatization (ca 9th – 15th century CE) wherein enclosures and profits contributed to the spatial and cultural marginalization of community agriculture. Restricted by local statuses and facing the almost complete inaccessibility of lands, peasant unrest revived and when heavily repressed resulted in violent contentious episodes. The third and last sequence (15th century onwards) witnesses the industrialization and commodification of food production together with the establishment of global food regimes (McMichael, 2009). Here, land commoning remerges after centuries of abeyance as an action repertoire and alternative paradigm to capitalist food chains. Overall, the historicization of community agriculture highlights how dynamics of deterritorialization, dispossession, and privatization have been constitutive of different food regimes, how they influenced the organization of land commons and determined the transformation of community agriculture into a contentious repertoire. The analysis also accounts for the role of peasant agency in uncovering how structural mechanisms are in turn shaped by processes of collective action through which peasants do make their own history (Marx, 1852; McMichael, 2008).

The article presents a processual approach to the historicization of community agriculture to enrich both structuralist and agential explanations of land commoning for food production. The text is organised into four sections. The first section defines community agriculture and frames the concept within the sociological debate between structuralist and agential explanations of social phenomena. The theoretical background is approached through processual sociology which considers relations as the fundamental unit of analysis, shaping social phenomena through the interaction of social actors (Powell, 2013). While various sociological approaches recognize the significance of relations, processual sociology goes further by considering them as the very foundation of its ontological premises (Emirbayer, 1997). Since processes are always transforming, processuality embraces a non-linear and open-ended conception of time (Dépelteau, 2015) which is the basis of the present historical account.

The methodological section delves deeper into the processual framework and presents the selection of secondary sources based on the guidelines for the study of history in social movements research (Bosi & Reiter, 2014). Empirical results are retrieved from different types of secondary sources thereby existing evidence is employed not to discover new facts, but to provide a new interpretation of social phenomena (Skocpol, 1979). The analysis has proceeded through three different types of sources (Ritter, 2014): country texts that are broad historical treatises on the Italian peninsula; topic texts that focus specifically on land commoning for food production; cause texts that

emphasise the continuity of commoning practices supporting the analytical conclusions of the present article. In this study, empirical data are presented in a narrative style (Barbera & Santoro, 2007), outlining the historical process of community agriculture in the Italian peninsula across three key phases: delegation, privatization, and proletarianization of food production.

Finally, the discussion of empirical results and the conclusions underscore the role of community agriculture as a repertoire of action. The notion of action repertoires is useful for overcoming the binary distinction between structuralist and individualist explanations, seeking to reconcile both these elements without flattening them. Action repertoire refers to the bottom-up process through which collective practices are layered over time, contributing to material and cultural transformations that facilitate collective mobilization (Tilly, 2006). At the same time, it is a concept that also highlights how these practices are influenced by and in turn, affect their socio-economic and political context. In this sense, the analysis illustrates the long-term processes through which land commoning for food production has transformed over the centuries driven by both agential and structural dynamics of change. Despite the organizational, demographic, and cultural differences that land commoning has taken on in different periods and across various territories, this extensive historical reconstruction aims to appreciate the nonlinear processes through which community agriculture represents itself today as an action repertoire available to peasant communities in Italy and Europe. Although present-day peasants are not comparable to those of the Roman era, there is a genealogy that unites them and is characterized by the persistence of processes of dispossession and displacement, the centralization of food production, and alienation from the means of reproductive autonomy to which local communities have historically responded through communitarian food systems as a form of resistance.

COMMUNITY AGRICULTURE BETWEEN STRUCTURALISM AND LIFESTYLISM

Practices of land commoning for food production have historically diffused in the Italian peninsula since antiquity. Hereafter, I assemble these practices both in their past and present materializations under the umbrella term of community agriculture. Community agriculture describes grassroots practices of land commoning, where local communities come together to cultivate shared lands to manage communitarian food systems. The need to introduce a specific notion to describe community agriculture emerges from the theoretical richness and complexity of the agri-food scholarship. The field can frequently convey thick conceptual ambiguities in the definition of agri-food initiatives. Rural commons (McCay & Acheson, 1987; Vivero-Pol, 2017), peasant movements (Shanin, 1984), and agroecological initiatives (Wezel et al., 2009) are only some examples of the tentative clusters in agri-food research. In the absence of overarching definitions, I advance a practice-based conceptualization of community agriculture (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, & Von Savigny, 2001). This definition can be at the same time specific by pointing at a very precise modus operandi that is land commoning for food production and general enough to be applied to a long-durée periodization. The focus of community agriculture is on the practices of land commoning defined as the activities carried out by individuals within a community to oversee and restore resources that are collectively shared (Linebaugh, 2008; Varvarousis et al., 2021) in this case, cultivated fields and their harvest.

Community agriculture grasps the specificity of food systems redesigned through land commoning thereby food is produced by sharing properties, practices, and rural knowledge. Examples from around the world show a range of commoning efforts related to food: collectivization of governance and use of eating resources together with other livelihood assets, urban gardens, access to land reclamation, innovative agroecological techniques, and alternative currencies, among many others (Bollier & Helfrich, 2015). Among these, community agriculture refers specifically to the management of land commons for food production by a community. The practice of community agriculture is described by two main elements. Firstly, in terms of production, it refers to the communal use of land: agricultural activity takes place on land not assigned to individuals or family groups but recognized by the

