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LA TABACCA:

small Farming, bold Intentions

A walk through the challenging creation of alternative lifestyles.

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Abstract

Considering small farming as a viable and optimal solution to achieve sustainability, the following work presents La Tabacca – a small farm in the Northwest of Italy – not as a generalisable model but as one of the many expressions of current environmentalism. After three and a half months of fieldwork – using the tool of critical ethnography – different layers and elements of the place have been taken into consideration. Through a narrative walk the present study provides a description of the site and of the people involved, their historical backgrounds and purposes, a list of major influencing ideas and approaches such as permaculture, a perception of a culture in transition, an ethnographic discourse analysis of the farm and its narrative and a critical view on the relationship between the study case and European agricultural funds. In the closing section, the study provides an insight on the dissent role that La Tabacca is taking towards what is to be considered mainstream society.

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Introduction

"This straw appears small and light, and most people do not know how really weighty it is. If people knew the true value of this straw a human revolution could occur which would become powerful enough to move the country and the world."

(Masanobu Fukuoka 2009, 178)

Like many I am inspired by the idea of a one-straw-revolution.

As I am deciding to dedicate my life to see things from down within and not from up above, I make of this thesis a drive towards change. A change that I, and many others (Naomi Klein 2014, Bill Mckibben 2007, Masanobu Fukuoka 2009), think is needed if we see this planet as a whole.

This thesis finds its interests in discovering how a small place can become part of a necessary worldwide movement towards what is thought to be a sustainable society. The following is a story of re-peasantisation (Ploeg 2008, 6-7), a story of the reintroduction of human life in an environment with a modus operandi different from the business-as-usual.

What is this place? What is happening there and why?

Who is involved in it? What mentality characterises them and what makes it useful for a sustainable society? What personal changes make them different from conventional lives?

But also, what limitations is this place facing? What biophysical¹ characteristics, economic and cultural burdens does it encounter?

To find answers to these questions I spent three months and a half of "participant observation" (Davies 2008, 71) in Italy.

As a researcher directly involved with the issues here disclosed I connect this work with the methodology of Critical Ethnography that helps to "take us beneath surface appearances, disrupts the status quo, and unsettles both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control" (Madison 2005, 5). Mine is an activist stand from where I can expose "the material effects of marginalized locations while offering alternatives" (Fine 1994, 17). Or in Ingold's words, I apply an anthropology that has the objective of being "transformational" (Ferrandez and Ingold 2013,

1 By biophysical I mean : "the external surroundings including all of the biotic and abiotic factors that surround and affect the survival and development of an organism or population." Biology online, s.v. "Environment", <http://www.biology-online.org/dictionary/Environment> [accessed May 19th 2016].

287).

The following piece is based on a farm study case where, similarly to Belfrage's doctoral thesis, the data tendentiously supports the case and appraises it rather than finding solutions for an already flawed phenomenon (2014, 25). It is a study case about uniqueness, contextualisation and unrepeatability. However, I allow myself to make generalizations due to the fact that the context in which the characters of this story find themselves is full of homogenisation, abstraction, and universality (Eisenstein 2011, 39-44) making the existence here explained a commonality among many. And I hope to be able to address the main issues that are for them of interest.

The writing style could be referred at as a narrative walk where the topics and arguments are unveiled through the description and the telling of the story of a place: like a stroll around where the sensing of the surroundings are joined with occasional abstract talks. I am aware that "no narrative can 'show' or 'imitate' the story it tells" (Genette 1983, 164), and my aim is to make the gap between my experience and the one of the reader as narrow as possible, although I am also aware of the difficulties of "representing Others [which is always] a complicated and contentious undertaking" (Madison 2005, 3-4).

The story is anachronistic, allowing for past, future and present perceptions to join each other, show contrast and allow comparison (Genette 1983, 55). This mirrors the fieldwork – that I have done – through which I have gathered the knowledge that is the foundation of the thesis. This is precisely because "movement *is* knowing" (Ingold 2011, 160) and it is with my movement, my being-in-the-field, that I could see and learn. Just as I needed to move and experience an environment, in this work I need to guide the reader into the walk, showing the different connections of the elements and the things and events that occurred. Things are not because they exist, but they are because they occur (Ibid.).

The choice of literature was heavily dependent on the situation. I encountered difficulties in finding original sources and Italian literature on the study case, both not available in the Swedish library system. It could have happened otherwise only if time was not a limiting factor.

The same applies for the topics here highlighted. I entered the fieldwork with the broad question of what do people go through in the development of such a sustainable farm and the results are heavily influenced by situational intuitions based on personal and shared experiences.

Without further ado it is now time to travel to the northeastern Italy.

Prologue

It was the 17th of August 2015 when I first approached the Ligurian gulf to carry out the tasks of my fieldwork.

Part of the very diverse spectrum of Mediterranean ecosystems, the gulf can be roughly described as an indented wall of hills and mountains sparsely cut by generally v-shaped valleys, crossed by “short torrential rivers on the coastal side” (Regione Liguria 2015, 11) that stream calmly during the hot and dry summers and swell during the colder and rainy winters. Although Liguria is a mountainous and thin strip of land, the central part of the gulf hosts the city of Genoa and its 400.000 inhabitants². This is made possible by the extraordinary amount of buildings that lay now not only by the sea, but that through the years have crawled up the hills and over the above mentioned rivers thanks to a simplification of building regulations that is causing harmful floods in recent years (Palmisano 2014³).

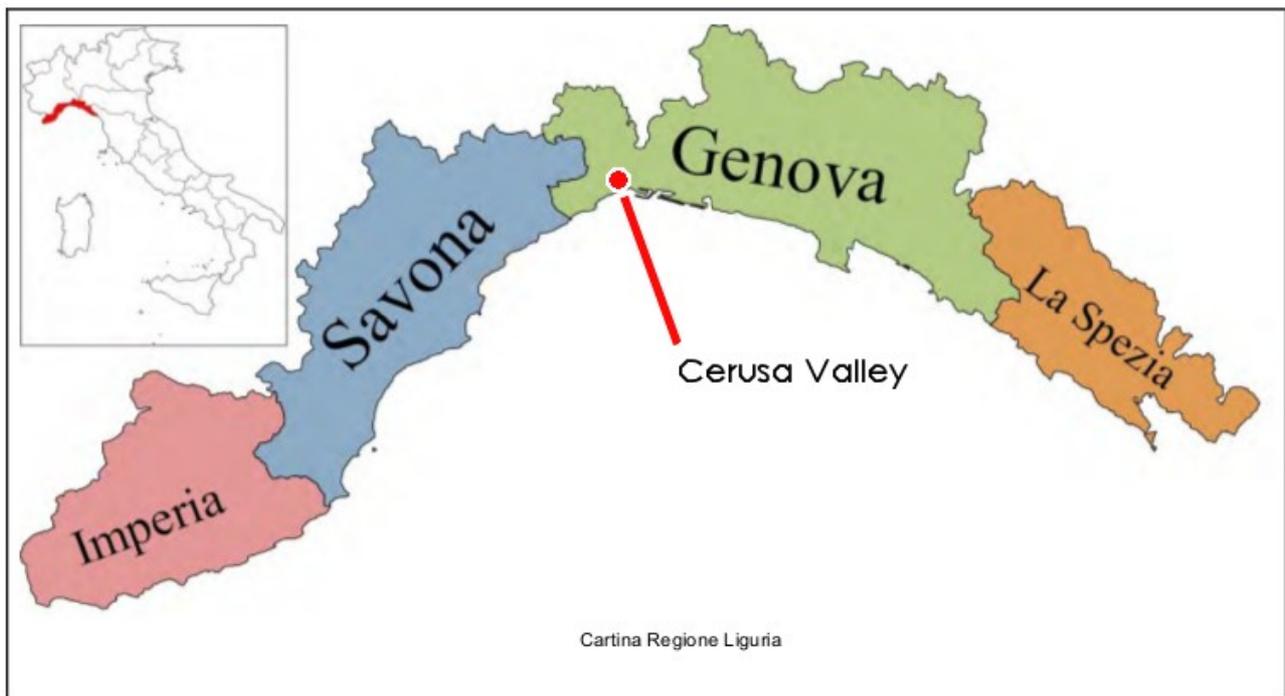


Figure 1: Map of Liguria Region (Regione Liguria 2015, 12) edited by author.

However Genoa was not my final destination. After some hours by public transportation I had someone waiting for me who had already been to the place and was kind enough to take me there and save me some time.

2 http://www.istat.it/it/liguria/dati?qt=gettableterr&dataset=DCIS_POPRES1&dim=16,1,0,182,8,0&lang=2&tr=0&te=1
3 <http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2014/10/13/alluvione-genova-la-semplificazione-edilizia-che-fa-della-pioggia-un-flagello/1153697/> accessed 7th April 2016

We drove along the highway that crosses and cuts through different hills and valleys until we reached the very western part of what composes Genoa's metropolis. Here it is possible to enter one of these short and steep valleys through an old industrial area. At the bottom of the valley runs the stream Cerusa which we had to follow for some smooth turns until we crossed it. From here a seemingly one-way road climbs up the hills for circa four kilometres entering a realm of mainly woods with sporadic openings where human buildings can be found. Luckily we left the chaotic Genoa behind and generally, a driver has to stop a couple of times to let other cars pass through, hoping not to get a scratch.

All went well this time and we, me and the former WWOOFer⁴, who was my guide, reached the little hamlet known as Ravin. This is also the last accessible place for cars. From here only your own feet and some small vehicles can proceed through old paths and mountain roads that once made up the heart of the communicating network between the surrounding households and cultivated fields. One of these paths is visibly more used than others and the expert eye can recognize the reminiscences of a mule-track, characterised by occasional paved and drywalled parts. The path goes up and enters the woods. It could be the contrast between the loud and fast-paced city life and the quietness among the trees but what I could later recognise as old abandoned fields, back then seemed like a tunnel of tangled trees and brambles. We climbed until a point where a huge holm oak and an anthropomorphised dead tree denoted an intersection.

To the right a possibly freshly painted sign says "La Tabacca". Following that direction we proceeded downwards through old chestnut, oak and ash trees. On the left side, facing downhill, I could recognise a terracing system that seemed newly restored. On the right side one of these terraces had already been occupied by vegetable raised beds and a couple of small trees that were protected by a wired mesh. Further down in a terrace on the left, a cistern and a sink preceded tables that were lined up to form a long dining place for around 30 people. "I arrived at the right time", I jokingly said to my guide. The dining area was covered by the shade produced by three big cypresses, trees traditionally used as border markers or paths indicators. From that spot a house was clearly visible: stone walls, red tiled and slate roof it stood on two floors, on the ground floor two rooms that used to be stables, in an intermediate level on the right a kitchen, and above them respectively three other rooms. This is what appeared to me at La Tabacca when I first arrived there on a memorable sunny Monday.

4 "WWOOF enables people to live and volunteer on a variety of organic properties. Volunteers (WWOOFers) help on the land and home for 4-6 hours a day and hosts provide the food and accommodation. If you want to have hands on experience, learn and share organic and sustainable ways of living then WWOOF might be for you." (source: <http://wwoofinternational.org/how-it-works/> accessed May 8th 2016)



Figure 2: La Tabacca southern perspective. Photo credits: Giorgia Bocca.

La Tabacca – History

La Tabacca means literally “the tobacconist” (with the feminine definite article as it is referred to a house, feminine as well). Or at least this is how the old and new neighbours know this place. It is believed in fact that it was a meeting point for the tobacco smuggling path that went from the sea to the inland of Italy (Bocca 2014, 214).

