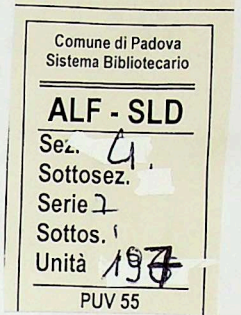


Rustic and Ethical

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Editors' Prefatory Note

Rather than a unified tradition, (post-) *Operaismo* is best understood as a collective effort whose theoretical and practical engagements have always shown a great degree of variation, even if remaining pertinent to a same field of consistency. If today this field is defined by certain problematics – the blurring of the boundaries between work and life, production and reproduction, the issue of ‘immaterialisation’ and the opening up towards dimensions of care and affect – is safe to say that it bears an enormous debt to the ground-breaking work of feminist autonomous Marxists in a broadly defined ‘area of autonomy’ in the 1970s, among whom Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Leopoldina Fortunati have been central references.¹

To acknowledge this indebtedness is not to say the dialogue was easy and took the form of gentle assimilation. On the contrary, it involved a lot of divergence, confrontation even, and as Dalla Costa observes here, ‘many remained deaf’. The text that follows – an intervention at the Colloquium *Earth and Freedom/Critical Wine* at Centro Sociale La Chimica in Verona, Italy, April 9-10, 2005 – is in keeping with the story of this dialogic struggle by posing enormously relevant questions to current debates, in terms that do not retread, but repeat by displacing, some of the issues at stake in the 1970s.

In particular, Dalla Costa here poses, from the perspective of care, a crucial problem to be considered today: that of *limits*. This problem appears in different ways throughout the text.

Firstly, in outlining *à rebours* what may be a Marxist orthodoxy that the hereticism of (post-) *Operaismo* has never fully managed to shake off, the perspective of care requires an attentiveness to singularity that can be easily overrun by the movement – as Hegelian as it is Leninist – that defines the cutting edge of Being and struggle in ways that tend to subsume various forms of struggle under the hegemony of one.

Secondly, the attentiveness of care, moved from the theoretical to the practico-political terrain, raises serious questions about the limits of what can and is to be done. The

1 Cf. Fortunati (2007), this issue.

attitude of care that the peasant stands for in Dalla Costa's text resituates the debate at once in the *earth* (as the ultimate source of generativity and biological life and the grounding for human relations), the *world* (as the totality of human and social relations articulated through capitalism), and *materiality* (as a precondition for the reproduction of life, and what appears in the Tardean distinction between "tangible, exchangeable and consumable" and "intangible, unexchangeable, unconsumable").² In doing so, it opens a window onto political issues of finitude – both of the earth's ecology and the human form-of-life – that (post-) *Operaismo* has so far addressed in less than satisfactory ways.

Both moments come together in the questioning of one of the central tenets of Western thought for centuries, which evidently also profoundly permeates Marxism: *progress*. Is it not behind the conditionality of the peasantry only being able to form part of the multitude, insofar as they are already, and inevitably, caught within the logic of teleological development? Is it not behind the idea of permanent growth, ever-increased productivity, and of liberation through modernisation and machinisation?

In this way, Dalla Costa at once sheds light and casts a shadow over a lively political issue in (post-) *Operaismo* today that is not directly mentioned in the text: the guaranteed social income. While they do not necessarily invalidate the idea, the points raised should be seriously considered in shaping the debate. On the level of the earth and finitude, how could a guaranteed social income be tied to a questioning of the limits to growth and productivity? And on the levels of materiality and the world, even if productivity is understood only as intensive and not extensive, does one not have to consider the risk of a guaranteed social income that existed in Europe alone in fact implying a reinforcement of the (global) division of labour (let alone internal stratification)?³ These are questions which have yet to be answered. Dalla Costa here, once again, has opened the debate.

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The organisational and communicative effort which has blossomed in Italy in the first few years of the new millennium around the issue of a peasant-based agriculture brings to the fore agricultural realities – old and new alike, but all endowed with an extraordinary wealth of propositions – which afford us not only the pleasure of an intelligent discussion, but also the joy of emotional investment. We experience the thrill

2 Cf. Tarde (1902) *Psychologie économique*. Paris: Félix Alcan; Lazzarato (2004) 'European cultural tradition and the new forms of production and circulation of knowledge' [<http://multitudes.samizdat.net/European-Cultural-Tradition-and.html>];

3 Of course, the guaranteed social income is conceived both as a demand and political strategy in numerous different ways, not limited to its implementation on a purely European level. Being a mostly European debate, however, it can often be depicted by certain proponents in this way. For an overview and problematisation of these discussions see Henninger (2007) and Trott (2007), both in *Turbulence: Ideas for Movement* [www.turbulence.org.uk].