community as a shared resource. This definition is not necessarily tied to institutional recognition of common land: legally, the land may belong to third parties but is acknowledged as a common resource by the community. For instance, both feudal workers and contemporary rural squats find themselves in this situation: the land may not legally belong to the community who is tending the fields, but it is informally recognized as a shared resource, a common. These productive features exclude from the definition of community agriculture those food systems based on the separation between producer and consumer (Pole & Gray, 2013), be it the medieval peasant selling their products at the local market or the contemporary farmer distributing them through large-scale retail trade. The second distinctive element of community agriculture is the human community (Tönnies, 1988; Chase & Grubinger, 2014) that manages and organizes the use of common lands. This community is defined by physical proximity, linking it to the same geographic location, and by shared intentions, whether they are purely material needs related to nourishment or cultural aspirations aimed at autonomy through reproductive autonomy. Based on these two defining characteristics only, community agriculture cannot be directly associated with a political practice of collective action. There is indeed no inherent connection between the management of land commons for food production and shared political values. However, as the processual analysis of its historical trajectories demonstrates hereafter, community agriculture is most often practised as a repertoire of collective action. In other words, it serves as an emancipatory practice aimed at potentially transformative changes in the everyday lives of its practitioners (de Angelis, 2017).

Contemporary agri-food initiatives have been explained as a result of neoliberal structures. For being either a response against processes of deterritorialization, land grabbing, and usurpations that threaten local communities' access to land, right to food, and self-determination (Akram-Lodhi, 2007; Araghi, 2009, 2010; Borras & Franco, 2012; de Angelis, 2001) or post-materialist (Coole & Frost, 2010; Dunlap & Mertig, 1997) and post-political individual actions (Marchart, 2007; Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014). Rather than insisting on a binary separation between structure and agency, the multidimensionality of food brings together macro and micro elements of social change. The role of food in today's economic system is concurrently structural and individual (Steel, 2020). Since the 1970s and the transition towards neoliberal capitalism, natural resources and environmental governance have emerged as pivotal areas of influence for markets and private corporations (Bakker, 2015; Heynen & Robbins, 2005). The neoliberalisation of nature has resulted in modern enclosures, territorial dispossessions, the valorisation and commercialisation of environmental externalities, and the commodification of new and unforeseen aspects of life. Rural and environmental new social movements (Petras, 1997; SinghaRoy, 2013; Woods, 2003) have emerged under the claims of a new agrarian matter. One that did not concern the political relations between factory workers and the peasantry (Gramsci, 1974) but represented the quest for ecological modes of production and a greater focus on food quality (Araghi, 2000; McMichael, 2006a; Pugliese, 2017). This shift narrowed the explanatory power of productive struggles between capital and labour (Melucci, 1980; della Porta & Diani, 1997) while materialist claims and class identities were decentred in mobilizations (Inglehart, 1997; Offe, 1985). Symbolic arenas became predominant spaces of contention for identity and post-materialist demands; practices and mobilization moved away from the streets and more traditional repertoires of protests (Tarrow, 1998; Tilly, 1986) to diffuse through latent networks (Diani, 2000). The effects of modernisation at large (Rucht et al., 1999) were changing political participation (Dalton & Kuechler, 1990; Inglehart, 1990; Klingemann & Fuchs, 1996; Norris, 2002). A general blurriness of political cleavages (Rokkan, 1999), and the desegregation of strong collective identities allowed space for individualism and lifestylism (Mayer, 2007; Pellizzoni, 2014) to emerge. Throughout these transformations, food and agricultural movements have been emblematic in both evolving from 19th-century peasant movements to rural new social movements, also creating spaces for post-political lifestylism (Mouffe, 2005; Rancière, 2001; Žižek, 2002). At the centre of this theoretical short-circuit, processual frameworks provide a wider perspective on these experiences and the debate between structure and agency in rural collective action.

A PROCESSUAL APPROACH TO COMMUNITY AGRICULTURE

Conceptions about time are fundamentally relevant to the study of social change. Nowadays, within and outside academia we are confronted with a short temporality and even more restricted attention spans. Everything seems to move at an accelerated pace as slowness becomes not simply a practice but a political standpoint (O'Neill, 2014). The impact of this temporal perspective is also evident in social research, where there is a proclivity to portray phenomena as novel and unprecedented. This inclination appears to have been fuelled by the recent proliferation of alternative agricultural practices, particularly in discussions regarding land commons (Dardot & Laval, 2019; Rundgren, 2016; Vivero-Pol, 2017; Vivero-Pol et al., 2019). While there are noteworthy exceptions to this pattern (Wall, 2014), this prevailing tendency leans to downplay the significance of time-sensitive approaches and often confines the analysis of land commoning to the neoliberal context.

The temporal dimension of mobilization has been investigated through two main approaches (Gillan, 2020). Movements have often been described through metaphors of cycles (Tarrow, 1993) or waves (Koopmans, 2004) that describe rise-peak-decline dynamics. This approach has broadly led to a distinction between temporalities of latency (Melucci, 1989; Taylor, 1989) and eventfulness (Sewell, 2005; della Porta, 2008). On the other hand, the longue durée and historicity of social movements (Tilly, 2004) have been mainly theorised through the notion of mechanisms (McAdam et al., 2001; Tilly & Tarrow, 2007). Processuality maintains time as a central category since relational ontologies imply that social change constantly unfolds through time. Yet, processual time is a non-linear dimension that does not work through direct causality, nor it progresses towards teleological or eschatological futures (Abbott, 1988). In terms of historical comparison, this translates into the predominance of relativity over essentialism, in change against stasis, in the attention to mutable processes and sub-processes against deterministic grand theories (Dépelteau, 2018; Sciarrone, 2021). It implies equality in how dynamics can act on each other and acknowledges the importance of contingent and incidental constitutions. Motion, nuances, and continuums deconstruct temporal linearity and additive chronological orders of events to comprehend how past, present and future are reciprocally constitutive (Renault, 2016). Analytical fluidity is particularly relevant when investigating food as it allows for managing the complex co-presence of structural and individual elements of mobilization. Understanding how collective political action has been catalysed through food (Shanin, 1984) in the past as well as in the present requires major awareness of these interconnections. Strongly rooted in these relational premises (Crossley, 2016), processual frameworks build long temporal sequences through which social phenomena are historicised and depart from any a priori assumption of linearity and causality in their multiple pathways (Abbott, 2016; Mendez, 2010; Pettigrew, 1997). Approaching the longue durée analysis of community agriculture as a volatile and ever-changing repertoire of contention, theories of continuity and stability are unable to grasp and explain its historical trajectories. Through a processual lens, the research valorises difference and multiplicity. It represents the restless dynamic of transformation, everyday practices and negotiations through which community agriculture persisted to the present date.