Once all goods were transported through the “salt roads” – old transport paths across which salt was traded – but of course in a controlled way, especially after the constitution of local governments and the introduction of exchange tariffs (Putnam 1993, 124). Everything that was not supposed to flow used to go through alternative ways such as the one that supposedly passed through La Tabacca. I say supposedly because this is an oral fact, transmitted orally and never officiated (“of course” you might think to yourself since it was an illegal path).

In legal maps La Tabacca is known as 'Casa Brusamè', that from the local dialect could be possibly translated into 'House burn me'. The house once consisted only of what is now the kitchen and the room above, something which is visible by studying the signs on the exterior wall. At that time, rather than a house, it was a chestnut drier where in the room below spread out charcoal would be burning, hence the term 'brusamè', and above would lie the chestnuts. This is also explained by the presence of numerous chestnut trees and the wording

in official maps that assigns the surrounding area as a chestnut forest.

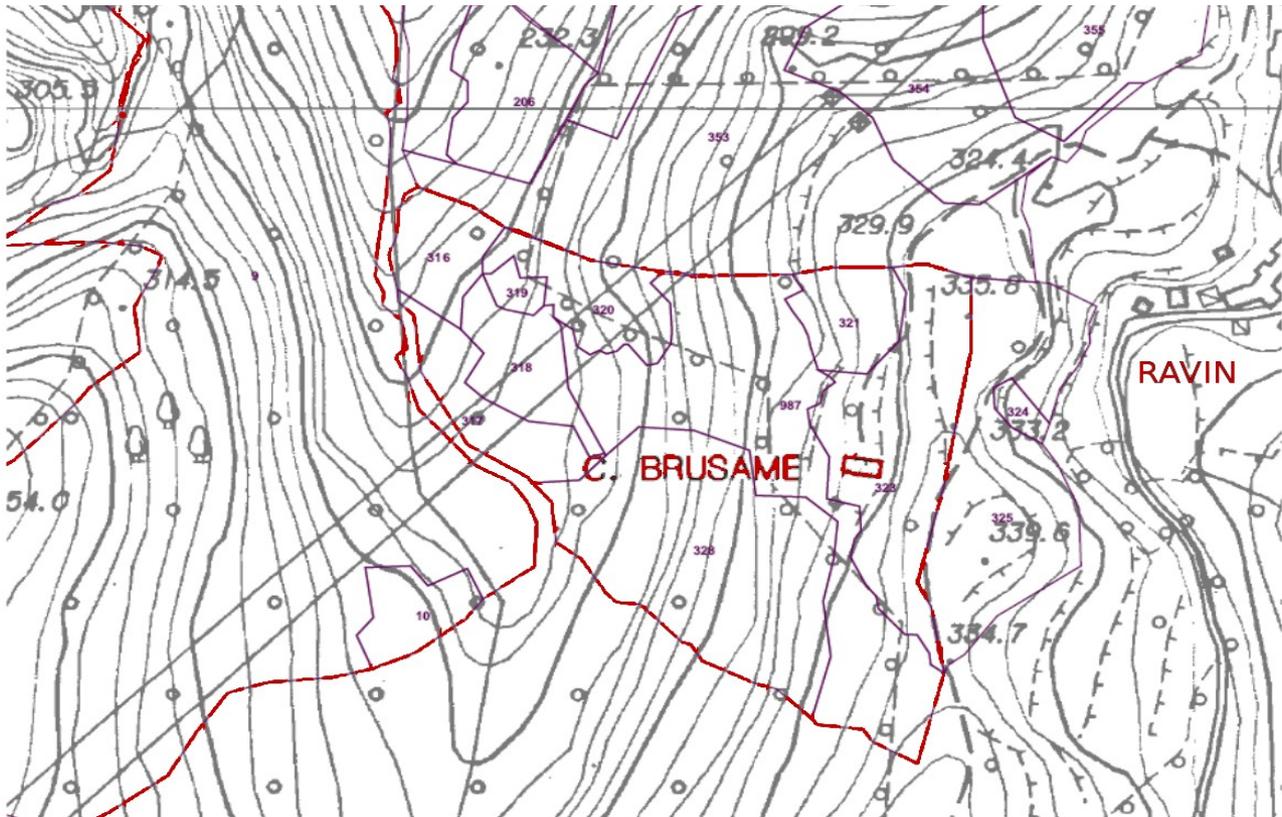


Figure 3: Plots of land owned by La Tabacca. Courtesy of Francesca Bottero, edited by author.

The rest of the house was built around the beginning of the 20th century. The terraces where it stands face west influencing and reducing the Mediterranean effect on the place; the sun appears later and disappears early because of the mountains; the winds mainly blow from the north (tramontana) and the sea does not have a direct impact. This enhanced even more my first feeling about the place: I perceived it as a muffled bubble, surrounded by forest, hills and mountains, making it darker, quieter and colder than the city I had left behind.

The house has been inhabited until the 1980s and since then has gone into a process of abandonment with plants prevailing, especially invasive ones, over the human artefacts, building and terraces in particular.

Only recently humans have been re-inhabiting the place.

In Ravin, the small village 5 minutes away with which La Tabacca is developing social connection with good and bad outcomes (more on this in section The Neighbors), lives Roberto. He has been using what was once the house vegetable garden since 2008, when he moved there. It was him that introduced the place to the two people with whom I lived

through most of the experiences during my fieldwork: Giorgia Bocca and Francesca Bottero. Giorgia and Francesca are engaged environmentalists. The former – with a background of activism with Greenpeace – has always had “a desire to create sustainable ecological systems, where people could live in harmony with nature”⁵, and the latter with now a 10+ years experience in synergistic agriculture has tried for more than 15 years to move to the countryside.

When Roberto pointed out the house and when the old owner, a retired psychologist from Turin, decided to give the house to them as a gift they could not believe their luck. Especially because a few days before they had already decided to quit their old project on which their lives were then mostly based and about which I will explain later (see section Vesima and Alternative Gardening).

Following here I present some of the basic concepts upon which the project of La Tabacca started and that reached beyond the personal interests of Giorgia and Francesca, the coordinators of the project.

Aims and Objectives

The project of La Tabacca is part of Terra! Onlus⁶, an environmental association for social promotion that works towards land access, urban gardening and the support of agricultural supply chains.

The project has set its official guidelines and aims, as one can see in the official site⁷ of the association, to reduce water consumption, achieve energy and food self sufficiency, engage practices of phytotherapy – the use of plants and plant products for medicinal purposes⁸ –, activate useful social processes and create spaces for events and workshops proposed by the association Terra! Onlus.

La Tabacca also aims to be a door opener for sustainable practices: it wants to ease up the road for possibilities that are now not taken into consideration within the conventional life we are all expected to have; it wants to bear the difficulties and the challenges for the many that neither have the courage, for some might be barely legal, nor the possibilities, economically and physically speaking, to do the same; it wants to know “if it is possible to reconstruct a house [and its surroundings] in an ecological way, valuing and enhancing the process and the result so that it is useful to the collectivity and the environment” (Bocca 2014,

5 Giorgia and Francesca, interview by author, La Tabacca, Genova, Italy. November 28, 2015

6 Onlus stands for Onrganizzazione Non Lucrativa di Utilità Sociale, which literally means Non-Profit Organization for Social Utility but that generally is translated with Italian Social Organization.

7 <http://www.terraonlus.it/chi-siamo-ft> (Accessed March 11th 2016)

8 *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “phytotherapy”, accessed May 17, 2016, <http://global.britannica.com/topic/phytotherapy>.

214).

Of course being useful for the collectivity is in fact a responsibility. Quite often, once I settled in and experienced the place with Giorgia and Francesca, we shared the feeling of being stuck. Sometimes it felt physically impossible or socially unachievable and conversations would light up just to allow us to release stress when the amount of work and difficulties that we had to go through was unbearable. But almost every week someone that knew or just heard about La Tabacca would visit and reminded us, though not intentionally, that this was not a personal project but a social instrument to share ecological practices.

Of course La Tabacca is *not a model* to be replicated in its totality. It is not a copy-paste solution. It is not part of a top-down plan to change the world, such as some ecological economists promote (Bramwell 1989, 31), but rather an example, a laboratory for different lifestyles, an exhibition of unusual routines in what Plumwood calls a one-culture society (2002, 25-29).

Yet, why should someone undertake such a path?

The reasons that brought the project of La Tabacca to existence are as various as the participants to the project. "Everyone can live a piece of La Tabacca", says Giorgia; everyone by passing by can bring an input depending on his/her past experiences. So while Giorgia has been aware of how interrelated can be one's actions in a globalised world, by having interest in global environmental issues through Greenpeace and university studies, Francesca has learned how a certain lifestyle can threaten one's health. In fact before getting involved in gardening she worked for eight years in a factory in contact with chemical substances that damaged her health (Bottero 2014, 187).

So on one side there is a wider understanding of the wrongs and pains of Western culture: a culture that has grown to the global level in the past centuries, and that has generated various controversial understandings of it; a culture that creates the "need for superstructures" and is dependent on them, as Francesca said. On the other side there is the direct contact with pernicious activities, such as the past job that Francesca had.

However in the process of wanting a place like La Tabacca the two coordinators share a feeling of being out of place, of not belonging to the "right" space – in this case the urban Ligurian life – and their disapproval to what was going wrong in the relation between humans and the environment.

The personal analysis (see section The Transition) they went through involved an understanding of what Plumwood calls the "ecological crisis of reason" (Plumwood 2002, 13-37), or a personal critique of what Ploeg calls "*Empire*" (2008, 3-5). The creation of La

Tabacca meant to disagree with the general tendency of their society that aims towards the detachment of humans from the environment, a push for the alienation from one's surroundings, a general objectification of all living things, and a sado-dispassionate approach to the environment that result into experiencing the destruction of environments, the reduction of the quality of life and for some people, the loss of ecosystems and biodiversity (Plumwood 2002). These latter facts, that to perceive one does not have to engage in bird's eye perspectives, might have played a major role in the creation of the need for such a project. They have induced them to jump off the *Titanic* boat of western globalised society (Plumwood 2002, 1-3). As Gooch stated, "it is when something breaks [...] that they become reflected upon" (Gooch 1998, 307). It is when you see these facts happening that you can start to question yourself.

Before I dive deeper into the world of La Tabacca I need to give some directions about those theories and methods that constitute the frame in which this dissertation is encompassed.

Theoretical and Methodological approach

Addressing the totality – or almost – of such a project requires a wider grasp in the matter of both theory and method. Throughout this text can be found diverse theories and methods that I used in telling different aspects of what is La Tabacca; some are strictly methods, others theories, and some have their bases in both of them. Following here is a brief touch upon them; more details can be found in the different and more specific sections.

Fundamental for this work are Permaculture (Holmgren 2011, Mollison 2002), synergistic⁹ (Hazelip 2014) and natural agriculture (Fukuoka 2009): they provide the daily guidance and inspiration for the people involved in the project; they offer tools for a revolutionary creation of life-worlds by natural design (see Figure 4) and promote a criticism of dualism and anthropocentrism (Ingold 2011, Plumwood 2002). Accordingly to these assumptions the phenomenological approach perfectly affiliates to this thesis. Phenomenology "as a possible point of departure for a *non-dualistic, contextualized, and post-modern* environmental science" (Gooch 1998, 295, emphasis in original); an approach that exalts above all embeddedness, contextuality, oneness (Ibid., 294-297), being-in-the-world (Ingold 2000), dwelling (Heidegger 1993, 347-353); "a theoretical understanding of [the] *direct* relationships between people and the world in which they live" (Gooch 1998, 297, emphasis in original).

