



Universiteit
Leiden

The Netherlands

The silenced paradoxes of urban renewal: morality, welfare reconfiguration and precarious labour in Collective Food Procurement in Turin

Vasile, M.

Citation

Vasile, M. (2023, September 6). *The silenced paradoxes of urban renewal: morality, welfare reconfiguration and precarious labour in Collective Food Procurement in Turin*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3638588>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3638588>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Chapter III. At the margins of urban renewal

In this final chapter of part I, I shed light onto whom remained partially excluded from the process of renewal of Parco Piemonte. In particular, I discuss the case of spontaneous gardeners and of a family of errant shepherds, who utilised the area since several decades, long before its transformation into the Orti Generali project. My aim is to bring light onto their urban agriculture visions, practices and skills, which came to be jeopardised by the park's renewal. More generally, these skills are increasingly delegitimised in the subtle “global hierarchy of value” (Herzfeld 2004) that is developing in the fields of sustainability, urban greening policies and urban agricultural practices. I chose these two groups as they incarnate different approaches to urban agriculture that are, in fact, silently disappearing, paradoxically in the name of greener cities. These practices contrast with the one of new urban gardeners at Orti Generali especially in terms of the different land access and management systems which are at their basis. These cases were quite controversial in the field, especially in the case of spontaneous gardeners. These were generally associated to illegal practices and the notion of decay both in the media and conversations between non-profit workers and public servants involved in local renewal.

Examples of such forms of criminalisation of spontaneous gardeners can be found in local newspapers' articles, which, for example, elaborate on their supposed danger and on the damages which they might cause, such as fires (Berton 2020). Others blame them for transforming the gardens into precarious homes for vulnerable groups (Redazione CronacaQui 2016). Alternatively, spontaneous gardens were mentioned in relation to their dismantlement (Redazione Torino Today 2014) or substitution by official gardening projects (Coracciolo, 2018; Redazione CronacaQui 2020). In fact, on one hand, renewal projects such as greening non-profit or municipal interventions were depicted as key processes that remarked boundaries between legality / illegality, formality / informality, appropriateness / inappropriateness. On the other, spontaneous gardens and the errant shepherd were associated to everything that belonged to the past, which did not have a reason nor a space to be in anymore. In the past, both practices had continued because of the little attention of the local administration to

these areas. As also written by Orti Generali project manager Matteo in his research on spontaneous gardens, when looking more closely to these practices it was hard to define them as illegal as they operated in an administrative vacuum left by the local administration, namely in a context of connivance of the local authorities (Baldo 2012, 4).

Going beyond the legal/ illegal divide allowed me to take a closer look at these practices and remark how the Parco Piemonte represented a site of self-appropriation in the case of the spontaneous gardeners and a space of autonomous labour in the case of the errant shepherds. These experiences speak of other forms of citizens participation (that contrast with more widespread configurations such as volunteering) and which are often invisibilised or delegitimised. They also represent forms of resistance and ways out the alienation of intensive production rhythms at both industrial and agricultural level. I regard both self-appropriation and errant labour as forms of engagement in and with the public space, which are everyday more incompatible with the making of neoliberal urbanism. This can be associated to several factors which include their incompatibility with “neoliberal urban aestheticization projects” (Guano 2020, 14) as well as their way of developing autonomous spaces and practices, which challenge both the divide between private property and public space as well as “neoliberal concern with efficiency” (Herzfeld 2010, 259).

Next, I explain how renewal processes observed at Parco Piemonte jeopardised the continuation of these practices. I show how new forms of citizen engagement can in fact exclude or delegitimise other practices, and in this case other skills and ways of doing urban agriculture. The new ways of framing gardening, as depicted in the previous chapters, seemed to leave little space for urban gardens to also be “spaces of autonomy” (Eizenberg 2012) and of autonomous labour. Autonomy would have allowed for the continuation of activities not fully aligned with contemporary neoliberal visions of urban space and production. An attentive review of these cases calls for a problematisation of the contemporary homogenising meaning of sustainability, as employed in the context of the renewal of urban green spaces.

Spontaneous gardeners

As previously explained, in Turin the phenomenon of spontaneous gardening is usually called *orti abusivi* (illegal or unauthorised gardens). This phenomenon is generally defined as “unstandardised nor regulated self-appropriation of a plot of land not of property used for the production of fruits and vegetables mainly for self-consumption” (Baldo 2012, 4). New greening projects in Mirafiori Sud did not include the preservation of spontaneous gardens in their plans because these were regarded as illegal practices. When an intervention was taking place, these would be dismantled and the gardeners would be told to leave, without any kind of social support³⁸. Only in the case of Orti Generali, the association attempted to integrate some of them into their project. They propose them to stay but, to a certain extent, redefining and standardising their gardening habits, space, material and asking them to collaborate with others in new ways. In this section, I discuss the case of some of the Parco Piemonte long-term spontaneous gardeners, their ways of managing gardens and related skills. Their perspectives represent yet another way of envisioning the park, urban gardening and subsistence food production in the city. I focus particularly on three aspects that were common to the approach of different spontaneous gardeners I engaged with: the reuse of abandoned industrial material, the cohabitation with a changing natural environment and the redefinition of property.

³⁸ Luigi Canfora, interview, 06/11/2019.