To bridge theoretical and analytical premises through empirical methods, the research is based on a long temporality. In line with any longue durée analysis (Braudel, 1960), this study does not encompass specific micro-level elements. Rather than a shortcoming, it is, however, a deliberate analytical choice driven by the research question (Katznelson, 2003). Its purpose is not to flatten the complexity of historical events spanning two millennia into a uniform narrative account presented chronologically. While keeping in mind the ontological and epistemological multiplicity of the themes addressed, this analysis focuses on highlighting the patterns through which land commoning practices have always been present in the transformation of food systems albeit not in direct continuity among them. Nor the scope is to engage in infinite regressions looking for the original cause of social phenomena. This choice is based on the observation that certain forms of land commoning have remained available for long periods and often across considerable reaches of space (McAdam & Sewell, 2012). To reconstruct these trajectories, the analysis has considered three different types of secondary sources (Ritter, 2014). The selection has begun with country text: broad historical treatises on the Italian peninsula. Texts like *Storia dell'agricoltura Italiana*

(1989) or *Storia del paesaggio agrario italiano* (Sereni, 1982) may or may not have emphasized the continuity of community agriculture but by engaging with sweeping historical accounts of the agrarian development over centuries, allowed to acquire a general familiarity with the Italian context. In the second stage, topic texts entered in more detail and offered valuable theoretical insights on the specific interest of research: in this case, land commoning. For instance, the work on primary sources elaborated by Curis (1917) or Cassandro (1943) has represented a unique resource for the study. Conclusively, the analysis has delved into cause texts: those resources that were affine to the interpretation proposed by the author like the continuity of land commons across long periods such as Grossi (2017) or Wall (2014). The study deals specifically with the Italian peninsula because it offers a unique standpoint to advance the historicization of community agriculture through a processual approach. The Italian peninsula presents an extraordinary range of landscapes, cultures, and regional agricultural practices (Bevilacqua, 1989). This diversity in cultivation systems, rural social structures, and the impact on environmental conditions sets the peninsula apart from the agricultural landscapes of continental Europe. Therefore, it becomes crucial to examine how, despite this heterogeneity, the historical development of land commons can be understood in a long-term historical context that forms a foundational basis for expanding sociological and historical research on the subject. Proposing this theoretical and methodological framework in a region as diverse as Italy, considering its history of political regimes and socio-economic organization, enhances the explanatory potential of a processual framework. It underscores how long-term periodization, in conjunction with a flexible understanding of temporal dynamics, can significantly enrich the field of historical sociology.

COMMUNITY AGRICULTURE IN THE ITALIAN PENINSULA

Delegation of food production

The interplay between land, food, and civilization is central to understanding the dynamics of food delegation. In classical antiquity, the imperative to assign specific social groups with the responsibility of food production arose from the necessity to ensure an ample food surplus for ever-larger communities (Garnsey, 1999). Ancient village societies relied on the full commitment of all members to agriculture as their primary occupation (Gomme, 1890). While a basic division between hunters and gatherers sufficed to meet their immediate needs, it hindered individuals from pursuing alternative interests. As the Italian peninsula witnessed the emergence of more complex economic and social systems, their foundations were built upon the subjugation of working peasants. These peasants faced dispossession of common lands, resulting in their detachment from secure access to food resources. Consequently, they were coerced into growing and harvesting crops primarily for the benefit of non-food-producing elites (Isett & Miller, 2017; Magdoff, 2012).

Late antiquity

The Roman civilization is perhaps the most prominent example of how civilizations depended on the control of the peasantry for the delegation of food production (Gauckler, 1883). During the urbanization of the Rome region in the 8th century BCE, there was a consolidation of larger properties into smaller family units (Kovalevsky, 1890). While community agriculture was prevalent among Italic peoples (Curis, 1917; Schupfer, 1885), the challenges of adapting land commoning to larger groups were often resolved by assigning property rights and establishing differential social statuses. Families who obtained a plot of land cultivated it permanently, employing more intensive agricultural techniques and eventually claiming hereditary rights to the property. In the transition from village communities to cities, the productive function of common lands became supplementary to individual properties, compensating for their limited size. This pattern of coexistence was also observed across regions (de

Laveleye, 1891) such as the German *mark* and *allmend* in Germany, the Scandinavian *almenning*, the Scottish townships (de Laveleye, 1885) and the Russian *mir* (Kovalevsky, 1888).

Roman peasants cultivated crops such as grains, olives, and grapes, and raised livestock including cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs. However, they did not benefit directly from these resources. Plebeians' diets predominantly revolved around wheat, either prepared as porridge or baked into bread, accompanied by grain pastes and soups. Their beverages consisted of diluted wine or vinegar mixed with hot water. The produce they harvested was considered elite food and belonged to the patricians – the Roman upper class consisting of landowners, military officers, and political authorities. Patricians enjoyed three meals a day: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Breakfast often comprised leftover cheese, olives, and bread, while lunch was lighter. Dinner, the main meal, included additional courses like appetizers and desserts and featured meat and wine sweetened with honey (Civitello, 2008).