9 "Synergistic agriculture is a cultivation method developed by Emilia Hazelip. [...] This method modifies a little the four fundamental principles of Fukuoka's natural cultivation: (1) Do not plough. [...] (2) Do not fertilise. [...] (3) Do not use pesticides. (4) Build or re-build synergy between plants." (Mancin 2012)

Before falling in any sort of exaggerated hypocrisy I inform you that the text, although an open critique of them, does not lack dualisms, objectifications, and reductionism (Plumwood 2002). This is an analysis, a written and static text; it is a detached reflection on my and others' experiences; a task that is required by "formal education and training" where "a more direct connection with, and experience of, the natural world through observation and experience" is prevented (Holmgren 2011, 20). But it is also a "result of modernity" (Gooch 1998, 307), where the extreme consequences of the modern living requires a detached reflection to be able to re-immense, or rather re-see oneself as being part of the whole and act towards it and not against it.



Figure 4: Permaculture Design Principles (Holmgren 2011, viii)

La Tabacca walks also in line with many ideas of the degrowth movement (D'Alisa 2015) that, similarly to permaculture, evaluates the current culture and sees the need to work towards a society that uses "fewer natural resources [and] 'sharing', 'simplicity', 'conviviality', 'care' and the 'commons' [as] primary significations of [such] society" (D'Alisa 2015, 3). Important for this project is also a critical view on the capitalist economic system (Eisenstein 2011) and its maximizing tendencies (Schumacher 1993) that favour the big industrial farm over the smallholding (Netting 1993).

Last but not least discourse analysis (Hajer 1995), both theory and method, which reveals itself useful in this context as an instrument to disclose the relations between the discourse brought forth by La Tabacca against the normative one of mainstream society.

Methods

As seen some theories go hand in hand with precise methods. For example, discourse analysis theory will obligatorily come with the here used ethnographic discourse analysis (Titscher et al. 2007). Similarly permaculture, synergistic and natural agriculture are both frameworks to understand society but they also offer guidelines and examples for the daily practices.

If theories can necessarily be coupled with certain methods, other times what could be seen as just a method implies also a theory. In the case of critical ethnography the employment of methods of participant observation, group interviews, fieldwork notes, maps, photos and documents that I have used, coincide with the view of critical theory that sees the researcher in an active and power position in an ever changing world (Madison 2005, 8-10; 12-14).

However I want to highlight what I consider being the result of the above mentioned theories and methods. In respect of such theories that imply and are promoters of societal change I conveyed them into a personal transition. The union of my rural background, the openness to employ and learn new skills during my fieldwork, my activism towards sustainability and the theoretical approaches that are here exposed generated the creation of a new imaginary, a vision of "a different normality" (Burkhart 2013, 45) for a possible sustainable future.

And lastly, as it has been mentioned already, this thesis is a farm study case that uses narrative walks as an explorative and explanatory tool.

To thoroughly unveil what La Tabacca is trying to do I now feel the need to share what my curiosity during the fieldwork and a semi-structured interview I did on the very last day of my staying has discovered about the stories of the two coordinators.

Francesca and Giorgia

A constantly moving "topknot", Francesca is strong and somehow intimidating at first. She's often restless and during my first days she was all over the place from the very first lights until late in the evenings. Planting, moving, building, fixing things and anything that her vigorous spirit could put its attention on.

After what she refers to as a turbulent youth, unwanted jobs that brought her to "physical and mental exhaustion" (Bottero 2014, 187), she "decided to find herself, almost just for fun," and while inquiring friends and relatives about it "a cousin told her that when she was younger she always wanted to do gardening". Hence, with the support of Giorgia, she resolved in taking part of a synergistic agriculture course where biocentrism replaces anthropocentrism in agricultural practices (Hazelip 2014, 36). It was a turning point.

She still remembers those five days passed in Asti as "an experience rich and simple at the

same time" (Bottero 2014, 188). She came back with "a body of new information, plants, practical knowledge and principles" that led her to start "a new path, made of testing and research" (idib.).

Giorgia, tiny and fragile at first glance, is a strong drive and a focus point in any socially active occasion thanks to her amazing talkativeness – always accompanied by the traditional Italian frantic hand gestures. As mentioned above she has worked for Greenpeace, first as a volunteer and then as a paid employee. This allowed her to get engaged with important environmental issues and to express her youth desire to fight for a better world and to suppress her guilt feeling of being part of the human category, "that destroys and pillages natural resources" (Bocca 2014, 206). But it is only through the involvement of her friends and especially Francesca that she discovered how she was changing her own internal structures.

The two are complementary. One more practical and introvert, the other more reflexive and extrovert, they feel "inspired by one another" and have shared moments of revolutionary change which are still happening in La Tabacca.

Now I must go further back in time, before La Tabacca, to the gardening experience of Vesima, a valley where Francesca found a piece of land where to try and learn. During a period of ten years she turned what it seemed like a never ending thorn bush into neat terraces filled with a luxuriant plant life that Roberto remembers as, "at it's beauty peak," a place "where everything was taken *care* of and it was beautiful!" (my emphasis).

Vesima and Alternative Gardening



Figure 5: Vesima Gardens (Bottero 2014, 190)

The Vesima period was like going back to school. Both for Francesca, who was working first hand, and Giorgia, where she could observe, help and restructure her own way to approach

the environment and herself (more in section The Transition). Francesca says that “ she entered a garden dimension” from where she could see how the soil is alive and how it is made of balances that are slowly created (Bottero 2014, 189). It was an “invitation to consider the environment as a key for her life path” (Bottero 2014, 189), so she started to learn everything that would be part of that infinite puzzle that is the environment (ibid.)

As I mentioned, they worked there for ten years until Francesca realized that while Vesima was “a perfect place for self-sufficiency, experimentation and training”, with its 350 squared meters “it was not enough to make a living out of it.” (Bottero 2014, 195). For these reasons she left and is now focusing on La Tabacca. The Vesima gardens remain today a place to cultivate low maintenance crops, where there are still “50 fruit trees, mixed hedges to attract insects, birds, hedgehogs and useful animals, comfrey, artichokes and spices a bit everywhere, a greenhouse, a seed bed, and a nice canopy under which we have nice meals and important chatters” (Bottero 2014, 195-196).

If Vesima was a temporary experience, La Tabacca is thought to be a long lasting one. What they share is a series of principles and ethics that Francesca and Giorgia have learned and apply from the teachings of figures such as Emilia Hazelip, Masanobu Fukuoka and Bill Mollison.

Natural agriculture, and its founder Masanobu Fukuoka, taught them how humans can only learn from nature (Fukuoka 2009, 8) and apply a more oriental approach of acting where you rather not do than do (ibid., 15). Francesca showed me many times how the land, if left on it's own, can create a sustainable and productive system by following “a primary need: protection of the soil and preservation of life around the roots” (Bottero 2014, 193-194).

When planting in the garden we then tried to imitate the characteristics of an abandoned forest. This is also known as “design by nature [...] a result of the forces of self-organisation which can be observed everywhere in the living and wider universe” (Holmgren 2011, 15). In the woods the soil is never uncovered, the leaves fall during autumn and keep the ground moist and through the process of decomposition they create some heat during the winter and they provide humus for the next growing season. Mulching is its closest imitation: in the garden instead of leaves we covered the ground around vegetables with straw, making it difficult for weeds to grow and at the same time keeping the ground covered, wet and with potential compost matter on it. The same type of soil if uncovered would look rather deserts while under just few centimetres of straw it would be dark brown and humid.

Also a forest does not display monoculture: Different organisms coexist and cooperate with each other. As Sepp Holzer, an Austrian known to be the “rebel farmer”, knows: “if in a terrain is cultivated only one plant species, it is obvious that the soil is not used in a balanced way”

(2015, 81).

Just few steps out of my dwelling, an old yurt 50 meters away from La Tabacca, I could take a look at the surrounding woods. Different trees made up a canopy, their trunks and branches offered hold to climbing plants, a multitude of birds could fill up the air of whistling melodies, decomposing leaves from the past autumn hid nuts that dormice would gather for the winter, mushrooms would pop out the ground showing that the mycelium was working on old branches and leaves to turn them into thick dark soil. Different species coexist, create protection, feed and support each other in different stages and layers. What is discarded or abundant to one can be of survival necessity for the next one. Hence in the garden we planted trying to create a variety of association and layers according to complementarity tables, also known as companion planting or guilds (Holmgren 2011, 165). However there is no global table to apply since they only “can be reliably demonstrated at a bioregional and local level” (Ibid.). Vesima and La Tabacca are in fact not the same place, they might be few kilometres apart but their climate is different, the soil is different, the sun and wind exposure is different. What Francesca tried in Vesima needs to be adapted to the different needs of La Tabacca. What we see as repetitions of happenings are “in fact a mental construction, which eliminates from each occurrence everything belonging to it that is peculiar to itself” (Genette 1983, 113); what permaculture teaches is indeed to “search for spatial and temporal patterns” (Holmgren 2011, 127) and not equalities.

Masanobu Fukuoka is just one of the many sources of inspiration for the synergistic agriculture movement that struck Francesca's interests. Emilia Hazelip, founder of the movement, describes him as the “author of the first proposed agronomic reform since agriculture existed” (Hazelip 2014, 36). Like him, who pushed towards a worldwide revolution, Hazelip openly invited people to cultivate, to work the land in a more suitable way. The objective is to “encourage an agricultural production that uses soil self-fertility” (Ibid. 31); but also to buy and consume differently: indeed “ as long as the consumer will buy food from the commercial system of production [she/he] will participate actively in the destruction of the planet” (Hazelip 2014, 32).

However, differently from its Japanese inspirer who focuses on finding misconceptions and errors of conventional agricultural activities and the modern mentality, synergistic agriculture has deeper roots in the historical understanding of our culture, and a more anthropological interest towards “other” cultures. What Francesca learned is that the soil is alive and not inanimate: the latter a conviction that comes from rationalist philosophers' teachings and their mechanical perception of nature (ibid., 31). Through the experiences and discoveries made by Marija Gimbutas, D. Worster; E. H. Faulkner; R. Stout; A. Smith she also addressed the

contrast between the warrior societies that used an agriculture of exploitation and the previous one that saw agriculture as an activity of social and sacral creativity (ibid., 40-44), she highlighted the inconsistencies of traditional agricultural practices and the damages that they can create (ibid., 44-57; 64-66), the intricate life system that is invisible to the human eye (ibid., 66-72) and how to preserve this life (ibid. 72-74).

In this sense synergistic agriculture is closer to an evaluation of a culture rather than just agriculture. And for this it perfectly joins forces with the permaculture movement.

Permaculture

Both of the coordinators and many other participants of the project are in fact linked to the *permaculture movement* and one of the coordinators is part of the 'executive' group of the Italian Academy of Permaculture.

David Holmgren, one of the founders of the movement, imagines permaculture to work towards a "stronger development of co-operative relationships between people, families and communities outside the large institutional structures", where people live in small communities with a minimised need of global, top-down solutions (Holmgren 2011, 172). In this sense La Tabacca is a project that wants to revive and create, among other things, a more tribal and community living society that many of its participants, coming from 'city lives', have missed or longed for.

They are back-to-the-landers. Like others, they are answering "to the global squeeze" of nowadays international situation (Ploeg 2008, 151). They are "opening small windows of emancipation" playing a "role of critique to rationalist abstraction, commodification of land and labor, modern state and politics, individual alienation, and the dissolution of social bonds" (Calvário et al. 2015, 143-145).