[Image 8: Walking around spontaneous gardens in Strada del Drosso. 03/06/2021. Screenshot of a video taken by the author.]

Gardening within the industrial life and material

On September 12, 2019, I arrived with my camera at the garden of Dino. Dino was one of the oldest spontaneous gardeners of the Parco Piemonte. He had started cultivating his plot there in the 1970s, a few years after migrating to Turin from the Italian southern region Calabria. Growing up in Calabria, he had worked as a woodcutter until he was 26 years old. To upgrade his “standards of living” (*tenore di vita*) and have better working rights (such as well-defined working hours and paid leave) he had followed the invitation of his brother-in-law, who had migrated to Turin a few years before. His brother-in-law was telling him that working with the chainsaw was a very hard work and that, if he would have joined him in Turin, he was going to help him looking for a better job in factories’ plants³⁹.

As I entered Dino’s garden, I could not see him but as I called his name out louder, he came out of his garden barrack. He smiled as he saw me with the camera, which he immediately disregarded and told

³⁹ Dino - a pseudonym, gardener, interview, 22/02/2019.

me: “do you know what I am doing? I made the tip of the pole”⁴⁰. He walked towards me and picked up from the floor a wooden branch that he was turning into a pole, indicating its point. “Now I need to scrape it”, he explained. I continued filming him as he leant part of the pole against the table in front of us, letting it pass in between his legs and resting its other extremity on the ground. As he proceeded with the scraping operation, removing all the bark, he explained that this was very important to avoid that the pole got covered with mould: “it will resist better to humidity and rain”. This was especially important for the part of the pole that was going to be underground. Dino was going to use the pole in the near future, to grow his tomatoes, but first he needed to improve its resistance. This, he told me, comprised a whole process that started when he had selected the branch, put it to dry for a year on a levelled surface (so that it did not curve) and which continued as he scraped it and would leave it to dry for a few months. “Scraping the pole is almost like dyeing it, but you don’t need the dye”. Dino was using a “*raschietto*”, a scraping tool that he created on his own, precisely for such purposes. “I built it because this was a billhook, the handle broke and then I welded these two pieces of iron and so I thought that this could be a *raschietto* to scrape the poles”.

⁴⁰ Dino, video recording, 12/09/2019.



[Image 9: Dino's self-made scraping tool. 12/09/2019. Screenshot of videos taken by the author.]

This moment with Dino revealed some important aspects of the adaptation mindset and different skills that were typical of the spontaneous gardeners whom I met in that period, and that generation of gardeners more generally. As also pointed out by Matteo in his initial research on gardening in Mirafiori Sud, gleaning and recycling represented a common denominator of spontaneous gardeners' way of working (Baldo 2012). Their way of gathering and putting together gardening material revealed their spartan pragmatism and idea of reuse, which contrasted with the aestheticized gardening standards found at Orti Generali. The materiality of spontaneous gardens (such as iron poles, iron and plastic nets, aluminium roofing sheets, wooden boards, plastic water containers, pallets) often spoke of the gardeners' linkage to and capability of reworking abandoned industrial material found in the area.

Most often, these gardeners had worked in local factories and as part of the logistical spin-off of the city automotive sector. This was also the case of Dino, who, once in Turin, had started to work in construction and then, for 30 years, as a factory worker at the Carello, a company developing headlights for motor vehicles. His experience had thought him to recognise, collect, reassemble and reuse all the surplus that the factories were generating. In fact, more generally, while spontaneous gardeners were often accused of generating dirtiness and decay themselves (because accumulating material now deemed inappropriate for gardening and for renewed urban green spaces), most times they had simply collected material already abandoned in the area by factories and firms in the area⁴¹. I argue that by reincorporating this material, spontaneous gardeners continued to cohabitate with the factory but overturning their relation to it: they creatively appropriated themselves industrial material for their own purposes and uses. In this perspective, their gardening activities can be regarded as practices through which they digested the materiality which characterised their work and life experience in Turin, its decline as well as their marginal conditions, while developing a creative and affective relation to it.

The time, effort and skills that were part of such reuse and gardening practices also spoke of the place that they held in the life of these city inhabitants. As similarly noted by Torquado Luiz and Jorge (2012), who conducted research in the “illegal gardens” cultivated by Capo Verde population in Lisbon, such gardening activities can represent for marginal city dwellers:

an exercise of re(approximation) to origins, to the land, in a broad sense, a space dedicated to idleness and freedom, as opposed to the limitations experiences in accessing the city, a form of satisfaction that also pertains to the sphere of affect (Torquado Luiz and Jorge 2012, 155-156, translation is my own).

During my time at the Parco Piemonte, such affective relation was manifested by the five spontaneous gardeners I mostly interacted with,

⁴¹ See also Barchetta (2021).

who were usually happy to show and talk to me about their gardens. Like Dino for his *raschietto*, gardeners such as Alessandro (presented in chapter one) and Sergio (whose perspectives I will introduce later) were quite proud of their work, production or plots (which were not always at their best, they underlined), apparently uncaring of external outlooks and judgements. They liked to discuss about the different crops which they grew, how some had failed and others were tasty, and how they went to the gardens with their families to eat and spend time together. The gardeners were used to share their production such as salads, potatoes, onions and home-made tomato sauces with their family but also friends and neighbours, who are important to mention when considering these gardens' direct and indirect beneficiaries.