of witnessing growth, the exultancy of spring, the opportunity to perceive colours and to enjoy silence. This is the humanity of a different agriculture, coming out of its hills to reveal new paths to all those who want to reclaim their lives starting from a different relationship with the earth. Here I am alluding not only to the individuals or the associations engaged in organic agriculture, but also to the initiatives in favour of preserving animal biodiversity which are engaged in the recuperation of little known rustic breeds presenting rare characteristics. These are hardy and productive local breeds of horses, cattle and fowl, extremely resistant even in harsh conditions. But since capitalist productivity, unlike nature, is hostile to diversity and requires uniformity, the rustic breeds would risk becoming extinct if it weren't for the efforts of those who love them. Humanity faces a similar problem. *We too have to salvage our rusticity, which makes us strong and diverse.* If we don't recognise it, if we don't love it, it will be crushed by increasingly homogenizing mutations.

The peasant voice, even through other subjects, has now created a rich and diverse debate, ranging from practical issues on the techniques involved in a different kind of agriculture, to efforts in delineating a different social project. It now starts to intersect other issues in our movement, new and old, such as poverty or instability, which actually started with the expulsion of people from the agricultural lands. Some critics (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 151) have said that, after having been considered backward, passive and conservative, also by the Marxist tradition, the figure of the peasant will no longer be seen as part of a separate world and will fully become part of the multitude thanks to the new forms of communication. Nonetheless, this can only be possible if the peasants are to construct forms of struggle aimed at the transformation of the totality of life. The conditional character of this assessment is surprising. If, in fact, there is a common aspect to the whole peasant movement, which in the last decades has built networks from the South to the North of the world in 65 different countries, it is precisely the opening of a discourse about the transformation of all aspects of life. This transformation is not a simple and empty demand, but a *necessity*. Because the will to rethink our relationship with the earth, whose negation (as expropriation and dramatic alteration) has always constituted the foundation of capitalist development, it implies a break with the whole process and the subversion of its conditions, while laying the ground for another development. This development will be 'other' because, first of all, it no longer considers the spread of death and hunger as the inevitable precondition for the creation of wealth as value. We are faced with an alternative: either this peasant understanding of development – which considers the earth from the perspective of 'food sovereignty' since it is the only guarantor of life at the planetary level – will prevail, or we will be confronted with infinite variations on the constant of hunger. Therefore, *the struggle of the peasant movement is the exemplary biopolitical struggle. The opening up of what some people call biopolitical struggles is not a problem for the peasants, as it might be for others.* What might be missing, on the other hand, is the will, on the part of these other political subjects, to start from the same basic concerns.

It is not by chance that I am reminded of the title of a document very popular in the feminist movement of the 1970s: 'When the mute speaks'.⁴ The mute was the woman. It

4 In English in the original (Translator's note). This text was a mimeographed original that circulated amongst Feminist circles of the period.

took years for the other subjects – men – to acknowledge the meaning of womens' denunciation – that is the immense feminine labour that went into reproducing them – and then for their behaviour to change. Many remained deaf anyway. The same thing could happen to the contemporary peasant subject, who speaks through the movement. The most probable risk is not that it will not be able to offer new perspectives on fundamental issues, but that the other subjects will not acknowledge them or that they will define as 'biopolitical' struggles that are not such at all. On the other hand, women and peasants are the most unrecognized subjects both in the history of capital and of anti-capitalist movements. Capitalist development is founded on the negation of women as persons and of the earth as living organism. Both have been considered zero-cost natural resources, and treated as machines for the production of labour and food as commodities.

Now the peasant movement, starting from the perspective of food sovereignty, is vying for a food no longer considered as commodity, and that could be provided to a humanity no longer considered as labour force, claiming it as its fundamental right. In this perspective, as we all know, we can find not only the demand for access to soil, water and credit, but first and foremost the right to select, preserve and exchange natural seeds, as the peasant has always done in the past, because this right constitutes the most essential level of safety and autonomy. This right is predicated against genetic manipulations, patents, monopolies and interdictions. Initiatives aimed at maintaining the freedom of life sources – which are the seeds as well as water and soil – opposing their privatization and enclosure, are present all around the world. One example is the Seed Bank in Bangalore, India, created by peasant networks and which collects and redistributes natural seeds among the rural populations. Similar initiatives exist in many countries. As I have already stated elsewhere, the struggle for soil, water and seeds is crucial in the biopolitical field, because its outcomes will determine the possibility not only for life, but for human freedom (Dalla Costa, 2002). This is the mother of all battles, where we see on one side the interests of multinationals and their scientists, and, on the other, the movement for another agriculture composed by peasants and citizens who refuse to be simple consumers and defend the seeds as common goods. In fact, the seeds are not only a gift of nature, but also of the work, the knowledge and the cooperation of entire generations of peasant men and women. Their being natural does not make them 'primitive'.