Although one of the two founders of the permaculture movement chooses to not "define and control" what permaculture is (Holmgren 2011, xix) we can grasp a wider understanding of it as a counterculture, which for me is the most important aspect of permaculture for the study case of La Tabacca. Permaculture then as a provider of a "wholistic framework for reorganising the lives and values of a small minority ready for more fundamental change" (ibid., xxi). The initial desire to engage agricultural practices that were permanent "has evolved to one of permanent (sustainable) culture" (Holmgren 2011, xix) generally seen as in opposition to the "industrial culture" (Table 1.1).

Characteristic	Industrial culture	Sustainable culture
Energy base	Non-renewable	Renewable
Material flows	Linear	Cyclical
Natural assets	Consumption	Storage
Organization	Centralised	Distributed Network
Scale	Large	Small
Movement	Fast	Slow
Feedback	Positive	Negative
Focus	Centre	Edge
Activity	Episodic change	Rythmic stability
Thinking	Reductionist	Wholistic
Gender	Masculine	Feminine

Table 1.1 (Holmgren 2011, xxviii)

This is a culture that is seen as fosterer of natural over unnatural spaces, reproductive over productive, cyclical systems over linear ones (Soper 1995, 183-4). A culture that creates abundance of food with low energy use, and more output than input when talking about energy and resource use (Mollison 1990, 1; Soper 1995, 184). In fact "scarcity is a culturally mediated reality"(Holmgren 2011, 8), a narrative enforced to foster the paradigm of continuous growth in consumption and production (D'Alisa et al. 2015, 4-5). A point of view of industries where they specialise in a financial target and pursue it even with the risk of damaging others. This follows the "*fragmentary* nature of the judgements of economics" that are "necessarily and *methodologically* narrow." (ibid., 29, emphasis in original) What is good for an industry is not good for a nation (Schumacher 1993, 28-29) but what is good for a permaculture system is good for all.

Permaculture instead focuses on relations. It creates a network and continuous interactions between the parts to create a resilient and sustainable system that works for the equilibrium of all. Like the farmer that becomes aware of the wind due to being part of a "relational totality" (Gooch 1998, 306) any element in a permaculture system cannot be thought of as separate.

From this we move into the (hi)stories of places, movements and people in La Tabacca today.

La Tabacca – Today

La Tabacca is not connected with the energy and water grid. Its water supply comes from a local stream that satisfies the needs of most of the people living in the nearby hamlet of Ravin. According to historical divisions based on the amount of land possessed it is possible for the landowners to access a nearby stream to fill their own water deposit. For La Tabacca this applies every Friday from 8am to 8pm. Since the amount of water that they can have is more than what they can store (in seven 1000 l tanks) for the purpose of waste reduction they are going to build a pond in August 2016.

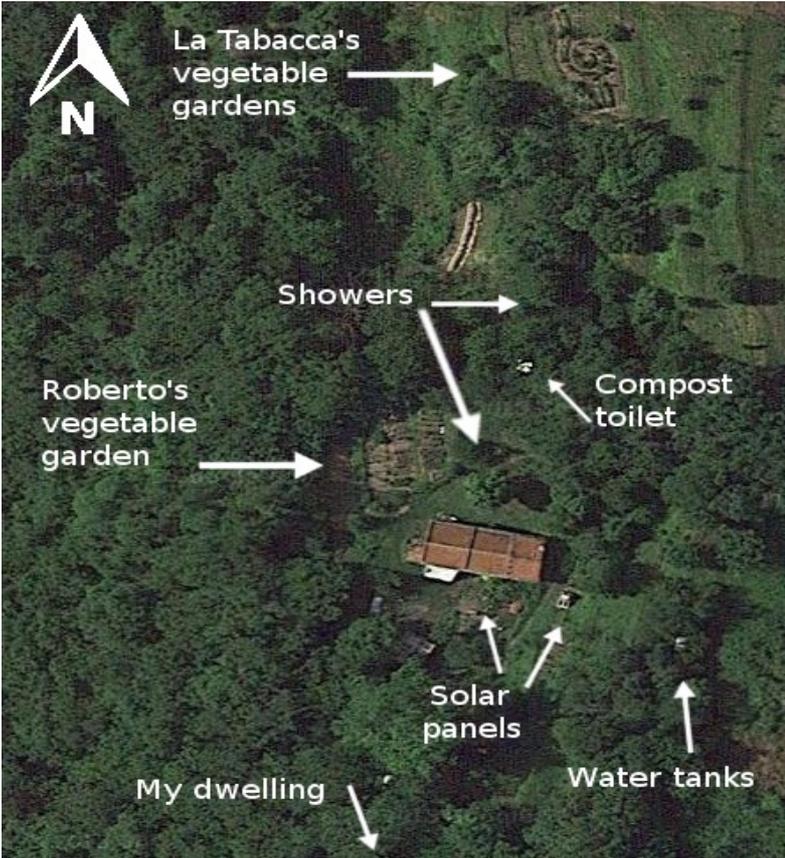


Figure 5: La Tabacca overview. Image credits: Google maps. Edited by Oscar Paganin

Energy comes from a solar panel, that charges car batteries that illumine up to seven bulbs and a USB connection used to charge phones: this happens only when the sun shines most of the day otherwise you ought to be careful with how you use electricity.

Someone could say that at times La Tabacca experiences scarcity. It happened a couple of times that we finished the water or that the batteries were dead. As consequences piles of dishes were occupying the sink and we had to use candles to see our meals. But, as Francesca reflected, on the other hand this allowed us to see "another world, made of

awareness [...] and small changes".

We saw shortages as opportunities to reflect on our lifestyle and needs. Scarcity became then "an artifact: of our money system, of our politics, and of our perceptions." (Eisenstein 2011, 24)

Living at La Tabacca is not all about alternatives. We also used gasoline for some tools, such as chainsaws and a motorised wheelbarrow, and it is used to power the cars that Giorgia and Francesca use to move around. During my internship I often discussed with different people about the implications that fossil fuels have in our lives and surrounding ecosystems. When I first arrived in La Tabacca I was eager to act and to prove myself as much as possible, so the first time I was handed a chainsaw I did not question its use of fossil fuels wanting to prove my abilities at all costs (literally all environmental and economic costs), but during the 3rd week I found myself alone in La Tabacca. It was after then that I started having a more critical view towards the place, resulting in me experimenting more with alternatives and trying to diminish the use of such fuel demanding tools: I cut wood with saw and axe, spending hours doing an apparently boring job that in reality allowed me to think since my movements became somehow habit; I transported logs on my back, furniture and groceries through the pathways making me understand my bodily limits and pain in muscles I had seldom used. I agree with Burkhart when she says that, "you cannot know how it is without a specific machine if you have never been without this machine." (Burkhart 2013, 37)

But still sometimes using fossil fuels felt like the only way.

The relation between the project and fossil fuels sounds more like a compromise. Hopefully the following example will clarify it.

As previously stated, part of the land on which La Tabacca is built is covered by an old chestnut forest, but since its abandonment it has lost productivity: the trees are old and most of them have pests (during my internship some trees gave again chestnuts after a lean period of ca. 5-10 years). Since Francesca and Giorgia don't own much land every part of it needs to be used and the low, or non-productive trees will be cut and used for construction purposes. Making this process happen with the use of solely hand tools would require expertise, lots of human labour, and time: at the moment they are not available, since no one knows how to cut a big tree with axes and saws, the two coordinators need to build the house as soon as possible if they want the land to produce more yield for their economic interests and they can save some time since there is the possibility to get the work done with funds by the European Union. In this way they accept the use of non renewable resources for the purpose of creating a sustainable long lasting system, where possibly trees won't let to become too big before they are cut or they are left to die of old age. In their case "the end

justifies the means". I personally believe that there are alternatives but they are limited by external social factors that I will explore later (see section Economic Needs).

The house has been recently connected to the internet (in November 2015) with an antenna thus it has no phone cable connection. My way of connecting with "the outside" was only through a very weak mobile network signal. But as said, lacking something can also show other possibilities, or make you reconsider the importance of some aspects of your life.

There is a compost toilet and 3 outdoor showers, one of which uses a solar panel to warm up the water with daily sunlight. Showering in the summer was fine and actually a new and amusing experience (nudity in open spaces) but as days got shorter and temperatures started to drop the whole washing process was not a fun experience any more. Hence me and another WWOOFer partially covered the shower that is connected to the solar panel with a structure made of poles and old greenhouse windows. This made showering acceptable, but not in all senses, thus making me wanting to shower only during very sunny days, or even not showering at all during the last nine days in La Tabacca.

Clothes are washed manually and a bicycle washing machine is planned to be built with an old machine in the spring 2016.

Apart from the 2 coordinators which live there most of the time (they still own an apartment in Genova Voltri) the house is frequented by friends that help every now and then, specially when some work days are planned. They have started hosting interns, like me, and people connected to the wwoofing network since June 2015. If Giorgia is the one that manages the contacts and brings people there Francesca is the one that manages and plans the work that has to be done.

Generally the work at La Tabacca "is tied to seasonal factors such as rainfall, day length, and temperature and to the cycles of reproduction, growth, and maturity in plants [, hence] labor is not normally applied in fixed, standard amounts, and neither can work be increased by the simple expedient of lengthening every working day." (Netting 1993, 118)

I remember days under the sun, back bent, sweat dripping on the ground that would be easily followed by a rainy day, indoors, reading at the pale light of a candle. You do what you can do and accept what you cannot do.

Most of the vegetables are grown in raised beds placed in different terraces. The rest of the food is bought in an Ethical shop in Genova called 'Manifattura Etica'¹⁰, or in super markets, on a weekly basis. They also make use of wild edible plants and are planning to be able to sell products to the local market and the above-mentioned ethical shop. This precludes from

10 <http://www.manifatturaetica.it/> (accessed May 21st 2016)

the category of self-sufficient community for the “their desire for goods and services they cannot produce at home necessarily involve them in important external relationships.” (Netting 1993, 15)

The fact that there is a need for external resources does not undermine a strong point for the organic farming movement. Although very subtle and usually understudied, or at least under showed, it has been demonstrated that small organic farms produce significantly more than industrial farms (Bramwell 1989, 66), especially when considering *productivity* per hectare and not per hour of labour (Eisenstein 2011, 26; Netting 1993, 146-156). The agricultural methods employed at La Tabacca make it possible to obtain high yields from relatively small parts of land and in a sustainable way, in the sense that it could be done for many years without compromising the productivity of the place and making their lives resilient by having a “pooling of income from many resources, periodic cooperation to perform farm tasks” and protecting themselves “against risk that comes from a diversified economy” (Netting 1993, 16).

The disregard of this argument can happen also because of a general tendency to think “that if some is good, more must be better” (Holmgren 2011, 17) or “the bigger the better” (Schumacher 1993, 47). We are “brought up on the theory of the 'economics of scale' – that with industries and firms, just as with nations, there is an irresistible trend, dictated by modern technology, for units to become ever bigger.” (Ibid., 48) and this obscures the fact that small farm could be a sustainable solution. The message does not pass through because projects such as La Tabacca have little visibility and a little impact on our globalised everyday life and cannot call into question the “reigning hegemonic ideal of large-scale, energy-expensive, mechanized, specialized, scientific, capital-intensive, labour-saving agriculture enshrined by the West” (Netting 1993, 9). Also big companies tend to generally be a collection of small enterprises that just give us the 'feeling' of being big (Schumacher 1993, 48).