An adaptive relation to land and the natural environment

The pragmatic management of spontaneous gardens also reflects a very peculiar way of relating to the park and coping with its changing natural environment. This can be illustrated through the following example, as narrated by Dino:

When a flood arrives, the water [once] arrived up to here, this slime, this sand, it was brought by the Sangone [river], it brought it to me. Here [pointing to his shack] it was completely full, I was keeping tools here. The flood did not bring them away because the door was closed. But the water arrived at this level. [...] My god, [it was] a hard work to unravel these nets, taking them out, all full of sand. It covered it all. [...] [Showing me his garden journal] It should also be written here, I write everything, see here, in 1994...⁴²

With these comments, Dino recalled one of the many episodes of overflow of the Sangone river. Such incidents represented – for him, as well as for many gardeners cultivating along the river - moments in which part of their cultivation, barracks and equipment got damaged. He explained that he was used to keep going despite the challenges and managed to keep his head above water as he always was a hardworking man.

⁴² Dino, interview, Parco Piemonte 22/02/2019.

Dino had an important relation to land linked to his rural past, similarly to many of the “*meridionali*” (name and social label given to Italians coming from southern regions) that had arrived in Turin to search for work and better living conditions. As underlined in the documentary *Meridionali in Turin: an investigation on emigration in Italy in the 1960s* by Giordani and Zatterin (1961), being a *meridionale* in Turin often involved facing similar social difficulties such as adapting to an urban lifestyle, inappropriate housing and being discriminated. It also entailed trying to maintain relations with the region of origins and continuities with local habits – as I will further discuss in the next chapter focusing on a community of emigrants from Apulia. This often entailed an important emotional relation to land and its cultivation (Giordani and Zatterin 1961). Dino had initially arrived at the Parco Piemonte thanks to a proposal of his relatives. At the time, he was working following shifts, which meant, he explained, that he often had half a day of free time, outside of the factory. Gardening at the park represented for him a way to occupy his free time and change his mind, as well to procure food for his family. This was also a learning process: every day, he would go to the park and learn how to garden by conversing with neighbouring gardeners, also local workers and inhabitants. This process also included living and coping with nature unpredictability, such as the overflow of the Sangone river.

In his article *the temporality of the landscape* (1993), Tim Ingold advocates for an understanding of the landscape as continuum between “inner and outer worlds”, which describes well the particular way of relating to the park of spontaneous gardeners such as Dino. This was exemplified by his acceptance of and co-existence with the different temporalities and shapes of the river. While he could have decided to move away from that plot due to its instability, he has decided to stay and develop ways to mitigate the effects of the overflows. Making a parallel between the management of the garden and the life of Dino allows to see the landscape of the park as both an external and internal experience that bridges between the industrial life, the rural past and every day artisanal experience. The work of Ingold is useful here to think of the contrast between such ways of inhabiting the park and the approach of the managers of Orti Generali. The latter defined new rules to prevent the use of such material as well as created mechanisms for controlling the environment in the name of sustainability and

aesthetic order. Their approach could be discussed in similar terms to what Ingold regards as the opposite of the above-mentioned vision of the landscape namely the creation of “a landscape as a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing or symbolising surroundings” (Daniels and Cosgrove 1988, 1 in Ingold 1993, 154).

Re-appropriation of public space and the pervasiveness of the private property model

The context of spontaneous gardens, while based on such different practices of self-appropriation, reuse and cohabitation with nature, also included a specific morality around property as well as conflicts over resources. Among the other long-term occupants of the park, stood Sergio, whom I met in 2019 via Orti Generali. Sergio shared with a partner a spontaneous garden close to the Sangone since several years. While talking, Sergio stressed that gardening at the park had always implied many interactions with its other occupants. However, such connections were not always positive. His plot, situated near to the one of Dino – and even closer to the riverbanks –, was often a site of “pillage”:

I planted garlic, a beautiful one! Mine was the most beautiful one, well-grown. So I said [to myself] tomorrow I come [to collect it] and take it [home with me]. But they [thieves] came first [...] and did not leave not even one for me, they took them all.⁴³

Sergio explained that the cases of theft in the gardens were numerous: according to him these were conducted by other gardeners or dwellers living in the vicinity. The Roma living at the edges of the park were among the people recurrently mentioned by Sergio, as well as by other spontaneous gardeners. This did not come as a surprise and should be contextualized as part of the widespread prejudices and forms of discrimination that surround the Roma people in Italy and beyond (e.g. Piasere 2015). During our exchanges, Sergio accused them of theft as well as considered them as privileged because, according to him, their camp was provided with free water and electricity by the local

⁴³Sergio - a pseudonym, gardener, interview, 26/02/2019.

administration. Reference to Roma people was also made during an interview with another spontaneous gardener called Alessandro. He used the term gypsies (*zingari*) to talk about gardeners who behave inappropriately such as taking food from other gardens and not taking care of or damaging common infrastructures. I interpreted such statements also as a way they used to differentiate themselves, their position and practices from the one of other local occupants.