Roman imperialistic ambitions (ca. 27 CE) had a significant impact on community agriculture. Territorial expansion served as the driving force behind economic productivity and sustained the political elites of Rome. However, this expansion often came at the expense of community agriculture and common lands, both within and beyond the empire's borders. Village communities dwindled as Rome grew larger, and their common lands were fragmented and allocated to new settlers. Military campaigns were incessant, and it was the peasants who were first compelled to abandon their fields and join the ranks. Deprived of their lands and tools, these peasants became known as the *proletarii*: the dispossessed. Community agriculture survived only in the form of grazing and timber production while seeding and cropping were relegated almost exclusively to private gardens. Since herding necessitated vast tracts of land, pastures and forests were theoretically exempt from direct appropriation and seizures (Cassandro, 1943). However, in practice, the imperial authorities ensured a monopoly over pastures for wealthier herds by granting them perpetual and free hereditary possession. Several agrarian laws were attempted to establish a fairer redistribution of common pastures, but they were largely circumvented (Gauckler, 1883).

Roman large estates

Familiar inheritance among landowner elites significantly limited access to land, transforming it into a privilege that symbolized wealth and power, thereby making it unattainable for the majority of the population (Battaglia, 1897). This lack of access to land had profound effects on eating habits. Community agriculture, which provided a diverse range of natural resources for sustenance, such as berries, wild greens, acorns, and pastured animals, allowed peasants to maintain a varied diet and increased their chances of survival. As peasants were dispossessed of their fields and denied the opportunity to secure food from alternative sources, they were compelled to work for local lords. The delegation of food production and the process of land privatization coerced peasants into selling their labour and time in exchange for limited forms of land access. Even small landowners found it increasingly challenging to survive and often chose to abandon their fields, relinquishing them to landowners, and becoming dependent settlers under their dependence. Hierarchical social relations based on the delegation of food production, usurpation and dispossession were estranging the peasantry from community agriculture and preventing any space for local autonomies – including by neglecting nutritious and healthy food.

The ascent of the Christian Church as a religious and political power played a significant role in the emergence of large estates (Laurent, 1865). Following the legalization of Christianity and its establishment as the official state religion in the 4th century, the Church acquired control over numerous properties (Milella, 1880). By leveraging its economic and political influence derived from land ownership, the Church bolstered its autonomy. It also actively contributed to the marginalization of community agriculture through its cultural influence. The case of forests is emblematic in this respect. Woodlands had been considered sacred for many centuries, they were protected from extractivist activities and popularly intended as common because of pagan beliefs. The spread of Christianity reframed the symbolic meanings attributed to nature thereby sacredness was abstracted to the materiality of the environment. The Christian doctrine supplanted pagan beliefs, including tree worship, and paved the way for the

expansion of large estates into forested areas by reframing the cultural relations between humanity and nature. This shift in religious and cultural paradigms facilitated the Church's increasing control over land and its alignment with the interests of the ruling elites. It perpetuated the consolidation of power and wealth, as well as the marginalization of community agriculture.

Under the incipient disaggregation of the Roman Empire, land ownership became deeply intertwined with political power (Baudi di Vesme, 1876; Beaudouin, 1899). As two mutually constitutive prerogatives, large estates became proper political jurisdictions, separate from the cities and, to some extent, even from the emperor himself. A similar reorganization of social and productive structures also entailed a rearrangement of community agriculture on the latifondia. Peasants residing on large estates were granted the opportunity to cultivate a portion of the land collectively: the reminiscence of ancient land commoning within a shifting socio-economic context. However, this partial common ownership of lands primarily benefitted landowners rather than the peasants. The local lords took advantage of this arrangement by imposing taxation in the form of a share of the peasants' harvest, even from common lands, thus ensuring a stable income for the estate. Simultaneously, common lands still provided for the subsistence of the workers, relieving the landowners of the responsibility to support them. Finally, lords maintained access to common lands on large estates and kept exploiting their resources, further exacerbating the power imbalances within the estate: a cohabitation that often resulted in abuses and oppression limiting local autonomy (Winspeare, 1883). Overall, the changes in landownership and the reorganization of community agriculture reflected the shifting dynamics of power and exploitation during the decline of the Roman Empire.

Privatization of food production

Following the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in 476 CE, the Italian peninsula faced invasions by foreign populations. In an agricultural landscape reduced to a semi-natural economy, large estates became the places designated to reinstate private land ownership and assert territorial control (Sereni, 1982). The manorial system based on the productive unit of the large estate initiated a sequence of agricultural privatization. The crystallization of feudal social relations solidified private landownership and tied its rights to rigid rules of inheritance (de Coulanges, 1873). As a result, community agriculture was marginalised towards mountainous areas where ecosystems were less favourable to agricultural production. The predominance of manors and the systematic enclosure of fields was sided with the rising urbanization of the late medieval communal movement, the progressive transition towards monetary economies and the expansion of continental markets. On the eve of modernity, only ancient residuals of community agriculture were left as land commoning was held in abeyance through the transition to capitalism.

Post-classical period

Following the invasions, the Lombards and the Byzantine Empire shared control over the Italian peninsula, with the Byzantine Empire surviving the fall of Rome. During this period, latifondia still performed a decisive function as centres of economic and administrative life (Poggi, 1857). The invasions took a toll on cities, resulting in looting, devastation, and a decline in economic and administrative capabilities. Urban life languished and decayed while cities lost their ability to organize and dominate the agrarian landscape of their outskirts. In contrast, large estates remained relatively intact in terms of their population and land assets. They operated self-sufficient economies that provided food and produced textiles, agrarian tools, and other essential goods needed for daily life.