For a more thorough analysis of “the dynamics of smallholder social and economic systems” in comparison with big industrial farms see Netting's 'Smallholders, Householders' (1993, 145).

Although plenty more details, particular practices, observations and examples would create a fuller picture of the place I now must switch to another subject due to certain thesis limits.

Plan your Planting

Some of the above mentioned solutions are temporary and experimental but they are all part of a vision for the longer run. There is an old house to be restored and not everything can be improvised. Only if you observe something from different angles can you possibly achieve a better understanding of what the observed is.

This is why, after a couple of months into my fieldwork, when I started feeling more confident in openly sharing my point of view, Giorgia and Francesca gladly accepted my thoughts that “traditional agriculture” is “labour intensive, industrial agriculture is energy intensive, and permaculture-designed systems are information and design intensive.” (Holmgren 2011, 13) As Francesca, the current architect following the design of La Tabacca, said to me, multiple inputs, “awareness and participation” are keys for a planning process. “If the involvement is not active, then the project slides towards a traditional [architectural] project, [...] the house is a party that lasts forever”¹¹.



Figure 6: La Tabacca - main prospect by Francesca Gagliardi

For this and the above reasons permaculture means a lot of *planning* and this is one of the main tasks that I also participated in. We spent days only to walk around to imagine and plan what we could do in the future. What could we do here? How could we use this? How to preserve this peculiar feature?

The planning process of course involves conventional specialists like architects and geologists. Their expertise is not only welcomed but is also necessary for the paper work that needs to be formalised. However sometimes the official way is not the best, not the one that fits the common sense. That is why La Tabacca needs to stand for those common sense solutions and push the local politics to change its position on what is good or not for environmental reasons.

Moreover the specialists, Giorgia and Francesca find also support in a group of teachers of the Italian permaculture academy and friends in general whose input is much valuable for the two coordinators and that eventually point out unfamiliar methods and practices.

¹¹ Francesca Gagliardi, interview by author through email correspondence, March 9, 2016.



Figure 7: Planning moment after "observational stroll". Photo credits: Giorgia Bocca

Rational thinking

Inspiration at La Tabacca can come then from those cultures and habits generally seen as irrational and primitive. Several times we engaged in the practice of connecting to nature and its spirits: in the beginning I was joining but also very sceptical of these unconventional practices. I only thought later, through the readings of Ingold, that this was a way to understand La Tabacca not as an assemble of elements but as a whole process. So spirits are not human-like presences but the imagined representation of the process of change, of "dissolution or [...] regeneration" (Ingold 2011, 29) that characterises an alive and ever-changing environment. It was also a way to disengage the general rationalism that pervades us and that is actually a cult in itself (Plumwood 2002, 4).

However, when understanding the guidelines of the daily activities done at La Tabacca and in the many places that apply the methods underpinned by the labels of permacultural, organic, sinergic and natural farming, we do not see an impractical way of thinking that cannot be applied "within the prevailing social, market and policy environment" (Holmgren 2011, xxii). What happens is that the goals and the stakes taken under consideration are different from what is now considered as "normal", usual. Hence the "choices [made at La Tabacca] of allocating time and effort, tools, land, and capital to specific uses, in a context

of changing climate, resource availability, and markets must be made daily, and these economic decisions are intelligible in rational, utilitarian terms" (Netting 1993, 2). Nevertheless this cannot be qualified as classical utilitarianism, where the individual is thought to be inherently selfish. Their utilitarianism can thusly be defined anti-utilitarian (Caillé 1989, 13 quoted in Romano 2015, 22) because the rationality and the utility of actions is thought not for the individual but for the smallholding, the family farm, the community project.

As Plumwood clearly explained what the rational culture is bringing forth is not inherently rational, it is in fact "irrational, in the sense that it is maladapted to the environment it depends on" (Plumwood 2002, 18). Like Netting I share Wilk's hypothesis "that agrarian social formations [...] are constituted partially as work groups that motivate and apply the proper combination of labor, knowledge, and leadership to each task in an efficient (if not the most efficient) fashion" (Wilk 1991, 85 quoted in Netting 1993, 61).

I have done no quantitative evaluation study on the main aims of La Tabacca where I can offer a quantitative explanation that living there is this much better or much worst in terms of material and energetic sustainability, especially because La Tabacca is not a blueprint for sustainability and because in their daily lives "individuals can and assuredly do make economic decisions about market exchanges, stored food, and labour expenditures, [...] without book-keeping and exact calculations" (Netting 1993, 5).

Also La Tabacca was not an established conventional farm and is undergoing a process of transformation, it starts from zero. The only comparable fact is the consumption of the two coordinators before and after they started living there. So although there no is palpable data there are subtle explanations for several of those objectives – as seen in section Aims and Objectives – that the project has stated to aim for.

The water consumption has generally increased, following variable seasonal patterns, for the reason that now they have a garden to water, however the need for it is satisfied through the recycling of grey waters and the storage of it in the seven 1000l tanks and further storage locations (lakes and ponds). So counting the fact that now they are producing most of their food reducing the water over-usage that usually affects traditional farming, water consumption could be seen as lower (Dries 2002).

Energy self-sufficiency is a work in progress. They now feed on one solar panel and they plan to have about four in the renewed house but there are more conventional energy needs that are definitely not self sufficient, such as gasoline. Regarding this they still depend on international trading and they will for some years more, until further lifestyle or technological changes do not happen.

Food self-sufficiency now includes the majority of vegetables and wild edibles plants, and considering their diets it is consistent part of it. If local product exchanges and gifts are to be included, self-sufficiency is higher but is still not achieved. Plus considering the understanding that they have of their future total self-sufficiency is not going to be reached because of the need for products that cannot be found locally because they require the existence of complex infrastructures for their processing.

Phytotherapy, activating useful social processes and creating spaces for events and workshops proposed by the association Terra! are already happening and are an important part of the societal and individual process of change that is so important for La Tabacca.

Following here a deeper insight into this transformation.

The Transition

In the beginning of September 2015 I joined Giorgia and Francesca, who left a week earlier, in Bolsena where the Italian Festival of Permaculture was held. Narrow cobblestone streets, arks with old crafts plates on the brick walls, an ancient medieval castle on a top hill overseeing the beautiful homonym volcanic lake, it was for sure a perfect location where teachers, practitioners and just curious people had the possibility to share, try and learn the small, slow, alternative and old arts of living.

Personally I was more prone to follow workshops and seminars that were aimed towards more manual activities. The two hours I spent under the sun, learning and sharing knowledge about bread making in the middle of the old medieval town square was definitely a treat I cannot easily forget.

However it was almost impossible to bypass the fact that many of the initiatives aimed towards the self. Emotion explorations, body exercises, relationship analyses and yoga workshops were some of the topics presented in the festival's flyer¹².

This is not only a personal impression. An important point in the Italian permaculture movement is the understanding of the "Zone 00", which is the self.

The basic concept is that within the planning, interaction and observation with the environment there need to be a self-analysis for the zone 00. In the planning process permaculture teaches the importance of zone division of a territory as "a primary energy-conserving placement pattern for the whole system" (Mollison 2002, 49). The higher the number the less we ought to work and concentrate our focuses and energies on the elements present in such zone. Thus zone 00, as the closest and the central part of a site, is

12 http://media.wix.com/ugd/9564d9_561023649f5e49948ffd61771c5a9939.pdf (accessed on April 25th 2016)

the first to be worked on. This is a major difference and a point of discussion between the classical English school of thought and the Italian one. On one side the Angles are more fixated on practice and methodology, Italians are putting more emphasis on philosophy and personal building to forge a community.

During an interview one of the coordinators explained how this personal transition could be faced in few steps. The first one involves a deconstruction of the self.

“It depends on the luggage you start this journey, this beginning of transition [...] it depends on your sectorial characteristics, what adaptation characteristics you have, what are your problematics, what do you leave, what do you elaborate, how do you elaborate the legacy for a new road”¹³.

The deconstruction of habits and ways of thinking can be done through practical activities and the sharing of experiences. The cultural transformation is then not done solely through the same objective processes that created this sado-dispassionate society (Plumwood 2002, 42), but through the attempts to include alternative approaches that wouldn't be traditionally considered rational.

After the deconstruction of the self, continues Giorgia, comes the step “of adaptation to these different elements, to another lifestyle”. After this step you have to make a choice. “When you start to say 'no, I choose this instead of that' and this thing makes me feel good it means that is being consolidated”.

Beyond these steps there are important factors that can guide and support the transition. Studying and researching are important because they can help to be “inserted in a more general vision” of systems, ecosystems and politics where “you can really feel part of a movement”.

Another one is sharing. “These types of paths cannot be crossed alone otherwise you risk [the transition] to become unsuccessful because it became sad, and also because it is enriching and it is part of this process of change”.

Therefore living in La Tabacca changes perspectives.

Coming back to La Tabacca on one particular day (my birthday), we had to stop by a supermarket to buy groceries, and walking down the aisles me and Francesca found ourselves fascinated by the quantity of products and colours, realising how silly, wasteful that lifestyle can be and how “we do not need any of that anymore”. As explained by Burkhart from her experience in the degrowth movement, it was the different ways of doing that “made [us] question the before normal” (2013, 23). I learned to appreciate actions of

13 Giorgia and Francesca, interview by author, La Tabacca, Genova, Italy. November 28, 2015

voluntary simplicity, reimagining what is good and bad, what I need and what is too much. There is no societal change if there is no personal and community development. A personal transformation that can precede a cultural transition (Alexander 2015, 135).

What somehow is a shareable element of the lives that passed through La Tabacca is a search or the understanding that a Transition is needed, either in their personal life or in society. La Tabacca is a place to try, to act, and to create change. Or as Giorgia puts it, a place to "learn how to live in an ecological way, to give the means to people allowing them to make a change, [...] to inspire others," a place "to experiment a more ecologically correct life and see if it is possible".

The work at La Tabacca follows an *imaginary*, a vision for the place and what it could become. The strength of this imaginary, according to the coordinators, is its realism, it is not wildly disconnected from the possibilities they see within the place and the work they can put into it. As Giorgia said "what we are imagining is always actualising itself, not because of some powers we have but, I think, because we are imagining things that for us are sustainable".

Thus, making an imaginary more feasible is making it more connected to the environment, including the subjects who are imagining this reality.

Among degrowth academics Serge Latouche, following Cornélius Castoriadis, highlights the importance of a "decolonization of the imaginary" (Latouche 2015, 117-119). The imaginary of La Tabacca is definitely challenging those regarded as unsustainable that guide the majority of us Westerners, and slowly more and more people everywhere. Luckily there are places and occasions that open up to alternatives. As when I mentioned that the perception of scarcity can be an opportunity to reconsider a situation, the different, abnormal, and alternative ways of living that La Tabacca puts you in can be a push for the creation of "profound changes in the psychological structure" (Castoriadis 2010, 199 quoted in Latouche 2015, 118). Hence changes in the modes of perception and understanding.

The following personal story, even if flawed by low repeatability and validity (Davies 2008, 84-86), can give an insight to the ways living in a place can make this change happen.

A couple of weeks into my internship, when the first wave of excitement dropped to give space for new habits and a new comfort zone to establish itself, I started finding myself in a recurrent situation: very realistic images would fill my mind. Often I panicked finding myself lying in the underwoods, outside of the yurt, my dwelling, were I fell asleep. Slimy slugs and arachnids creeping beside me that would not be frightened by any of my movements. On the contrary I was the scared one, sitting on the bed sweating I would slowly exit this realm in

order to understand that I was still in the bed looking at these invisible creatures, projections of my imagination and fuelled by a feeling of not being at home. This happened for several nights, especially when I was alone for a couple of weeks before joining Francesca and Giorgia at the Permaculture festival.