More generally, some spontaneous gardeners seem to imply that they were more legitimised than others to use that space. Sergio, for example, often referenced a system of contracts and exchange of plots:

In that garden that we have here, the first parcel is the one of a friend, we are business partners. He got it from the municipality. He told me “if you want a piece of it we go to the municipality” and that is how we did it. We went to the municipality, I also have the papers...⁴⁴

While the existence of such contracts is difficult to believe as the park always remained public domain, I was told by Matteo that such narrative was common. In his research in Strada del Drosso, Matteo dwelled deeper into how spontaneous gardeners, fearing the precarity that characterised their gardening situation, attempted to reject such instability in different ways (Baldo 2012). Gardeners often talked about how the administration, despite its discourse, was unable to intervene in the area. It lacked the resources to change in any way the situation of “illegal allotments”, which translated into what was discussed as “decisional immobility of the administration” (*immobilismo decisionale*) (Baldo 2012, 138-139). In the context of Strada del Drosso, however, some gardeners did own their plot. The ones developed on unused private property had been reassigned to the gardeners through usucaption, resulting in a diversity of land tenure systems in the same area.

Stephen Campbell’s anthropological reflections on squatting are particularly relevant to analyse the two elements that I highlight through these last interviews’ extracts (namely theft and land

⁴⁴ Sergio, interview, 26/02/2019.

contracts). In his research on Yadana, a squatter settlement on the outskirts of Yangon, in Myanmar, Campbell explored the agricultural practices on such “industrial frontier” (Campbell 2019, 8). The author argued against a “hypostatization of squatting” and illustrated how “squatting [...] becomes imbricated with wider relations of extraction, exploitation and rule and with the broader capitalist context more generally” (Campbell 2019, 7). The ideas of private property and gardening as an individual practice, which permeated the reflections of these spontaneous gardeners, are illustrative in this sense. While these gardeners were occupying public land themselves, their vision of such activity did not fully reverse, and to a certain extent perpetrated, some of the central features of contemporary society. In other words, the phenomenon of spontaneous gardening – and its critical potential – remained “tied to the world around it” (Campbell 2019, 7).

Such continuity was symbolised by the signs visible on the gardens’ improvised fences such as the ones visible in the images below. The use of signs indicating video surveillance and forbidden entrance (normally found in front of protected areas) could seem to be taking a contradictory flavour as the land was most often occupied and not owned. But not according to these gardeners, who found in these spaces unique margins for self-expression and ransom over the industrial city life.

To conclude, the analysis of spontaneous gardening calls for a problematisation of public management of peripheral green area. It reflects the city administration’s long-term lack of efforts to respond to the need of certain strata of urban inhabitants. The discussion around the (criminalised) practices and skills of spontaneous gardeners also brings out important questions about contemporary development of a hegemonic and decontextualised vision of urban sustainability. The phenomenon of spontaneous gardening is in fact being cancelled in the name of sustainability while it represents a way to digest, both internally (as a way for (factory) workers to contrast alienation, develop skills and provide for themselves) and externally (through the reuse of material) the industrial life and its crisis. I stressed spontaneous gardeners’ specific gardening skills linked to manual labour, cohabitation with the natural environment and self-arrangements for cultivation and subsistence.



[Image 10: Entrance of a spontaneous garden at Parco Piemonte. 18/10/2020. Photo by the author]



[Image 11: Entrance of a spontaneous garden at Strada del Drosso. 18/10/2020. Photo by the author]

The analysis of their practices further highlighted the aestheticised and market dependent dimensions of new models of urban gardening. Moreover, as noted by Roy (2019) in the context of community gardening in Copenhagen, it invites for reflections on how the

imposition of specific behavioural norms in new gardens might leave little space for the authentic inclusion of the practices of marginal groups. While regarding spontaneous gardens as spaces of autonomy and creativity - which should not be analysed as social phenomena in a vacuum - I also pointed to some of the ways in which these practices reproduce the aspiration to private property.

The errant shepherd

When I met the Bergero family⁴⁵, in August 2019, it was the first summer of the Orti Generali project. The shepherds had borrowed four of their sheep to the initiative. These were kept for educational purposes in the collective area of the gardens. This idea of the educational farm was developed at Orti Generali following a practice that is usually done in rural Italy on some farms, which decide to diversify their work by offering educational activities. Such type of farms “regularly welcomes children and young people - either as part of school visits or private groups - with the aim of teaching them about farming” (Forleo and Palmieri 2019, 431). At Orti Generali this entailed hosting similar groups and introducing them to urban gardens’ activities as well as the animals (mostly chickens and sheep).

Their service responded to the need for educational activities around the themes of nature and food, which are depicted as increasingly important in urban contexts like Turin, where such activities targeted to children are increasing (e.g. Redazione Eco dalle Città 2021). Hosting educational activities was also common in the other urban gardening projects visited during my fieldwork, which however did not include any animals. At Orti Generali, keeping animals necessitated a lot of work, which, most often, depended on the dedication of volunteers and solidarity gardeners. These animals’ conditions and welfare was criticised by some of these volunteers, who argued that children and visitors were not acting respectfully towards them and that, more generally, these did not receive enough attention

⁴⁵ In Piedmont dialect, the term and last name “*Bergero*” means shepherd. Their last name reveals how the family has been in this profession since several generations.

from the project managers⁴⁶. More generally, the idea of showcasing animals has also been criticised by environmental and anti-speciesism activists, who problematise the hierarchical understanding of human-nature relations that such settings reproduce⁴⁷. As I will explain next, I argue that, at Orti Generali, such attempt to reproduce a farm-like environment for “educational” and aesthetic purposes contrasted with the fact that sheep herding in the area in parallel became increasingly limited and endangered. In other words, the representation and image of farming was valued more than its actual practice or, put different, an image was extrapolated from a real practice and replaced it in the name of sustainability.