Food policies, aid mechanisms included, have always been a strategic instrument for the managing of the capitalist system. Today, in the genetically modified organism (GMO) phase of biotechnology, this instrument is becoming sharper, aiming at modifying and capitalising on the reproductive power of nature, which is the only true source of life and abundance. The alteration of the spontaneous mechanisms of life reproduction, patents, international debt, and structural adjustments: these are all components of a game allowing the system to create a food dictatorship determining the absolute dependency of entire populations and therefore the possibility to blackmail them on any issue at all. Against this system, peasants and citizens are fighting for a food democracy and for a maximum of autonomy and freedom, which is the essential basis of every democracy. The first step in this struggle is to keep in their own hands the most fundamental common goods and the means of life production and reproduction, i.e. land, water and seeds and the ancient and social knowledge embodied in them. I agree

with José Bové when he says: “The first sovereignty concerns food: it is the power of sustaining oneself, choosing how and what to eat” (Bové, 2001: 151).

The most meaningful shift originating in the peasant movement *is a logical one*. The movement does not want to act within the capitalist trend, which tends to ignore both humanity and the earth, dismissing and ruining their vital cycles. Rather it expresses indignation at such nonsense, deciding to recuperate and reaffirm the human ability to act with reason and meaning. This is why the movement decided to address the very meaning of the peasant’s social role. In this questioning, it also runs against common opinions which are characterised by the renunciation to raise these issues, generally dismissed with arguments such as, ‘the peasant figure is disappearing’, ‘who has the right to decide what is meaningful or rational to others’, or ‘there are no fundamental needs, and even if they existed who can legitimately define what they are?’. This is a debate typical of urban intellectuals with very little sensibility to the pressing problems of eighty percent of humanity, ranging from access to food and water to other health-related issues. *The peasant movement, instead, questions sense on the double terrain of human relations and of the relation to the earth, thinking about the impact of the choices we make with regard to both*. From this questioning arises on the one hand the desire *to offer an agricultural product* and therefore a healthy food source answering *the basic universal need of – and right to – a food supply that can be considered safe and legitimate* in terms of accessibility, healthiness, economic, environmental and social sustainability, as well as cultural appropriateness. On the other hand we see *the determination to practice an ethics of respect and care for the earth*, since it is the only way to preserve its generating powers and therefore to guarantee this kind of food supply for the entirety of its population. *It is in the expression of this will and decision that the peasant work finds the basis for the reaffirmation of its own dignity and takes pride* in its practices and knowledge. At the same time, it also discovers and affirms once again the peasant’s *multifunctionality*, because he⁵ is tied not only to the earth but to the territory.

It is obviously more difficult, for other subjects, to find a way to do meaningful work or to give meaning to what they are already doing. The peasants seized an historical opportunity, and they have truly determined a logical shift. They have decided to retake ownership of their arms and minds, like the protagonists of Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETS) and of other experiences in the exchange of work and money (Dalla Costa 1999).⁶ This is also what others have done, deciding to open networks of

5 The use of the masculine is intentional, as the reference here is to the discourse of peasant authors such as Bové, who write in relation to an agriculture (that of countries which are not primarily agrarian) which certainly in the large majority of cases is in the hands of men. It is significant that these countries have produced this kind of debate, connected also to the theme of the preservation of the territory (also as landscape) and of the ecosystem; initiatives and debates coming from other countries have focused more on other themes, namely the preservation of natural seeds and of subsistence agriculture and its traditional methods. In general, in countries of the first kind the farmer has a farm, it is not a case of subsistence agriculture. And of course the preservation of natural seeds and cycles is a fundamental instance also in the first kind of countries. (Author’s note, added upon request.) For some of the problematics concerning a farmer in Italy, cf. Dalla Costa and De Bortoli (2005).

6 Wikipedia defines Local Exchange Trading Systems as “local, non-profit exchange networks in which goods and services can be traded without the need for printed currency”

production and exchange inspired by equity and solidarity rather than simple profit. But the peasants occupy a *crucial* position in the general movement for ethical action specifically because they deal with the earth, which is the fundamental means of humanity's reproduction. Against those who predict their extinction, not only as individual subjects but also as social subjects *tout court*, they are still overwhelmingly numerous on the planet, and they represent a true force. With the diverse wealth of their agricultural systems, the peasants indicate an alternative path to all those who – after being made dependant by multinational corporations – want to escape their condition of debt and misery.