This discomfiture was not only the result of an irrational fear of the unknown, some events were very concrete. On one particular night of moon eclipse I woke up to relieve myself. Out of the yurt I turned towards the left, away from La Tabacca and more deep into the woods. I switched the flashlight when suddenly a heavy trotting followed by a couple of snorts revealed to me the presence of the protagonist of many scary stories I heard. My body hair raised and in two seconds I was urinating on the other side of the yurt with my left leg shaking, telling me to finish as quick as possible.

I could not feel more out of place. However I endured myself to bear it and as I discovered more about the surroundings, as I learned to memorise the place at night, as I understood who made a certain sound, I slowly stopped sensing this 'out of place' feelings. By the end I was even searching for those conditions that made me feel uncomfortable at the beginning: being alone and silent, trying to listen and feel the surroundings. I even had a second encounter with a wild boar. Same situation but I surprised myself by being calm and keep on doing what I needed to do.

All of the above happened during the night time. The lack of knowledge of the place and the visual clues that were hidden to me showed me "how visually dominated modern people are, raised in a literate and now graphical world" (Holmgren 2011, 16).

This variation through time mirrors my approach to the fieldwork. At first my mind-set tried to imitate that of a traditional anthropologists, with the use of participant observation to gather data and knowledge about the place and the people. During my staying following the four roles division by Gold (1958) I felt my approach to the field changed from a more observed-as-participant at the beginning to slowly acting as a full participant by the end. If at the beginning I was more waiting to receive instructions about what to do, by the end I found myself very engaged in being part of the planning of the place, familiarising with flora and fauna, and also feeling more accepted than at the beginning. As one of the coordinators said: "after three months and a half I identify you here, you are here... you're a piece (of it)"¹⁴.

Following this change of perspectives, as in the experiences in Burkhart's work, the aftermath of coming back from the lifestyle at La Tabacca meant an over critical approach to the normality of daily actions in which, as the voluntary workers at Can Decreix (Burkhart 2013, 19-

14 Giorgia and Francesca, interview by author, La Tabacca, Genova, Italy. November 28, 2015

33), I felt bound to. I also changed habits, like not eating fridge products, or even not flushing the toilet (which I quickly readapted after family members' angry comments).

Also in the writing process of this work I had to doubt myself, the hypocrisy in which I was living. Preaching for a vision of life that is more embedded, subjective, and extensive with the tools of objectification, reductionism and analysis that writing about a "real" experience can offer. Probably due to how the higher education "is based on knowledge from secondary sources interpreted through existing frameworks of understanding. Academic training that requires that every idea and concept be referenced to refereed published sources is the extremity of this approach to learning" (Holmgren 2011, 21).

Nevertheless, embeddedness is not empty of flaws. As Holmgren notes, it can create isolation and a tendency towards conservatism (2011, 21). This can be avoided in a system that for the coordinators is "permeable" by necessity: there is a need for external resources and a desire to include as many outsiders as possible.

Individuals making the place

As said, La Tabacca is the continuous rendering of the imaginary of the people that take part in it. And in this sense it shows also how dynamic it can be, full of contradictions and under a continuous process of adaptation. For example the two coordinators, on whose input the imaginary and the future of the project is mostly based, have two different approaches towards conventional society. One enjoys more a solitude perspective towards society and a more connected state with what is considered to be 'nature' (in a very objectifying and traditional sense). Once she told me how lucky she feels about the positioning of La Tabacca: a beautiful view of the mountains with little or no human trace, and Genoa at the back, hidden by a hill covered by the woods. The other aims more towards the socialising aspect of the place, constantly involved in the gathering of people and the creation of possibilities for La Tabacca to be part and be the (small) change in the unsustainable society it lives in.

Sometimes these differences can help and can avoid being an obstacle to each other. Other times a different view of facts can create discrepancies. During one of the community lunches with friends and visitors, a time to rest but also bond and confront your thoughts with others, it happened that the conversation drifted towards climate change. Now, my preconception was that those who were involved in the project, mostly self-defined environmentalists, would generally agree with the provability of climate change as a fact. I was wrong.

The frustration and the surprise left me a little bit shocked, making me unconsciously angry and not being able to even clarify basic concepts that I learnt during my studies. I talked

about this contradiction in the following weeks with the coordinators. I also managed to clarify a little with those I was disagreeing with but I finally made my mind about it much later, when my fieldwork was already done. What I faced was an occurrence explained by Anna Bramwell: that environmentalisms, and thus environmentalists, share a primary understanding of the problem of disconnection between people and the environment, but they express many different approaches and solutions to this issue (1989, 237). Same diagnosis, different prognosis.

However La Tabacca is not only dependable on environmental characteristics and the human response towards them.

Ciobi and Nuvola are, respectively, Giorgia's and Francesca's dogs. Bossy and small the first one, bigger and shy the second, they also dictate the daily procedures and activities through their needs and their participation to the daily life they are part of La Tabacca. Anthropocentric hierarchies still apply but to a certain limit. Giorgia's and Francesca's sensibility towards the animal kingdom puts Ciobi and Nuvola on a higher step. Ciobi for example has the habit to hide under the table during meals, quite a common behaviour in dogs, but he also hates moving feet, which makes it quite a challenge to relax if you are not familiar with him. When I first arrived I felt troubled by the power that such a small dog could have over my mobility, only later I could adjust my behaviour to have a relaxing and fearless meal, both for me and Ciobi. More than pets they are part of the family and they contribute in the life at La Tabacca.

If within the project there are a variety of existing relationships, for a project that works on a small scale, the neighbourhood has an important effect on it. Thus to unveil these relationship with the surroundings I made three group interviews with the families that were the most involved with the project and who live in Ravin, or close by. Other four families live in the same neighborhood but their contact with La Tabacca is sporadic and controversial. A deeper insight on this will be discussed later.

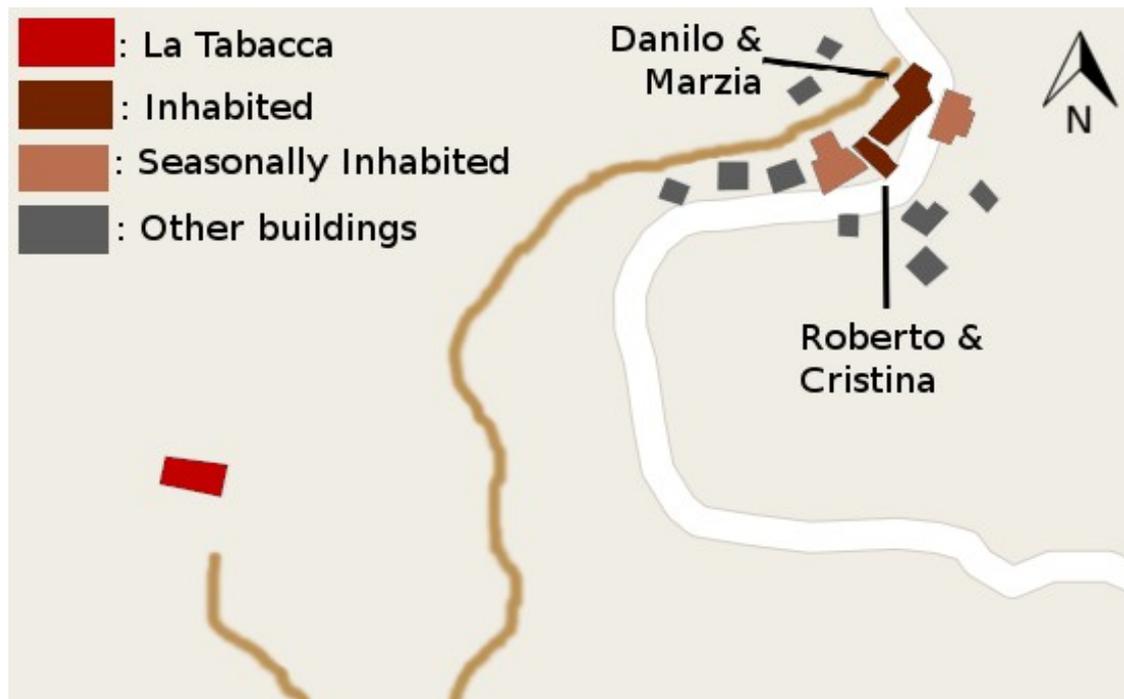


Figure 8: Ravin and La Tabacca. Image credit: Google Maps, edited by author

The interviews have been semi-structured where I would have few questions to follow but I tried to make the experience seem as much as possible to a normal evening talk, or a quick chat in a bar. This can be seen by listening to the recorded files where there are gaps, most sentences are not fully outspoken and there are plenty of subtle and implied messages, making it hard for me to present it in an academically acceptable form but also it allowed the conversation to flow and bring as many arguments as I could to the surface (Bryman 2012, 470). Emotions too and openness to the interview were triggered as the talk became more fluid. During the interviews my personal behaviour and tendency to be talkative have possibly blocked or covered important bits of the conversation. Sometimes the different ways of speaking influenced the flow of the conversation. Having for example a slower talker and a quicker one created an intertwinement of phrases where one person's speech would be often supplemented by many sentences by the fastest one. Sometimes it happened that I, or someone else, tried to wrongly complete or finish a sentence, corrupting the original thought of the speaker. Other times, especially during "monologues", the speech clearly showed how the thoughts were much faster than the tongue, resulting in continuous drifts from the original topic. Quoted sentences in the next section come from those interviews.

Considering all of the above following here are some important aspects of La Tabacca's closest inhabitants.

The Neighbours

I occasionally joined the neighbours in various activities, dinner, hikes and events. It was a good way to satisfy my social needs and to get to know those who were having the most contact with the project.

Doing it was not a field-work, it was more a pleasuring way to do my job. I once went on a hike through the nearby natural park with Roberto. He is the one that is working in La Tabacca's house garden and that pointed out the house to Francesca and Giorgia, as I mentioned in the beginning (Section La Tabacca – History). Throughout his youth he has longed for the country life, having a peculiar interest in the antiquity of a place and the old ways of living. I admired how he tirelessly kept on cutting his firewood with axe and saw. He has a great knowledge of the people of the Neolithic era, almost as if this longing for a connection to nature could pass through the knowledge of ancient people that were once connected to the environment in a more direct



Figure 9: Hiking with Roberto. Photo credits: author

way. For example, "Celts and Saxons had long lived as the under-dogs of European history, both seen as in possession of natural harmony" (Bramwell 1989, 97). I often enjoyed his antagonism to the conventional society. The way of being a back-to-the-lander is, for both him and his wife Cristina, an escape from a city life that, as she states, "was depressing me"¹⁵, an opposition to a system of control over one's life.

Annachiara and Paolo are another couple that lives 10 minutes walking distance from Ravin. He moved to the "countryside to fulfil a dream"¹⁶, to move away from the city where, he says, "I was living a reality that was detached. [...] I found this place and when I saw the view... [In the city] I was in the classical paradise: a minute from the centre, a quiet place but always surrounded by buildings and by traffic jams. [...] The landscape brought me here. I need, like

¹⁵ Roberto and Cristina, interview by author, Ravin, Genova, Italy, November 11, 2015.

¹⁶ Annachiara and Paolo, interview by author, Ravin, Genova, Italy, November 23, 2015.

many others, wide perspectives." Annachiara moved there to join him. At first she thought, "how is this [life] possible?" but slowly she found her motif in the micro-community that was growing around Ravin and La Tabacca. Thus if Paolo looks for a place to be away from the chaos of the city, she searches for stronger social bonds that the small community can offer.