Peasants lived in a condition of strict territorial control and dependence on the lord, yet this context surprisingly fostered the development of associational and consortium relationships based on spatial proximity, economic support, and a shared desire to participate (Calisse, 1893; Thibault, 1904). Neighbourhood associations

emerged, bringing together peasants from adjacent fields who shared the same territory. These associations were founded on principles of solidarity, responsibility, and mutual defence. Neighbours collaborated by pooling their labour and harvests, dividing the burdens of taxation, and even organizing collective resistance against their lord when necessary. Community agriculture persisted through the popular practices found on large estates, where contiguous lands were still managed collectively. Peasants' manses operated as integrated agricultural complexes rather than separate units, ensuring basic subsistence and minimizing internal conflicts. Many villages set aside portions of land outside of the regular cultivation cycles, making them accessible to all members, particularly the poorest or landless individuals. Land redistribution was also a common practice to accommodate changes in family sizes and ensure fair access to resources.

Despite the evolving social and economic landscape, common lands continued to offer numerous shared productive activities for the peasantry. These activities included acorn gathering, the wild breeding of pigs, and hunting which was still a popular activity. Access to these common resources was vital for the peasantry, as they provided essential sources of calories for daily meals. Peasants could count on a diverse range of products including meat, dark bread, fruits and vegetables, cheese, beer, and cider. Still, a modest variety if compared to the diets of the elites who started incorporating foreign products like spices from the Middle East (Freedman, 2012). In general, peasant life and work conditions were poor. Cropping techniques were simple and harvest yielded meagre outputs. Unpredictable weather conditions posed a constant threat to agricultural productivity, and the workforce was frequently weakened by diseases. Despite the availability of common lands that could help alleviate these challenges, a significant portion of the harvested products was still appropriated by the lord.

Manorial system

After 774 CE, the Frank Kingdom played a significant role in reinforcing the post-classical social and productive agrarian patterns. During this period of invasions, natural catastrophes, plagues, and famines, large estates represented safe settlements where peasants sought protection. Manors were protected by soldiers with whom the lord established contracts of vassalage granting them landownership in remuneration for service. The distribution of lands in these manors was based on personal connections and relationships and the rules of primogeniture governed the inheritance of lands, ensuring their indivisibility. The Carolingian fief system exemplified the merging of private property and public authority, as these estates enjoyed special immunity and privileges. This prerogative extended to the Church as well because bishops held similar benefits and shared territorial control with secular lords (Luzzatto, 1910).

The manorial system heavily relied on the delegation of food production and indirect taxation, which sustained the wealth and power of manorial families. Taxes were charged on any activity performed on the fiefdom, be it productive like grazing or leisurely as celebrations. Peasants were entirely dependent on the lord's fields and protection, despite enduring relentless exploitation, giving up significant portions of their harvest, and suffering from violent abuses. Revolts by settlers against taxes on common lands were frequent occurrences, as they sought to preserve community agriculture and resist oppressive practices (Salvioli, 1913). To address these uprisings, landowners strategically implemented new forms of communitarianism known as seigneurial concessions: the civic uses. These top-down commons ultimately represented the only residue of community agriculture in the Middle Ages and persisted until contemporaneity (Grossi, 2017). Given the impossibility of eradicating collectivism, lords conceded access to new lands. They limited and taxed their access and exploitation of natural resources as a strategy to reconvene all common lands under their control. Local lords managed to subsume ancient popular practices without confrontations, extending their control on all common lands. In historical accounts, the transition from community agriculture to civic uses serves as a significant benchmark for understanding collective domains. Feudal civic uses are often regarded as the historical manifestation of rural communitarianism in the region. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that these forms of control were already residual, limited, and manipulated,

serving as a means of exerting reproductive control over the peasantry to eradicate community agriculture (Venezian, 1887/1990; Cencelli, 1920).

Communal urban turn

Due to the increasing insecurity and arbitrary territorial control under the Holy Roman Empire, many settlements relocated to mountainous areas or sought refuge behind ancient fortifications and castles. Peasants were compelled to sustain closed economic systems within their isolated communities. In contrast, urban centres experienced a different trajectory. Urban communities began to form associations and embrace the cooperative spirit of the communal movement, fostering a sense of unity and corporatism (Lanzani, 1881). Between the 11th and 12th centuries, the Italian peninsula witnessed a steady demographic development, partially attributed to the favourable climate conditions of the Medieval Climate Optimum. This period saw the emergence of growing cities that organized themselves into local municipalities known as communes. The establishment and consolidation of these urban communes marked a decline in the influence and significance of the manorial system, particularly in the northern regions. The communes represented a shift in political and economic power away from feudal lords but towards urban self-governance and communal autonomy.

Urban centres progressively expanded their control over the countryside with significant consequences on community agriculture. This urban hegemony was formalized through communal statutes, which recollected the written laws of the cities. These statutes placed the countryside under the political and economic control of the city, which exerted authority through monetary investments and commercial activities. As the communal movement gained momentum, landowners were compelled to urbanize and transfer their properties into the city's heritage (Roberti, 1903). Even within the city, landowners achieved profit from the renovating socio-economic context by reforming their management practices. The fast circulation of money and mobile goods pushed them to abandon natural economies on large estates. Productivity needed to increase through new settlements and reclamation of uncultivated lands to grant food supplies to urban centres. The control of food markets by urban elites continued to be enforced through the violent extraction of peasant labour with longer working hours and deteriorating conditions. Between the 12th and 13th centuries, this context fuelled a dense period of contention between lords and peasants. Rural unrest was met with violent repressions, destroying peasants' belongings, and burning of their homes and lands (Casanova & del Vecchio, 1894). Many cities also established the *securitas* – proper rural police meant to defend closed camps (Cassandro, 1943; Sereni, 1982) against community agriculture. Repression also led to massive emigrations toward the cities where the peasantry sought emancipation from farm work and generally became dedicated to the arts and crafts. Consequently, the countryside experienced a decline in population and workforce at a time when expanding cities had shifted their reliance on food production to their surrounding rural areas.