In August 2019, I had not yet considered that the development of the project had affected the Bergero family use of the area and had not considered their permanence in the park. Their presence (but not the one of their animals) seemed to be almost invisible to the new gardeners. In this section, I shed light onto this invisibility and the ways in which errant shepherds’ work and skills were increasingly pushed away from the urban context. I also discuss the divide between new imaginaries and understandings of urban farming and some of its more traditional configurations in Turin, like the activity of this family. Similarly to the case of spontaneous gardeners, the continuation of their work was undermined by the new land use and management of the area. In this case, however, the activity at risk was also a productive one. More specifically, one which challenged neoliberal uses of the city and an intensive approach to food production.

Memories: the Parco Piemonte over the years

I met the shepherd Giovanni Bergero as he was taking a walk close to the entrance of the individual allotments of Orti Generali. As I passed next to him, I did not know who this smiling and tan men in his 80s was, until we exchanged a few words. He seemed very open and

⁴⁶ Olivier, informal conversation, 02/09/2021.

⁴⁷ See for example the information campaign against Zoom, the zoo of Turin, developed by the anti-speciesism collective Transelvaticæ (Assemblea Antispecista e Transelvaticæ 2022).

willing to talk, and mentioned that he was there to look after the sheep, currently grazing in the nearby field. I realised that neither me nor the other volunteers had really noticed or asked about the owners of the animals, which were grazing right there, in the field adjacent to Orti Generali. Like the children growing up in the urban context, who are said not to know where tomatoes or chicken grow, we did not draw a connection between that activity and ours. We did not think about these in terms of two different ways of urban farming and their possible incompatibility in the long term.

Later that day, I went to the shepherd. As I walked in the direction of the sheep, I saw him rearranging things in front of a caravan. As it saw me, the dog chained to a nearby tree started barking, making the shepherd turn in my direction. It was rare that somebody from the urban gardens wandered around in that part of the park. He had set his small base in a rather isolated spot, not far from the Roma camp. The allocation of the occupants at the margins of the park seem to reproduce their position in contemporary society, reflecting once again the ways in which the organisation of urban (green) spaces can also reflect how difference is articulated in the city (Newman 2015). The shepherd walked toward me with a chair in his hand, deciding that we were going to sit and talk in front of the main field, while watching the sheep.



[Image 12: The sheep of the Bergero family at the Parco Piemonte. 23/09/2019. Screenshot of a video taken by the author.]

Giovanni shared with me his childhood memories about the park: he depicted a landscape of grassland and informal landfill for local factories, which constituted a rural-urban continuum of its kind, concurrently populated by farmers and subproletariat. The latter were gleaning from the landfill to attempt making a living out of the collection and resale of iron, bolts and other of such material⁴⁸. From the farmers' perspective, this area was particularly interesting because of its vicinity to the river, which always had an important and ambivalent role in the transformation of the area⁴⁹. In his narration, the river was functional to herding: cow and sheep were drinking its water and grazing at its margins. At the same time, the river was used by some local construction companies to extract sand, representing once again a point of coexistence and possible tension between the rural and the urban realm. Upstream it was also as a space for leisure and bathing for the city inhabitants (as also recalled by Loredana, see chapter two).

The shepherd's memories, dating back to the 1950s, also help contextualising the following development of the Parco Piemonte and the housing units around it. The park officially arose in the early 1980s on what was used as a landfill by nearby factories until the 1970s, which was covered with soil. It also incorporated the surrounding seven hectares of agricultural land and the farmhouse *cascina Cassotti Balbo*. Meanwhile, around it, much of the land had turned into housing, initially constructed specifically for factory and railways workers, who came to populate the industrialising neighbourhood. Such historical account of the area, as presented by one of its long-term goers, illustrates well the ways in which nature also played a role in the development and later renewal projects of Mirafiori Sud (most often referred as the historical industrial neighbourhood of Turin).

⁴⁸ Giovanni Bergero, shepherd, interview, 23/09/2019.

⁴⁹ Similar references to the river also appeared in most of my conversation with old local gardeners.



[Images 13: images of the Parco Piemonte area before and after its official transformation into a park. The images on the left show the landfill in the 1970s and the ones on the right the activities (such as walks and picnics) promoted in the park over the years 1980s-2000s by the spontaneous neighbourhood committee. 21/12/2021. Courtesy of the Comitato di quartiere spontaneo Borgata Mirafiori.]