They are slowly discovering, from being in touch with the degrowth movement and sustainable agriculture activities, new ways of living. Among the neighbours they are perhaps the ones that made the most changes in their lifestyle. They are getting involved in self production, Paolo has recently started to work from home and is getting involved in agricultural activities, Anna has taken interest in home schooling and that night when I had dinner and then I interviewed them we all watched a very inspiring documentary called "Unlearning", where a couple travels through Italy to experience different teaching methods. They in fact have Matteo, a four years old energetic fellow that delighted me every time I visited them. They met La Tabacca through Paolo's daughter Giulia who joined one of the campings organised there.

Danilo and Marzia are the first of the back-to-the-landers group. He moved to Ravin in 2001 for "a choice of lifestyle"¹⁷, a passion for the countryside that was transmitted to him by his partisan father.

"I mainly like living outdoors and I see the house more like a shelter. [...] Living outside is for me the equivalent of the living room, even in the winter I cover myself [and] I go outside. [...] Here there is this relationship, you go out and see, see nature."

Marzia moved in 2 years ago with the dream of opening a farmhouse that is still brewing inside of her.

They are still bound to their jobs, like Roberto and Cristina, but they are slowly planning a stronger collaboration with La Tabacca. They want to "do something here. See what happens", especially seeing what their young children will be up to in the following years. A shared thought with Francesca and Giorgia who can imagine this next generation to become the possible future of their work.

Also for them getting to know La Tabacca was done through the children. Danilo's daughter met Giorgia and Francesca out of curiosity.

United by their kids' interests, by the back-to-the-land ideas, by an opposition towards business-as-usual they are part of the network on which La Tabacca is developing. However its development is not a smooth and painless process.

The house was given to Giorgia and Francesca as a gift.

¹⁷ Danilo and Marzia, interview by author, Ravin, Genova, Italy, November 25, 2015.

Since the project is not only about self-sufficiency and is about sharing and connecting, they started immediately bringing people and friends to clear the land and renovated what was once abandoned. They organized workdays with dinners for 20 to 30 people: it was a way to find help, enjoy the experience and work outside the monetary economy, which can have different advantages (Netting 1993, 72-80). Friends and acquaintances would arrive from different parts of Italy and with different backgrounds. Once Danilo appreciated the arrival of a Volkswagen T2, from which came out people with long hair and beards, "baggy pants and blouses". They threw him back 30 years.

However, if some of the neighbours were openly willing to engage with the project of La Tabacca, like Danilo and his nostalgic view upon the arrival of volunteers, others expressed contrariness.

The arrival of so many visitors of different attitudes, generally considered as hippies, worked as a cultural shock to the old inhabitants of Ravin. The dinners for some 30 people and alternative agricultural themed camping were off the usual happening. Contrasts started to arise.

Firstly the old inhabitants started to ask to Roberto and Cristina, those who suggested to them to move to La Tabacca: "why are they here? What are they doing in our woods?" If on their arrival they felt welcomed, having dinners together with their kid, "when we brought here the girls, Francesca and Giorgia, they made us feel bad [about being welcomed], and they told me 'we've welcomed you here like you were family and you did this to us?'".

Roberto says it is a problem of "attitude, of conformism". Theirs is a closed mind that when confronted with difference reacts with suspiciousness and doubt.

Danilo was also questioned at the arrival of the volunteers: "who are they? What do they do? What do they bring?" For Marzia it is a matter of intelligence that is required if you want to understand what is different from you. For Danilo is a matter of vision. "Before the nucleus was closed here, the world was Ravin".

But the mistake was done. "Knowing that this is a village of very few people [...] if you arrive [here] with 5-6 people you're not noticeable, but if you bring 40-50 ... this scared them a bit, it is a legitimate fear", thinks Roberto.

Now one of the biggest works for Francesca and Giorgia is to rebuild these broken relationships.

This is a major issue when talking about inserting in a context an eco-community that could rely on local social and material exchanges.

So what created this friction? Was it difference? Difference in the way of approaching something or someone? Difference in the attitude and the knowledge? Difference in the ethics and morals? I do believe this is the case.

There is an underlying narrative that they bring forth. A discourse, in its Foucaultian sense (Foucault 2002), that opposes normality and righteousness with abnormality and the wrongness.

With discourse, moreover texts and speeches, I mean "facial expression, gesture, bodily activities" (Malinowski 1966, 22), but also omissions and avoidance. Especially if regarding a case of opposition what is not done or said can be of even greater value.

To expose these particularities I applied ethnographic discourse analysis during and after my fieldwork for the reason that seems "appropriate when it is not only textual patterns but also their relationship with cultural constraints that are of interest" (Titscher et al. 2007, 98). As I said I draw my conclusions from interviews with the neighbours and the "capacity for participant observation and the capability for reflecting upon it" (ibid., 90).

This possibly allows me to reach "complete explanations of meanings and behaviour, which are embedded in a broad structure of values, actions and norms (Schriffin 1994, 140).

The results here exhibited come from a comparison between the commonalities or peculiarities of the interviewees in the intent of exposing the different discourses between those in contact with La Tabacca and the autochthonous. I did not interview those neighbours that were not in direct contact with the project. My first idea was not to identify two clashing visions thus the opposing discourse derives from descriptions, comments and concepts from the interviews I had with the above mentioned families and Giorgia and Francesca, plus data that I gathered from my personal experience and the multiple sharing moments I had during my fieldwork.

I understand the lack of veracity that I could encounter but as "the discourse forms a version of" the object/subject, any perception and narrative existing around it shapes the behaviours and attitudes towards it (Bryman 2012, 528).

What two discourses can be found then?

To delineate them I grouped the different ways of describing La Tabacca.

On one side there is a description from those within. The two coordinators see it as an open, harmonic, ecological, and sustainable system. A place that exalts and tries difference, which is independent from unknown expedients and that connects to nature and its cycles. A process that destructures and changes. A way to become conscious of the surroundings and

aware of limits. At the same time those neighbours that cooperate with the project see it as a beautiful happening, an innovation, an opportunity from what is normal. A friendly and sharing creation that can eventually bring good to the community.

On the other hand stands the perception of those who have not yet engaged with La Tabacca but that have only scratched the surface. The project then becomes "the Other". It is different from the usual, it brings change into a traditional life, it destabilizes a long established equilibrium of principles and morals.

Words as "scary, dangerous, hippie, addicts, masked criminals" have been used to refer the people involved in the project.

As seen above in the hostility expressed not only towards the volunteers but also towards those who were already living in Ravin words are not just assemblies of letters: they imply that an individual may act according to what his/her discourses suggests as being right. "Discourse [...] is itself part of reality, and constitutes the discoursing subject" (Hajer 1995, 51). Hence it results in practices that make up "the rules and conventions that constitute the social order" that is reproduced through speech situations (ibid., 55). The wording with which the neighbor's perception is constituted is brought forth by a traditional culture, where a "historical rationalist imaginary" prevails (Plumwood 2002, 19). A culture where conventional land management, social structure conservation, anthropocentrism and patriarchy constitute the status quo, when any alternative is dismissed as "inferior" (ibid.), or wrong.

As an open system that aims to work from the local level La Tabacca can encounter limitations due to the clash of discourses that are extrapolated from it.

For example on their arrival they asked to one of the neighbors to show where the farm's borders where. Both Danilo and Francesca have found it surprising how "people could argue about two centimetres. [...] 'Here it's mine. Here we don't touch borders' they say in Genova".

Or as well, we used to go to Genova once every one or two weeks. It was necessary to buy groceries but it was also an excuse to socialise and have a positive confrontation with the "outside". And it could happen, while driving through that narrow road that leads to Ravin, that we met one of the neighbors. Our instant reaction: open smile and waving hands; but in return: a mere grin and a disapproval look.

If the first example can be a limit when we talk about material, work and knowledge sharing, the second is rather a psychological punch to the emotional guts.

However the most dreadful practical consequence of how the traditional discourse is influencing their lives is how their relationship is perceived and judged.

Francesca and Giorgia are a couple. I became aware of it only when Giorgia openly talked about how she fell in love with Francesca. Otherwise they never express clues of affection that surpass those of friendship. This is not exclusive of those neighbours that act in a hostile way. There is a whole fog around the clarity of this, even among their own family members. In any case living together at La Tabacca is also a way to normalize what was before "abnormal".

More data should be collected around this issue but unfortunately this is not going to be the occasion; I leave this topic aside both for lack of time and space, and because of possible ethical problems that might arise around such delicate topic as Madison exemplifies in detailed ways (2012, 139-142).

How they deal with this opposing practices?

How can they manage to reconnect with those hostile neighbours? How can they fit in a culturally and ideologically different society?

Sometimes hosting events can work. For instance they have already hosted a workshop on how to make soap. It is just soap, it does not mean that a change in a person's perspective will happen, "but the soap workshop means self production, it means a bigger concept that starts to create small cracks in a wall of resistance", says Giorgia. This works for those who already have some similarities.

Other times you need to know the culture to be able to approach someone.

You need to be able to use similar terms and behaviours. If they insisted "on their own mode of expression", "they run the risk of losing their direct influence [...] even if they do try to challenge the dominant story-line, people are expected to position their contributions in terms of known categories" (Hajer 1995, 57). Their project risks to "become aligned, at whatever level, to the grammar entailed" by dominant patterns in society (Ploeg 2008, 4).

Sometimes we went to the Vesima gardens for some heavy work in November 2015. It was generally me, Francesca and maybe a WWOOFer. On addition we would get visits from Gigi, an older man with an 'I know it all' attitude. For Francesca, a woman, trying to teach him, an older man, the basics about synergistic agriculture would not work. There was a need to overcome that "masculine bias [that] favors the "modern, scientific, rational, global, and the high-tech over the traditional, small scale, and the low-tech" (Curtin 1999, 80). But sometimes the traditional agricultural methods and the synergistic ones overlapped, and in those moments it was possible to play along the lines of the traditional discourse. We could ask him for help that we genuinely needed, and be able to use these grey area to introduce him to alternative ways of gardening. It was all about applying the traditional respect for the older

and at the same time sharing something new.

Hence being accepted somewhere does not mean an extreme adaptation to whatever are the surrounding conditions but find a middle ground, meet “the Other” and from there try to guide it into a new realm that might favour both entities and society in general. It means challenging the discourse in a “non/violent” way, avoiding the risk of “recreate the old order in a different, distorted form” (Eisenstein 2011, 60). Like for permaculture theorists what is praised is a positive approach to problem solving, where we see “what we want to do and can do, rather than what we oppose and want others to change” (Holmgren 2011, xv). In this sense the activism of La Tabacca detaches itself from the ordinary fight-against techniques of ‘sabotage activism’ to find a try-alternatives perspective.

So far we’ve seen agricultural practices, perception changes, and social relations with the nearby community. Next, one more important topic that was touched almost all throughout the period of my fieldwork.

Economic Needs

‘Time is money. Time is life, therefore money is life’.

Although the above is not a quote and it is just my personal expansion of a common saying, this syllogism does not go too far from what is happening inside and outside of Italy, where “to say that our economic future is being determined by the economics would be an exaggeration; but that their influence or in any case the influence of economics, is far-reaching can hardly be doubted” (Schumacher 1993, 26).