The reconfiguration of urban-rural dynamics had profound implications for community agriculture (Salvioli, 1901). Urban centralization resulted in the absorption of common lands, as political power and territorial control tightened their grip on these commons, imposing strict regulations and categorizations through written statutes (Poggi, 1845). In the Early Middle Ages, land served as the foundation for all individual's rights and obligations, regardless of their social status. Its political, economic, and social value meant that it was impossible to conceive of anyone as separated from the land (Leicht, 1903). However, the process of communal urbanization and the rise of monetary economies gradually eroded these conceptions. Urban elites seized control over food production, completely relying on dispossessed peasants for agricultural labour and manipulating the regulation of food supplies to meet the cities' needs. Peasants, who had once enjoyed land access and its associated privileges, were now marginalized and reduced to being *braccianti* – pauper, dispossessed rural workers who only relied on their arms and physical labour to survive (Bianchi, 1891). The process of urbanization also had detrimental effects on environmental conditions. The greed to anthropize new lands led to the inevitable destruction of natural

landscapes and ecosystems. The demand for firewood and building materials resulted in deforestation on the hillsides near cities and villages. The aristocracy expanded their properties by constructing villas and farms on cleared slopes. Hunting, which had once been an important source of meat for the peasantry, became increasingly reserved as a privileged leisure activity for the elites, as forests retreated, and game became scarcer.

Commodification of food production

During the period of early modernity, community agriculture experienced a significant decline, culminating in its further marginalization. In the 17th century, enclosures became a systematic strategy to eradicate land commons (Marx, 1867). This involved the fencing of fields, effectively excluding peasant communities from accessing and utilizing the land. Enclosures disrupted land commoning practices and traditions that had been central to community agriculture, exacerbating its decline. The advent of early modernity was also characterized by the profound influence of colonization, imperialism, and industrialization. These processes accelerated the delegation and privatization of food production, marking a significant shift in agri-food systems. Food, once deeply rooted in local communities and shared through communal practices, became increasingly commodified. It turned into a tradable commodity in the market, subject to the regulation of capitalist accumulation and influenced by international political relations (Friedmann, 1987; Friedmann & McMichael, 1989). The emphasis on commodification led to the standardization and homogenization of food, creating a global market where products were subject to supply and demand dynamics. This had far-reaching implications for community agriculture, as land commoning practices and community relationships that had sustained it for centuries were gradually eroded.

Early Modernity

The 14th century witnessed a significant shift in climatic conditions, marked by a period known as the Little Ice Age (Le Roy Ladurie, 1971). This colder climate brought about adverse effects, including extremely low temperatures, and resulted in food scarcity. Continental agricultural chains were accelerating and set the stage for significant transformations in the food market. In response to these challenges, agricultural practices in the peninsula underwent a process of specialization. Fields located closer to cities and villages began focusing on the production of fruits and vegetables to meet local subsistence needs. Meanwhile, coastal regions specialized in the cultivation of olive oil and wine, catering to agricultural markets. One pivotal event that reshaped global agricultural markets was the conquest of the American continent which resulted in the establishment of plantations, where food production was forced onto enslaved labourers. The introduction of slave-based plantations brought about a restructuring of global agricultural markets, as the plantation system became a key player in the production and exportation of various crops.

During the era of agrarian mercantilism, the Italian peninsula experienced significant changes in food production and local ecologies. While some regions maintained feudal patterns of production (Rinaldi, 1886), others embraced capitalist agriculture through land reclamation and irrigation systems. In the southern regions and Papal domains, feudal structures remained prevalent, and the penetration of market agriculture was relatively limited (Dragonetti, 1788). In other regions like Tuscany or the Po valley, technical ameliorations and land drying determined steadier economic growth. Wider extensions of available lands and the implementation of innovative irrigation systems (Bianchi, 1989) consolidated two forerunners of capitalist agriculture in the peninsula: Veneto and Lombardy. In the past, pivotal centres of agricultural production were located in Southern regions (Lizier, 1907), particularly in Sicily where local ecologies allowed the cultivation of exotic products, mainly of Arabic origin, providing to the culinary preferences of the elites. The shift in agricultural production centres toward the North

coincided with the changing dynamics of continental trade and the marketization of agriculture, driving the need for faster and more abundant supplies through intensive cultivations.

Political structures were also changing, fuelled by the cultural influence of the counter-reform. Between the 15th and 16th centuries Italian cities were progressively absorbed by wider territorial controls and more centralised political powers like lordships and principalities. The ownership of lands was concentrated in the hands of noble families and the Catholic Church, which imposed stricter rules of inheritance that limited the transfer of land to male descendants only. By the end of the 17th century, the almost totality of lands in the peninsula was bound according to this system. Although community agriculture had represented an integral element of the agrarian economy so far, both political and economic transformations contributed to the almost complete disappearance of land commoning for food production. Popular uprisings and resistance efforts against enclosures and usurpations emerged, but ultimately, sovereigns abolished the civic uses. Enclosures of open fields and common lands were widespread and systematic. Behind the exclusive focus on property rights, landowners were driving a structural transformation aimed at dismantling the traditional land order and establishing a new concept of unitary private property in line with modern ideas. The consolidation of power in the hands of noble families and the Church, along with the drive for private property, contributed to the decline of community agriculture that will only remerge in contemporary times.

