A place-based turn in multifunctional agriculture: The case of Italy’s Garfagnana region

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Garfagnana, Italy – Study Area

- Mountainous, heavily forested, with marginal soils
- Small land holdings
- Close proximity to urban centers (Lucca and Pisa) and tourist economy
Research aim and purpose

Research question:
How are new forms of multifunctional farming activities fostering a place-based food and agriculture system in Garfagnana?

Why is it relevant?
- Explore the theoretical links between place-based theory and theory related to socio-ecological sustainability
- Highlight on/off farm practices that are helping small-scale producers adapt to an increasingly concentrated and neoliberal food and agriculture sector
- Emphasize actions that local institutions can play in supporting place-based food and agriculture systems
Theoretical Framework

Multifunctional Agriculture theory (Wilson 2008)

- Aims to identify the social, environmental, non-productionist and non-capitalist characteristics and relations embedded in on-farm practices that expand understandings of farms as more than productionist entities

- Focused on on-farm activities, less attention to territorial distinction

Place-based theory (Escobar 2001; Massey 2010; Richardson 2014)

- Characterizes place as a dimension of multiplicity in which social structures and cultural practices are enacted and contested through those that identify with and bound a particular territory

- Provides conceptual room to analyze how multifunctional farming practices may be distinct to a particular place, and how on-farm activities may influence off-farm identities and practices
Garfagnana Historical Framing

- Historically impoverished area of subsistence farmers

- 1930s/40s Fascist Italian government investment in extensive wheat production led to significant management of the natural ecosystems

- Collapse of the agricultural economy after WWII and emigration

- Rural abandonment balanced by adaptive small-scale farming

- Reforestation and new socio-ecological relations

- Increasing role of local institutions in local agricultural development
Case-Study Farms- Maestà della Formica Farm

- “Management” of nature to adapt to the territorial history and socio-ecological relations
- Investment in innovative place-based biodynamic practices
- Diversification of non-productionist farm activities and value-added products
- “Brokers” between rural economy and urban markets
Case-Study Farms - Cerasa Farm

- Alternative governance system - semi-public business with a strong educational role
- Revalorization of place-based, multifunctional production practices, and regional branding
- Significant role of local government in promoting territorial agro-tourism
Case-Study Farms - Filippi Farm

- Small-scale specialization in raw milk through vertical integration and high productivity
- Peri-urban proximity to customers and investment in on-farm milk dispensary and micro-processor
- Limited diversification, potential commodity path dependency
Research Conclusions

- Each case-study farm offers a different form of multifunctional agriculture activities (in-line with Wilson 2008’s framework)
  - Farm diversification activities strengthened farms’ environmental sustainability (soil quality and water usage in particular)
  - Farms increasingly engaged in local governance structures as both a beneficiary and service provider
  - Building of local and regional agro-food chains critical to economic vitality

- Place-based activities emphasized as most important for farmers’ socio-ecological relations in the territory, and economic success
  - Place-based activities around local varieties, breeds, and socio-ecological histories transcended farm boundaries and shape community relations
  - Institutional-driven place-branding having a significant economic impact on the territory
Thank you!

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