We need to consider that “nowadays, many aspects of rural life are subjected to highly detailed regulatory schemes. These sets of generalized rules are often at odds with the diversified and dynamic nature of agriculture – and several other economic activities in the countryside – and they therefore result in various kinds of friction.” (Ploeg 2008, 179)

As I have shown you La Tabacca is not a long established ecologically sustainable system. It aims at becoming one. To be able to achieve so they need to renovate, plan and build, plant and clear a location to make a place liveable. This requires resources and time. If resources can be found locally, exchanged or recycled, time still plays an important role in the formation of the project.

For long me and the two coordinators have discussed the two possible alternatives with which we could approach the work necessary to make the project happen.

They could buy, make, build, fix, maintain and do in general everything on their own, with the help of friends and family through the many years that will take to do it; or they could get the

support of a wide political and economic structure that offers them help and resources (money), possibly arising “from state-driven programmes for ‘modernization’ of agriculture” (Ploeg 2008, 1), to achieve their objectives. The variable is time. The first approach requires more of it, the second helps to overstep this requirement.

Just an example to picture the situation. La Tabacca stands on a spit of land, mainly clay, that is the result of an old landslide. The landform has been resting in place for years, to the extent that a house was built on it. Clay soil can be a very solid base until water starts to infiltrate. This is a process that has already started and once it happens the spit of land is not as safe as it could be. The results are already visible: the western wall is slowly lowering and tilting away from the whole structure. Going back to the two possible approaches, one can slowly try to fix the wall with the risk of it to fall, or, with more resources (money) and in less time one can build an underground palisade to hold the clay-ish land spit on its place and then work on the house.

The money limit is well understood by the two coordinators that refer to it as a border tool: the item you use to know your limits and with which you can make a line beyond which you can't go. In a very materialistic sense of course.

Accessing to the European Union (EU) funds for Rural Development Plans (RDP) then becomes appealing.

The centrality of these funds in the planning of La Tabacca pushed me to have an interview with Stefano Chellini, a farmer that has been involved in the Italian Association for Biological Agriculture (AIAB) for several years and has personally taken an interest in analysing the EU funds for agriculture.

What follows takes input from the original text of the EU funds for the region of Liguria, a complex document, definitely not to be considered an easy reading as happens with many secondary data (Bryman 2012, 315). Such text fuels a need for experts, an ever increasing complexity in the search for perfection and efficiency in trying to be equal and progressive in funding so many farms, in so many different places, with such different needs, but still part of that great centralised superstructures which is the European Union. Also the push for tech-fixes in agricultural practices is widespread (Ploeg 2008, 1) and evident in the document. However most of my analysis and assumptions come from the conversation I had with Stefano, for what I promote is the local perspective on these directives. Wrong or right that these suppositions can be, they reflect the attitude of those involved towards these issues, which in the end influences their behaviour.

The Rural Development Plan

The Rural Development Plan is a funding system that the EU provides for the agricultural sector and now takes approximately 40% of EU funds. It is divided in 2 pillars: one that provides the income for farmers and the amount of money provided is related to the size of land owned, the second is a financial support for the development, including support for new technological appliances, vehicles, buildings and the implementation of new sustainable practices.

Of the second pillar and the latter support measure La Tabacca is concerned. When analysing the agricultural funding process we see that the majority of the errors are done by local evaluators that tend to approximate too much. For Stefano is "the Italian way to do it"¹⁸, possibly affected by a history of "fragmentation" that "condemned Italians to economic backwardness and political marginality" (Putnam 1993, 121).

When the EU asks for statistics to be able to create an orderly distribution of monetary resources, what they ask is precision. What Stefano has encountered is carelessness. For example for the RDP of 2016 the EU has sent tables that the different Italian regions could fill with the data they collect themselves. But when the EU representatives met with the Ligurian region committee they discovered that new tables with different values had been created. Why is this happening? Why is nobody addressing this issue?

There is "a lack of transparency". As Stefano stated during the meeting where the Ligurian region has to decide where to allocate the EU funds "they never make the minutes. So if you want to ask 'who decided to allocate money on rice in Liguria instead of olives?', you will never know."

But "rural development policies were born at the supranational level", hence discrepancies between the core and the periphery are bound to happen, no matter their honest positive efforts, for the centrality of control "it is disconnected from the specificities of local ecosystems and regional societies" (Ploeg 2008, 4).

Hence to successfully be able to make the best of it, economically speaking, those who want to apply for these funds ought to use the same mentality of homogeneity and reductionism that the EU applies. Stefano, differently from me, agrees on a homogenisation of mentalities. He says:

"They have 200 RDPs to develop throughout Europe, if everyone makes its own version of it [...] when they have to compare data and statistics [...] they are going to go crazy". "It is a matter of mentality. [...] For example the first RDP to be approved in Italy

18 Stefano Chellini, interview by author, Genova, Italy, November 26, 2015.

is usually the one presented by Bolzano¹⁹. [they both] tendentially reason in a nordic way".

Of course is not always a top-down communication, not everyone is careless about the different peculiar needs. For one of the measures a sensible functionary has requested several meetings with the local organizations. "We told her", remembers Stefano, "what in our opinion was important to aim at" and their demands where met. It was one of the first parts of the Ligurian RDP to be approved by the EU.

Also some positive pushes come from the EU, great incentives are put of biological agriculture. However, the general culture of consumerism, money oriented and materialistic society tend to render the measures towards sustainability useless or vain since generally it is economically more convenient to remain a conventional farmer than turn into a biological one. Stefano explained that "if you have an intensive culture of vegetables that gives you an income of, let's say, 800'000 euros yearly because you cultivate first fruit zucchini [...] if the RDP gives you 1000-2000 euros yearly, you don't care at all."

However when we are talking of sustainability we can argue that smaller farms are more efficient (Netting 1993) and here lies a contradiction in the funding process. To achieve them you need to have a certain "economic dimension", "a standard gross margin that has [recently] been introduced", says Stefano, which excludes a priori self-sufficient farm, renown for their small scale.

La Tabacca has tried for long to be able to fit in the categories that open access to these funds, but some obstacles have made them change their mind. One of the difficulties they encountered has been the fact that these funds are open to change. As Giorgia says "you cannot base your planning on an element that is variable". Although they know that "having some capital can [...] shorten the time [...] this is not necessarily a good thing [...] because when you shorten the time you tend to not do, it can be dangerous" and superficial. It could create a relationship based on "dependency" (Ploeg 2008, 264).

Another reason is the result of the introduction of the standard gross margin and the Ligurian approximations which excludes them from being able to access these funds.

Have they decided to avoid the quicker way? Not entirely. One of the resources of the project is a good family support. If they will of course make use of other modalities to obtain, such as barter, voluntary work, gifts, work parties, agriculture courses, locally sold products, they can rely on some capital that the families have. Their support, plus the knowledge about their possibilities to live with their own means, is a fundamental pillar of what constitutes

¹⁹ The following link comprises a list of the RDP and their date of approval: http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rural-development-2014-2020/country-files/it_en.htm

La Tabacca.

Political activism and Resistance

La Tabacca is a process that with a body of knowledge and skills aims to achieve a reconnection with an environment that has so far been disregarded.

The particularities of its location, the society where it grows within, the individuals that make it are part of this body. They *are* the project.

Differences, alternatives, changes we see are all part of an opposing discourse to what is mainstream. This counterculture that is building in La Tabacca and in those many places where environmentally friendly ideas are put into practice, is resisting the “the centrality of control” that “penetrates into the smallest details of the social and natural world (even affecting how brambles grow)” (Ploeg 2008, 263).

They do mulching instead of using herbicides; they save seeds of old and unique varieties instead of buying standardised one; they recycle, exchange and accept donations instead of buying and selling; they host events, workshops and courses to share knowledge that is otherwise dismissed; they work with the neighbours and with friends instead of depending on the expertise of paid strangers.

Their strength is the possibility of putting in place a “*multitude of responses*” to the “principal mode of ordering”(ibid., 264, emphasis in original).

But they also adapt and adjust their aims. La Tabacca has in fact its own unique practise of dissent but also of collaboration with its “antagonist”. They are in contact with local political activity and they put pressure on them. It is part of that “third wave of environmentalism” which aims for the mainstreaming of sustainable practices (Holmgren 2011, xvii).

For example many farmers, through AIAB, are trying to get accepted a participative certification for organic agriculture. Official certificates are expensive and require the continuous update of a farm to external necessities. Or also because of the uneconomical conditions of being in competition with an international trade where “low prices paid for vegetables in Senegal or Kenya (or for asparagus in Peru or China) will translate immediately into downward pressures in Europe” (Ploeg 2008, 264). A participative certification, argues Stefano, allows local producers and consumers to self-certificate themselves with a simplified paperwork and the possibility for whoever cares to know more details about the production to visit the farm.

Others are not willing to cooperate and act in more uncompromising ways. I remember how impressed I was when during the Italian Festival of Permaculture one farmer was explaining

during a seminar how he was starting to provide local self sufficiency with his neighbours, but also aiming to provide energy, employment and material self sufficiency through the creation of local useful relations.

Such strategic and local actions are of great importance for the societal change that projects like La Tabacca are initiating. The efforts and appreciation of the neighbors towards similar ideas shows the effectiveness of the project.

By actively engaging in personal and community transformation they are in effect creating "their own 'actually existing utopias' that present themselves as a concrete critique of" conventional society (Ploeg 2008, 271).

Epilogue

As I drove away from La Tabacca I felt for the last time the dizziness of the four kilometres of continuous bends. The road was the same that I went through the first time but now the uncovered soil gave way to concrete and cement; trees gave way to apartment blocks and the noise and the lights of the streets over stimulated my senses. But mostly I left behind a whole collectivity of which now I know I am part of and that I will always feel part of. Part of a story. A story among many others. A narrative walk in La Tabacca, among the people and the events of a small sustainable farm. A farm that is not afraid to be different and to try to change itself for the sake of an ecologically sound culture. A farm that has to face an opposing discourse and withstand despite not having support of the prevailing society.

My hopes now reside on the analytical picture I drew in this dissertation's sections. Were the questions I asked answered in a clear way? Did I find out what this place is about? Did I show what is happening there and why? Have I introduced who is involved in it? What mentality characterises them and what makes it useful for a sustainable society? What personal changes make them different from conventional lives?

But also have I presented the limitations that this place is facing? What biophysical characteristics, economic, and cultural burdens does it encounter?

In short I can summarise that La Tabacca is a project that aims to renovate an old house so that it will become a sustainable permacultural system. In this manner La Tabacca allows the creation of life-worlds accordingly to natural design that applauds co-operation and participation, means for self-sufficiency and self-governance that forge a multitude of responses to challenge the normative conventional society.

Sections on the people involved and connected to the project helped to enrich the portrait.

Firstly I exposed the necessity of a personal transition characterised by the deconstruction of previous mind-sets and the adaptation of new perceptions to create a new imaginary. Secondly the unavoidable generation of a counterculture that inevitably opposes the traditional discourse in which La Tabacca is developing.

Finally throughout the text I revealed how the biophysical characteristics of the environment, the economic system and the culture in which La Tabacca occurs can be seen as obstacles – environmental limits, top-down operated funds and cultural disconnection – but also as opportunities to see those changes that are indeed possible and sustainable precisely because they are connected and appropriate to the surroundings.

With the above in mind shall this narration be an addition to the stream of societal change that works towards sustainability; an inspiration, not a blueprint, for those alike that want to begin a similar adventure; an interesting and constructive critique for the participants to the project and the Italian Permaculture movement; a support for a society that needs to change an imaginary of industrial efficiency and top-down impositions towards an highly planned and but simple living.

But mostly a gift for such a small entity that is doing so much more that it is aware of.

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