The final seizure of community agriculture was inflicted by liberal doctrines and rational individualism. Private property was affirmed as the dominant economic model, characterized by absolute and exclusive property rights that should encounter no political constraint. Property was not only a rightful attribute of citizens but defined their civic and political attitudes as well as their moral standing. Fuelled by the antifeudal impetus of the French Revolution that trampled down large estates and barons, modernity dragged along the residuals of rural communitarianism too (Bloch, 1978; Bourgin, 1908; Ikni, 1982). Community agriculture no longer fit within the framework of market-based food production and was even seen as detrimental to agricultural development. The principles of the French Revolution made their way to the Italian peninsula with the Napoleonic conquest in 1796. Through a series of reforms, feudal systems were dissolved, and the inalienability of land was denied. While this may have satisfied the barons' aspirations for territorial control, it disrupted local peasant economies and solidified private property by suppressing civic uses, common lands, and community agriculture. Remnants of community agriculture persisted in the central and southern regions of the peninsula, where they served as socio-economic units of territorial organization and maintained some traditional communitarian practices (Cassandro, 1943).

The proletarianization of farm labour

Since the second half of the 18th century, the colonial food regime restructured agricultural markets on a global scale, leading to the further privatization and commodification of food. The advent of steam-powered ships and refrigeration systems accelerated agricultural flows and facilitated the rise of corporate actors in the food industry. Local agriculture was further marginalised, and masses of rural labourers were expelled from the productive chain to swell the ranks of industrial workers or emigrates. Those who remained in the fields became landless daily labourers, devoid of any productive assets or tools.

In contrast to the classical and early modern peasantry who relied on common lands to secure a basic portion of their sustenance (Magdoff, 2012) modern agricultural proletarians had no access to land whatsoever and were stripped of their means of subsistence. They lived and worked in conditions worse than the *proletarii* of ancient Rome. While their predecessors could at least retain a small portion of the food they produced after paying in-kind taxes to their lords, modern peasants became completely alienated from their labour and harvest (Mercurio, 1989). Whatever they harvested exclusively belonged to the landowner, and they were compelled to spend their wages on buying back the essential yet privatized goods they had produced (Holt-Giménez, 2017). With this detachment from any socio-cultural embeddedness, the value of food as a cultural, social, and political symbol was

overshadowed by its market price (Vivero-Pol, 2017). Framed in wider strategies to produce nature (Castree, 2005; McCarthy & Prudham, 2004), the commodification of food paved the way for massive interventions in cropping techniques, experiments on genetics, and seed patenting (Jansen, 2014).

In this scenario, the political unification of the peninsula under the Italian Kingdom offered new venues for food commodification. The dismantling of internal customs barriers created an open national market for agricultural products, encouraging regional specialization in crops driven by competition and consumers' demands. The newly established Parliament aimed to reconcile radicalized class struggles, the growing pressures of capitalism for market-oriented agriculture, and the persistence of historically traditional practices such as community agriculture. Landowners felt threatened by the increasing mobilization of the peasantry, as they feared that access to land could serve as a gateway for revolutionary movements. In 1888, the Chambers approved the first national law that abolished all civic uses and common lands in the peninsula. Common lands were purchased by the State, but the monetary restitution offered to local communities was grossly inadequate, leading to widespread popular unrest (Cinanni, 1962). In 1894, another law regarding civic uses was ratified. Although it purported to acknowledge the existence of community agriculture, its primary objective was to quell protests and ensure the preservation of private property rights.

At the beginning of the 20th century, land commoning started losing strategic relevance compared to other contentious repertoires as peasants unionized in leagues to join factory workers. The focus shifted away from the reclamation of common lands while strikes, protests and occupations were aimed at land redistribution or the improvement of working conditions (Caracciolo, 1950). Interrupted by 20 years of dictatorship that reinforced the position of landowners and unsettled by WWII, Italian agriculture restarted in the aftermath of the conflict as an integral part of the capitalist food regime. By the close of 1926, the dictatorship had taken a firm hold. It simultaneously worked to advance the interests of the capitalist and industrial sectors that had facilitated its rise, while also strengthening its political dominance and quashing any semblance of autonomy (Cartiglia, 1979). Fascism encouraged the formation of large enterprises where labourers were placed in entirely subordinate and vulnerable positions. Efforts to boost grain production also leaned in favour of larger landowners. These measures were part of the broader objective, among others, to manage popular discontent and disrupt the communitarian and solidarity bonds among the rural workforces. The war further exacerbated this state of profound distress, resulting in livestock losses, the deterioration of irrigation infrastructure, agricultural machinery, land abandonment, and declining crop conditions. After the war, under the U.S. hegemony, the Italian agricultural sector was traversed by manifold economic, social, and political projects that induced its further stagnation. The automation of supply chains and the advent of the common European market negatively affected working conditions in agriculture, widening the gap with industrial sectors. While the legislation of the Italian Republic recognized civic uses, these provisions primarily served a conservative function (Cristoferi, 2016).

Over the last decades, food has increasingly been transformed into an industrial commodity comparable to any other product. Completely unbound to its cultural and intimate significance – other than its nutritional values – food supply chains have been standardised and automated to produce more and faster (McMichael, 2006b). The peculiarity of post-industrial societies and neoliberal food supply chains lies in the political will to push this manipulation even further. What the Green Revolution brought about has been the normalisation of a direct intervention in food, on the productive outcome itself. Far from solely turning agriculture into a highly input-based and mechanised sector, food genetics themselves have been altered flooding the market with processed foods of nearly no nutritional value and nefarious ecological effects (Giraldo, 2019). Agriculture has been systematically detached from its culturally informed local strategies moving production from intercropped, biodiverse fields to extensive monocultures, exploiting uncontracted and often undocumented labour force and draining away knowledge transmission. Both material and symbolic motives have pushed more and more people to engage in alternative food practices. The need to reacquire certain control over food choices as well as the spreading awareness of the ecological disruption caused by industrialised agriculture have nourished a general dissatisfaction over traditional food chains. The re-localisation of food production has been moving towards the centre of public discourses advocating for the prioritization of non-market values when it comes to eating.

CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

The historical trajectories of community agriculture in the Italian peninsula offer valuable insights across three key areas of debate and potential avenues for future research: they merge structure and agency in sociological explanations; they mainstream food as a paramount element for theories of capitalist development; and they advance the processual framework as an adaptable analytical tool.

Firstly, the analysis overcomes the divide between structuralist and individualist sociological explanations through the concept of action repertoire. By demonstrating how land commoning for food production has represented a practice of resistance over the centuries and despite its temporal and spatial differences, the article insists on considering both contextual and agential interpretations to explain community agriculture. Structure and agency are analytical categories that have influenced the interpretation of agri-food movements as broadly determined by neoliberalisation for being either prompted by global processes of environmental degradation or dissolved in individualistic networks (Pellizzoni, 2020). The analysis has advanced a more comprehensive perspective on the theoretical premises and empirical manifestations of community agriculture through a processual approach (Bosi & Malthaner, 2023). Empirical results highlight certain common features across this longue durée periodization that can be expressed in terms of periods of specialization in mainstream agriculture and phases of diversification of land commoning practices. The karst yet persistent presence of community agriculture as an action repertoire shows how the stratification of certain practices over time is a dynamic process that traverses the levels of sociological analysis. Indeed, action repertoires are not static but mutate over time as social actors refine their methods and adapt to changing circumstances (della Porta, 2013). A repertoire of action shows both adaptability to specific contingencies and versatility for agential preferences which culminate in the transformation of collective action over the long term (Tarrow, 1993). Accordingly, community agriculture can be explained through either structuralist or agential analysis only at the expanses of its non-linear complexity over time. It is through a complex interplay of innovation and repetition rather than a linear and progressive transformation that local communities continually refined their practices of land commoning until the present day. Through a processual approach to the historicization of community agriculture, the article shows how community agriculture has evolved through micro-dynamics of learning from past habitus and meso adaptations to macro-historical contexts. In conclusion, it is both structural and agential transformations that have determined significant shifts in material and cultural references, enabling collective action to adopt land commoning for food production as a form of resistance (Tilly, 2006).

The article also contributes to classical analyses of capitalist development (Smith, 1776; Malthus, 1798/1989; Ricardo, 1817/1962; Marx, 1867) emphasizing the interdependence between economic structures and reproductive systems. On the one side, by remarking that the delegation of food production has provided the economic and social bases for classical civilization to prosper, the historicization of community agriculture re-centres discussions on property and land access within sociological analyses of capitalism (Araghi, 2010; Harvey, 2003; Patnaik, 2008). For instance, bridging past and present strategies of land grabbing and peasant dispossession. Deterritorialization, enclosures, and underconsumption are all persistent mechanisms in the history of food (Braudel, 1961): social reproduction systems have been historically manipulated to control social and productive relations for the interest of political and economic elites. On the other side, the analysis has premised on the contested nature of structural processes (Polanyi, 2001; Radin, 1996) by emphasizing how local communities have persistently struggled for decommodified food systems (Segers & Van Molle, 2022; Thirsk, 2000). By demonstrating that community agriculture has historically served as a repertoire of action utilised by local communities (Tilly, 1986, 1995), the analysis has highlighted how structural transformations are interdependent with the agential strategies of social actors. The evolution of land commoning for food production from the Roman era to the present day, now inspired by principles of food sovereignty (Nyéléni, 2007), for example, reflects the broader shift from industrial capitalism to advanced neoliberalism thereby social movements, in general, have undergone macrohistorical shifts in their relationship with economic and cultural structures as well as microhistorical transformations in the way individual identities are shaped through these transformations (Pichardo, 1997). In this sense, while collective action cannot

be studied only through structural theories of political opportunities, it is not only about individual preferences and lifestyle choices either. Once again, even concerning theories of capitalist development, the historicization of community agriculture advocates for the copresence of structuralist and agential explanations. In so doing, land commoning for food production implies both the identification of food as a social and political cleavage to engage in political, social, and ecological conflicts (Goodman, 1999) and often merges into ideals of alternative ways of life in post-industrial societies too (Edelman, 2001; Touraine, 1997). This dyadic component cannot be separated in sociological analysis: a processual approach to community agriculture has demonstrated to what extent they are mutually constitutive and interdependent.

To conclude, the third main contribution of the analysis is precisely to advance a processual approach to the historicization of social phenomena that can single out interrelations and interdependence over division and compartmentalization. In this case, I have applied the framework to understand how community agriculture can be explained across mutable regimes. Nevertheless, I advocate for its application beyond the scope of the present analysis. New ways forward include the possibility of expanding the historicization of land commoning for food production outside the Italian peninsula. Based on the empirical pieces of evidence of communitarian food systems throughout the European continent since antiquity, the expansion of the present research proves promising. Likewise, the transformation of food towards an increasingly privatized resource resonates with a broader global narrative, where other natural commons have also undergone processes of privatization (Roberts, 2008) which could represent insightful case studies to be analysed through the same processual approach. For these reasons, the processual analysis of community agriculture calls for deeper scrutiny and ongoing debate within the field. While it seeks to contribute meaningfully to the existing body of knowledge, it also invites further investigation into longue durée processes of land commoning for food production.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author has non known conflict of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The author confirms that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article. Some of the quoted texts were sourced from the collections of the Accademia dei Georgofili (Florence, IT) and the Biblioteca - Archivio "Emilio Sereni" (Gattatico, IT).

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