As explained by Newman (2015, 31) in relation to the historical production of northeast Paris: “the urban process is not only spatial, economic, and political, but fundamentally ecological as well”. In the context of Mirafiori Sud, this area had represented a site of ecological procurement and subsistence as well as one of waste discharge and pollution of firms, while in parallel always hosting acts of re-appropriation by the poorest strata of the population. Later, its conversion into a park represented the intention to legalise and modernise this liminal area. At the same time, however, responses to the social inequalities in accessing welfare services took a long time to arrive. In this perspective, the park’s “greening” and popularisation through the urban gardening project Orti Generali seemed to represent a new promise of transformation of the area. A promise in the sense of fostering its attractiveness and its “sustainability”, which passed

through a new branding, new forms of city consumption and ways of rendering the city productive by bringing forth the idea of disciplined urban nature.

Changing access to land

Eliciting the reflections of Bergero was also important to unravel aspects of his relation to the urban territory as well as traditional forms of agreements that use to regulate land use in that area.

We were the *margari* (cow breeders and shepherd)! The *margari* would spend eight months a year in Turin! You would go where you would find a farmhouse [*cascina*]. In August, you would make a contract: my father was coming down [from the mountains], he was looking for the people of the farmhouses. If you were getting along you would go there, if you were not or maybe it was too expensive, you would go somewhere else. You would spend eight months in Turin and four months in the mountains. [...]. At Porta Palazzo in August there was the hay market, and you would go there to look for a farmhouse for rent.⁵⁰

The family's direct search and arrangements for land speak of a time during which the use of urban green areas (situated around the typical northern Italian peri-urban farmhouses *cascine*) was regulated through private agreements between their owners and users. The square of Porta Palazzo, which is today an important market square of Turin (which I will further elaborate on in chapter five), served as a point of

⁵⁰ Giovanni Bergero, interview, 23/09/2019. Original text: "*Eravamo i margari! I margari si facevano otto mesi a Torino! Dove ti aggiustavi di cascina. C'era agosto, c'era un contratto, mio papà veniva giù, si trovavano quelli delle cascine, se andavi d'accordo andavi lì, non andavi d'accordo magari o troppo caro, cambiavi posto. Facevi otto mesi a Torino e quattro mesi di montagna. [...]. Perché te andavi a Torino a Porta Palazzo, a Porta Palazzo ad agosto c'era il mercato del fieno, per aggiustarti in cascina, e c'è ne era marghè, avevano il gilet, sai il gilet con i buchi qua che c'è l'ho ancora io, che andavano lì sui capelli di velluto, tutti apposto.*"

encounter, where initial contacts were made for shepherds to rent a plot⁵¹. These months closer to the city were important for shepherds to be able to sell their products to the city inhabitants.

Over the following decades, many of the *cascine* were abandoned or converted into public green areas by the municipality. As proven by the story of the Bergero family, such transformation also entailed a change in the ways in which potential users of these urban spaces engaged in their procurement and access. In this perspective, it can be interesting to contrast the experience of the Bergero family with the one of the new urban gardeners at Orti Generali. With the development of the project, the contracts that govern the use of the grassland now consisted in an agreement between the managing non-profit organisation and the gardeners. The organisation mediated between the municipality (owning the land) and the gardeners (using the land), as part of its more general responsibility to manage that area of the park. I argue that this shift exemplifies the way in which the management of urban spaces in Turin is increasingly delegated to the Third Sector. It also reveals how such new managing systems undermine other forms of traditional productive usage of these areas.

The area that was used for grazing by the Bergero family was in fact reduced with the development of Orti Generali and even more so in 2021, when another part of the park was intended for an urban reforestation project sponsored by the IKEA company (Comune di Torino 2021; Redazione Torino Today 2021). According to the municipality, the 3000 trees planted in the park contributed to its reforestation, which was considered as an important element as part of its more general alignment with the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Comune di Torino 2021). Ikea reforestation is a good example of the ways in which Turin municipality attempted to renew urban green areas through collaborations with private firms investing in environmental projects as part of their corporate social responsibility programs (Comune di Torino 2021). In this process, the activities previously ongoing in the area were not considered: the case

⁵¹ For an introduction to the history and multiple functions of Porta Palazzo see Balocco (2014).

of the Bergero family seemed to be unknown or, more probably, actively disregarded.

As explained by scholars investigating processes of “green gentrification”, greening might come from outside investors (e.g. Gould and Lewis 2012 in Barchetta 2016) who have no knowledge of the areas but can extract value from the process of revitalising environmental resources such as urban parks rehabilitation. The choice of the municipality to give space to such large-scale and generally identified as “sustainability projects” is also exemplificatory of the linkages between greening, governance and city branding (e.g. Newman 2015). In the context of global neoliberalism, the municipality is interested in producing images of its engagement and compliance with international targets, implementing the same type of project and speaking the same language as other cities and countries. This probably provides a higher return in terms of visibility than what would be supporting and incentivising different local productive activities such as the ones of Bergero. To explain more in depth the ways in which these transformations impacted the activity of the Bergero family, it is first necessary to illustrate better their work and values. I will do so by reporting on their vision of production as narrated to me by the son of Giovanni Bergero, Giorgio.