In fact, one of the merits of the peasant analysis in its logical shift has been the dismantling of the myth concerning the *productivity of capitalist agriculture*. When we factor in the hidden economic, social and environmental costs of this productivity, it is clear that this choice is not convenient at all. There is more hunger in the world today than before the Green Revolution. This is attributable to several factors: the stealing of lands formerly devoted to local crops; the high cost of chemicals, seeds, and (despite all promises) the failure of crops – one of the most flagrant being transgenic cotton in India, which has already led to thousands of suicides –; the nutritional impoverishment and the pollution of food sources; the loss of biodiversity and of work environments. All of these losses have occurred without the proportional creation of new working opportunities within the modernised agricultural practices, mostly as a result of the worsening of the international debt incurred when building new infrastructures and of the huge amount of water required by hybrids and GMOs. The breeding of farm animals is subject to the same critique. Against the imposition of this 'productivity sham', which only generates sterility in nature while provoking illness and death for human beings, the peasant revolt exploded onto the world stage. One of its actions has been in the organisation of an event parallel to the World Social Forum in Mumbai in January 2004, where key peasant networks, such as the Movimento Sem Terra from Brazil, came together with networks of fishermen and other groups gave life to Mumbai Resistance 2004 and Peoples' Movements Encounters II (Dalla Costa and Chilese, 2005: 95-96).

The agricultural disruption of capitalist productivity discredits another myth, i.e. the view which maintains that we can save productivity while destroying capitalist class relationships. I have always been sceptical of this view. Certainly this is neither possible nor desirable in agriculture. This kind of productivity is a poisoned apple. We want to grow healthy apples. Consequently, we should simply abandon – some have already done it – the hypothesis that says that anti-capitalistic struggles should only aim for a more equitable *reappropriation and redistribution of products*, without worrying about *what* is produced, and *how*. Starting from agriculture, which in its 'separate world' has preserved the capacity to formulate an original knowledge and new propositions, we see the opening up of a planet-wide debate about what and how we produce, and the human ability to make meaningful and sensible choices while drafting a different social project.

[<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LETS>]. Cf. also <http://www.gmlts.u-net.com/>. For alternative currencies, <http://www.ithacahours.com/>; <http://www.strohalm.net/en/site.php>.

On the other hand, the questioning of the meaning of work within the human-earth relationship quickly leads us to a confrontation with the *problem of limits*, which is typical of the dimension of care and responsibility. In other words, we have to face the ethical dimension with regard to all that is alive, and first of all the animals, which have always been the mainstay of non-industrial agricultural systems. The number of animals which we can raise on the land that we own or use is limited, if we want them to graze freely. If we want to preserve their uniqueness, we need to raise different breeds in dry or wet climates. We need to preserve and respect the earth's vital cycles and biological balance if we want to maintain its ability to generate and regenerate harvests and crops every single year. We cannot till too harshly if we want to use humus instead of chemical fertilizers. We should not drill the earth too deeply if we do not want to exhaust the water tables. We cannot send too many cattle to the wells, because if we do so the vegetation will not grow and the farmers will suffer the consequences. The herd will be led by the bigger animals, and then the smaller ones will follow, eating the shorter grasses left behind. Most importantly, we have to remember that the earth can contain many human beings and create many working opportunities, if we do not upset it with big mechanical instruments, reducing it to a desolate landscape without trees, bushes or animals.

With regard to this issue, it is important to point out that peasant logic does not think of rural labor as a mere artifice to be implemented during a time of grave unemployment or instability in other sectors. It does not propose to purposefully support backward rural provinces which could be developed in other ways just as a place for the unemployed. It is not a matter, as Keynes used to say, to be willing to send the unemployed to dig holes, fill them up with paper and then empty them again just to boost employment. In our case, the necessity to increase rural employment is objectively derived from a respectful management of the earth, which makes sense because it preserves it as a source of nourishment and life by preserving its natural cycles. Not only would such an increase re-establish a balance between city and country, revitalizing the territory, but it would also discourage us from considering as transitory figures on the verge of extinction 250 million farmers worldwide still using animal rather than mechanical traction (used only by 27 million), or one billion farmers (largely women) who still use only their hands (Bové, 2005: 205-206). Peasant analysis considers in real terms the issue of where, how and in what conditions human labor assumes a vital role and is therefore necessary, and most of all refuses to accept the death sentence pronounced against millions of farmers living from the earth simply because somebody decided to 'modernize' agriculture.