The work and skills of an errant shepherd

A year later my encounter with his father, in summer 2020, I visited Giorgio in their mountain pasture and worked with him for a few days. The pasture situated close to the village Salza di Pinerolo (still part of the metropolitan area of Turin) was composed of large areas of mountains of property of the family as well as some of public property, which they rented from the municipality. The shepherds and its sheep normally spent there only the summer months. Then they descended, moving and grazing up to the margins of the city. As explained by Giorgio:

I go, I sleep, I ask someone if I can eat a small piece of grassland to have breakfast, then, as I am eating the banks of the rivers, I arrive in Pinerolo in two days. From Perrero, to arrive to San Germano, Pinerolo, two, three days maximum, I

go fast, as I do not want to eat anybody's grass, you understand? Because the other [shepherds] must sustain themselves the same way I do. And then going down from Pinerolo I know some places.⁵²

As he talked about the ways in which he worked as an errant shepherd (*pastore errante* – term which he used proudly), Giorgio identified himself with the sheep: he used the pronoun “I” even when referring to the animals (for example when he said: “I am eating the banks of the rivers”). He often emphasised his connection to the land and the animals, which were at the basis of his passion and choice for an errant life. As he mentioned different towns on the way to Turin, he explained about the different types of land use agreements and speed of traveling that characterised each distance, such as where it was possible to reach an agreement between shepherds. Similarly to other Alpine people analysed by Aime, Allovio and Viazzo (2001), the case of the Bergero family should be regarded not as an isolated mountain community but rather as part of a network of engagements and negotiations with other actors and institutions such as local administrations. The family's mobile labour tradition (and necessity to migrate) is exemplificatory in this sense (e.g. negotiations of their paths and pastures, economic exchanges and commercial relations, to name a few).

While telling me about his labour, Giorgio Bergero was standing in front of me. It was around 7 pm and we were on our way to his sheep (around a thousand), which were grazing freely up the mountain. Like every evening, we needed to close them inside the *reti* (mobile electric fences used to create an enclosure), which protected them from getting attacked by wolfs during the night. Bergero had went to the sheep on his motorbike, followed by one of his white dogs. When he caught up with me, I had been walking uphill for the past hour. He decided to stop a few meters in front of me. He got off his bike and took out his phone: he explained that it was one of the rare places where he had coverage. While he spoke on the phone, I decided to take this break as an opportunity to talk to him about Orti Generali. It was hard to find a moment to talk to him about that urban world, as the mountain life and

⁵² Giorgio Bergero, shepherd, field recording, 21/08/2020.

work were fully absorbing. As he hung up, I started the conversation by asking about his work during the winter, when the mountains were covered in snow. It was not hard to imagine: as we talked, the fog whitened the mountain tops all around us. As resumed in the quote above, he explained to me some of the logistics and the language related to his winter displacements. By defining himself as an errant shepherd, he also underlined the differences to the way of farming of his father and ancestors. He moved with the sheep, for longer distances and period of times, whereas his father used to be both a cows and sheep breeder (*margaro*, piedmont dialect). Because of the presence of the cows, his father would rent a farmhouse close to the city to sell milk and cheese, and only move around it for short distances. That is how the Bergero family had started to go to the *Cascina Cassotti Balbo*, in the Parco Piemonte.

Even though he did not rent the farmhouse anymore, Bergero still brought his sheep to graze at the park because, he explained, this had remained the last sector (*zona*) of his errant pasture (*pascolo errante*). His approach to sheep keeping - also called errant pasture or transhumance - is part of a declining tradition that has been a long-term characteristic of the Alpine region, studied by several anthropologists (e.g. Verona 2016; Aime 2011; Aime, Allovio and Viazzo 2001). The set of skills developed by these shepherds is to be linked to the hard living and working conditions and the poverty that historically characterised these mountain communities. The continuation of such practices, which represents an important contribution to the diversification of agricultural activities, is being increasingly endangered by contemporary economic system and the reduction of spaces and paths for herding (Verona 2016).



[Images 14a and 14b: Giorgio Bergero looking at his sheep above Salza di Pinerolo. 20/08/2020. Screenshots of videos taken by the author.]

The images above symbolise the continuous connection between the shepherd and his sheep (even when these were grazing far away) as well the skills that he developed over the years. Among other, Bergero could make his animals move from a section of the mountain to another by giving remote instructions to his sheepdog with sounds, short words in Piedmont dialect shouted aloud and several types of whistles. More importantly, his way of looking after the sheep

reflected his skilled visions (Grasseni 2007) coordinated with his skilled movements, namely his peculiar way of looking at, knowing and relating to his environment. These reflect a peculiar set of competencies but also ideas, meaning and beliefs that are configured by his skilled visions (Grasseni 2007, 5) that are becoming increasingly jeopardised by contemporary standardised understandings of animal production and modern society, more generally.

Keeping the sheep, removing the shepherd: physical and political marginalisation of the last shepherds of Mirafiori Sud

When talking about Orti Generali, Giorgio explained that he had to reduce his stay at the park: during the last autumn, after 15 days of grazing in the area, he had to find another place. Giorgio felt that he had no influence on these processes:

- Maria: So the urban garden has taken a piece of your...
- Giorgio: It took me 5 days of grass.
- M.: and did you tell them?
- G.: Well, the world is changing, I do not have control and neither do the urban gardens, you understand? It is the municipality. I was taking it from the municipality and [then] they wanted to make the gardens and that's it.⁵³

The shepherd had not resentment if not a feeling of being marginalised and disregarded from decision making processes, in a context which rendered increasingly complicated his way of working and, more generally, difficult for a diversity of small-scale productive activities to be sustained in mountain areas and beyond⁵⁴.

⁵³ Giorgio Bergero, field recording, 21/08/2020.

⁵⁴ While I do not have the space to further elaborate on these broader challenges, see for example Liechti and Biber (2016) and Mannia (2016) for an overview of the economic, social, environmental and policy-related challenges of contemporary pastoralism. On general transformations and opportunities see Farinella et al. (2017).

In her dissertation *Municipal Goats. Exploring social relations and multiple ruralities in El Boalo, Spain*, Flora Sonkin (2017) explored a quite different context, where goatherd became part of municipalist politics working to create resilient, autonomous and participatory rural development projects. While highlighting the potential of such experience, the author underlined the ways in which such project also became embedded in the context's converging and conflicting "multiple ruralities, or different ways of relating with place that do not conform to a unified ideal of 'the rural'" (Sonkin 2017, 34). I reflect on her analysis in the context of peri-urban Turin in the search for alternatives to the contemporary situation of the Bergero. I also build on her questions to ultimately ask if multiple peri-urban realities can coexist at all in the context of urban renewal.

On that day at the mountain pasture, I met Bergero again uphill, in the place where he had decided to plant the fences. We had not reached the sheep, which had gone even higher than expected. While we set up the enclosure, Bergero shouted to the sheepdogs, giving them precise orders to direct the animals back down, towards us. The fog now surrounded us and it became impossible to see at distance. But this made no difference to the shepherd: we still had some work to do. Some of the sheep had injuries and needed treatment. Until darkness I observed the shepherd managing his sheep with the skills, manual techniques and *savoir faire* that revealed his years of experience. He turned the injured sheep on their back and operated on their hoofs. As I observed his way of proceeding, I compared it to the way in which at Orti Generali we had attempted to treat one of his sheep, which he had borrowed for the summer activities conducted at the didactical farm of the project. I remembered how we needed at least four people to immobilise the sheep on the ground, attempting to replicate the expert hands of Giorgio. Concerned with the health of the sheep (clearly suffering the consequences of a sudden sedentary life), we played at the sheep keepers, simulating in the urban context what was done with expertise by shepherds, whose labour in the area was currently endangered by the space assigned to its very *simulacrum*. Absorbed by the enactment of the rural life, we did not pay attention to how it was being jeopardised.

A similar paradox was to be found in relation to the use of the image of the sheep: again, as the continuity of Bergero's activities was being endangered, the animals were being photographed and used to depict the special features of the neighbourhood of Mirafiori Sud. For example, this was the case as part of the 2019 exhibition about the neighbourhood entitled "Mirafiori after the legend" (*Mirafiori Dopo Il Mito*). In this advertisement the shepherd was absent: in this way, the sheep were there to represent an imaginary landscape more than an actual practice. Similarly to the sheep used for the didactical activities at Orti Generali, these were presented in a socio-political vacuum.



[Image 15: Bergero's sheep on the flyer of the exhibition *Mirafiori Dopo il Mito* organised at the *Polo del '900* in the period October 11 – 25 2019. Image retrieved on 19/08/2021 at: <https://mirafioridopoilmito.it/in-mostra/> .]

To conclude, my visit at the mountain pasture of the Bergero family helped me reflecting on the strong contrast between the knowledge, skills and capacity of adaptation of these shepherds and their very limited recognition and inclusion in decision-making processes. Drawing parallels between the rural and the urban contexts across which the shepherd and his animals navigated also shed new light onto the extent to which urban renewal practices at Parco Piemonte jeopardised the coexistence between diverse ways of envisioning and practicing peri-urban rurality. While, at the time of the research, Parco Piemonte remained a space where, with difficulty, a diversity of gazes, practices and forms of civic engagement encountered, it remained clear that not all of these were going to be transformed into priorities, political claims or simply considered equally in the present and future management of the area. The importance given to the image of renewal meant that the park should, among other, increasingly comply with visual standards and with opportunities to account for results and improvements, which seemed to be pushing some more than others at the margins of urban renewal. In this perspective, we see how the case of the renewal of Parco Piemonte partly reflects some of “the same neoliberal urban strategies of gentrification and consumption-drive redevelopment seen in cities throughout the world” (Newman 2015, xxix). If mobilising for a park is “as important for being a political idiom for broader social issues as it is a goal in itself” (Newman 2015, 35), the same should be said in relation to the political attention and will (also mentioned in Roy, 2019) to include activities such as the one of Bergero in the future of the area. Following the right to the city approach, this case calls for thinking about how marginalised groups in Mirafiori and beyond are currently being pushed away from two key rights of all inhabitants, namely the right to participation and the right to appropriation (Purcell 2002). Jeopardising the continuation of such activities does not only mean rethinking the scope of Parco Piemonte but also taking a position on broader issues such as local small-scale production, rural-urban linkages, diversity, participation and democratic debate in the city, openness of urban spaces, and ways of making these sites a right for urban dwellers, but also for people passing through these spaces. More than a question of the park it becomes an issue of definitions of civic engagement and participation, and of political attention to local experiences of marginal groups to be put at the centre of processes of urban transformation.