The problem of the limits and of ethical responsibility pertains more directly to women and farmers. It is not by chance that an entire section of feminist discourse, Ecofeminism, has merged gender and Earth-related issues, revealing not only the crucial role of domestic labour but also of the agricultural labour performed by women all over the globe, and joining its voice and its activism to together with that of the peasant movement, especially in the South of the planet. Both peasants and women had to face the issue of the limit. This is why women have not been able to keep fighting against reproductive work. The peasants, forced by the agrochemical-industrial complex to ignore the limits of earth management, have been forced to negate their own identity while destroying the meaning and the dignity of their profession. There is nothing new

in the struggle of the secretaries and the nurses who reject the added burden typical of all 'work of love' (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 135-136), that is all the material and immaterial aspects of reproductive work constituting the normal corollary to their extra-domestic work. These struggles were already typical⁷ of the 1970s' feminist movement, with its all-important rebellion against domestic work. The real problem is different: the question is not the refusal to buy fresh flowers for the boss' desk or to remind him of his wife's birthday, but the refusal to take care of one's son or elderly relative. No woman, except for rare cases, will take the struggle against unpaid reproductive work to the point of threatening the well-being of her family. When the issue of reproductive – others may call it 'caring' or 'domestic' – labour exploded, women's rebellion went as far as to reject motherhood causing a decrease in birth rates in the countries where it occurred, whilst also refusing marriage and cohabitation with male partners in order to avoid the additional work this produces. Nevertheless, when a pressing family emergency arises, women do not hold back. They do not jeopardise the well-being of their dependents, because of their love for them, of their sense of responsibility and their unwillingness to negate themselves to such a point in their relationships to others. This has been in the past and still is today the limit of the struggle around reproductive work.

Regarding the earth, the problem is similar, but distinct. It is similar because the earth is alive and needs care just as human beings do. It is different because the rejection of an earth-conscious agriculture has not been the result of peasant struggles – who never wished for an agriculture dependant on oil – but an imposition on the part of the agrochemical complex' demand for profits. But when we work the earth without respecting its vital cycles and ecological environments we are faced with a limit: the earth dies, losing its generative ability, becoming sterile or only producing poisoned harvests. This negation, therefore, backfires on the peasant and compromises the dignity of his work, because he will be the provider of a food which will no longer bring life, but illness. In both cases, the negation of the ethics of care backfires on humanity itself, to which women and peasants belong. Consequently, the issue of achieving different conditions of life and work is necessarily destined to be treated at another level, namely that of building networks of cooperation among subjects ethically determined to refuse any false solutions to these fundamental problems. Preserving the integrity of the earth's body and its reproductive abilities remains at the very core of the rediscovery and affirmation of a responsible peasantry. At the same time, it is also the necessary precondition for guaranteeing nourishment and health to the human body and providing stability and life to the community. This is why the great battle for a different agriculture unites in the same struggle women – who are historically responsible for human reproduction – and peasants.

7 An enlightening example of this kind of struggle, which mobilized several professional firms from Trieste to Bergamo and Genoa, can be found in the article 'Le segretarie non conciliano', published in a double issue of *Le operai della casa*, November-December 1975/ January-February 1976. About domestic work as 'work of love' and the peculiar forms of violence that it fosters, cf. Dalla Costa (1978), currently being translated in English by Autonomedia, New York.

April 17: this spring disclosed by the reawakening of the agricultural world tears down the fences and reopens the pastures.⁸ The time for transhumance has come also for us; we who are on our way to meet rural civilization. Let's shed our coats and become less eurocentric, less anthropocentric and a little more animal, between rustic and ethical.

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⁸ April 17th is the day Via Campesina has chosen as International Day of the Peasant. Consequently, the spring here is in the double sense, also political. That is, since when the autonomous organizing of peasants for another agriculture started, a new kind of spring is arriving in the world that tears down the barriers where humanity was confined, (I had in mind population in our countries very urbanized in an industrial world.) Transhumance means the action that happens in spring (but also in autumn on the contrary path) to bring the cattle or the flock to the better pastures, on the mountains or to the lowlands. The animals go to another world, and certain kinds of animals also change their fur. Here I invite also humans to move toward another world, towards the rural world, to find again the connection with the land, in the reconnection that in many ways is happening with these networks of peasants. Cf. also some of my writings in *The Commoner*, 6 (2002); 10 (2005); and 12 (forthcoming); www.thecommoner.org (Author's note added upon request).

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