

A 'private place'? Changing meanings of the countryside in northern Italy

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Introduction

The relationship between official discourses and the ways they are understood at different levels of the national community is one of the most intriguing issues in the social sciences. The study of competing discourses about the countryside in late modernity provides an opportunity for casting light on such relationship, and this chapter sets out to explore how meanings attached to the Italian countryside are affected by changing political ideologies, most notably by the political transformations Italy underwent in the 1990s and after. The last few years have seen considerable changes in theoretical approaches to the study of the countryside. Until quite recently the Marxist approach dominated theoretical debates. Central to this approach is the idea that the countryside represents the context for political action: in other words, it is the site for ethno-nationalist conflict and the context within which subaltern people resist the power of the 'centre' (e.g. the State).¹ This idea is taken on board by Nairn (1997) in an essay on the relationship between rurality and nationalism. In challenging Gellner's view (1983) that one of the preconditions of nationalism is the emergence of an industrial society, Nairn's essay pursues the argument that most ethno-nationalist conflicts go on recurring in predominantly rural situations (1997: 90). Thus, for Nairn, 'Ethnic nationalism is in essence a peasantry transmuted, at least in ideal terms, into a nation' (1997: 91; see also Wolf 1969). In arguing for the significance of rurality for nationalism, he shows that the countryside may be the social context embodying the forces of contemporary nationalism.

Yet with the decreasing popularity of Marxism, as a theoretical paradigm, the study of 'rebellious peasants' too became less popular, and rural emigration to urban centres was (tacitly) taken as evidence that the countryside cannot be politically relevant. The emphasis, in the social sciences, on the aestheticisation of everyday life (see e.g. Featherstone 1992) resulted instead in the social scientists' shift of focus from the exploration of the politicisation of the countryside to the study of its consumption and aestheticisation. In this sense, the countryside was no longer regarded as the context for political action (i.e. the 'periphery' as opposed to the 'centre' of economic and political power) but as a communal and 'visual' resource

that everyone feels entitled to enjoy, whose aesthetic appeal is expected to be universal (Milton 1997: 20–6). It was turned into a ‘visual’ resource; something tourists want to feel, taste, and make things with (Franklin 2003: 8–9).

The countryside has so far been regarded as *either* the context for political action or an object of consumption and aesthetic contemplation, but a third possibility, i.e. whether the countryside can be a combination of both, has barely been allowed for.² Despite the differences between these approaches, I do not think that they are incompatible: if anything, the countryside may be an object of contemplation just as it represents the context for political action broadly defined and for resistance to the political establishment. In the discourses of many political leaders, for example, the rural world is still referred to as tantamount to stability, i.e. ‘the roots to which one returns in periods of crisis’ (Pratt 2003: 190). Moreover, a countryside conceived as ‘landscape’³ involves ‘a definite history of property relations in which both the physical reality and collective recollection of rural dispossession lends backbone to the aesthetic and philosophical sensibility of loss’ (Abramson 2000: 5).

While the countryside has been an object of intellectual debate of different kinds (Marxist, postmodern, etc.), still little is known about the ways hegemonic meanings attached to the countryside are understood by those who live and work in the countryside itself. Talking about a ‘countryside culture’ at a time of rural depopulation, when people move with a speed and frequency that were unthinkable a few years ago, may seem naive. Yet the fact that the theoretical significance of the countryside seems to be shifting from a site of resistance to the political establishment to a place fit for the gaze of tourists does not mean that those who are active in the countryside itself necessarily share all the meanings attached to it from the outside, i.e. by politicians or intellectuals. If anything, ‘country people’ may be caught between different understandings. What meanings, then, are attached to the countryside ‘from within’ as a reaction (or partial accommodation) to those superimposed ‘from without’?

The study of the Italian countryside raises these issues, for rural areas have been transformed under the combined onslaught of postmodernity, rural depopulation,⁴ the privatisation of leisure provision and the emphasis placed upon tourist developments (Barberis 1999; Camanni 2002). Although in Italy the countryside has been part of the leisure experience for a long time, we cannot assume that in late modernity it is looked upon as an object of aesthetic contemplation only: it may still emerge as the context in which State power is contested, both at the level of discourse and at the level of political action. While until recently in Italy the country and the city were seen as the ends of a tradition-modernity continuum (Davis 1969; Silverman 1975; see also Barberis 2009: 4–7), various factors challenged this idea. Among such factors the growth of family-based industry in the pre-Alpine countryside of the north, particularly after the 1950s, is one of the most significant (Bull and Corner 1993). Yet what also challenged the aforementioned dichotomy were the transformations in the political arena Italy underwent in the 1990s: the economic crisis and the corruption scandals that led to the demise of the governing Christian Democratic Party

brought about a situation of political instability. Such changes were accompanied by the gradual decline of the Italian State as the main framework controlling the national economy and containing its citizens in terms of 'culture' and values.

Perhaps the most significant development that had an impact on conceptualisations of the countryside at different levels of the national community was the advent, in the Italian political arena, of the regionalist political force known as the *Lega Nord* (Northern League). When it came to the fore it contested the idea of national identity and the legitimacy of a State seen as corrupt (Diamanti 1996; Giordano 2000). It presented itself as populist in that it purported to recreate a lost 'authenticity' and a traditional 'community'. However, it also promised to protect the interests of entrepreneurs, had in its agenda an Italian version of Thatcherism, and achieved considerable appeal in rural areas in the north of the country.⁵

The Northern League championed the transformation of Italy into a federal state and, for some time, even the territorial division of the North from the South of the country. Its leader, Umberto Bossi, constructed northern Italy as a 'nation' in its own right partaking of a 'European culture' because of northerners' supposed propensity to hard work, as opposed to a 'Mediterranean' one of a putative lazy and State-subsidised South (Cento Bull 1996: 177; Giordano 2000: 458–64), which was pointed to as the main cause of Italy's economic crisis. According to the Northern League's spokespersons, the 'northern Italian culture' was not just threatened by immigration from southern Italy, but also by the influx of migrants from non-European countries (Giordano 2000: 460).

Although in Italy political regionalism was not a novel phenomenon (Romanelli 1991), the advent of the Northern League brought to the fore the issue of northern Italian identity, and gave it a political dimension by essentialising the idea of a 'northern Italian culture'.⁶ What also fostered the Northern League's success was the use of a language that can be easily understood, that differentiated itself from the political jargon used by most politicians. Thus, by presenting itself as an opposition movement, the Northern League chose a language that sought to bring politics 'down to the level of common people', even at the risk of sounding vulgar (Ruzza and Schmidtke 1996: 65). In the party's rhetoric, the northern countryside was constructed as the repository of the values (particularly a hard work ethic) that were believed to be lacking in the geographical and symbolic 'centre' of the Italian State. Thus, community and everyday culture and values became a banner to fly proudly as opposed to the 'civilisation' symbolised by the Italian nation state (Destro 1997: 371).

An Alpine valley

The Vanoi valley, an Alpine community in the Trentino region of northern Italy, is the context within which the political transformations just discussed had the effect of questioning some of the meanings attached to the countryside from the centres of

political and economic power. The valley is located at the eastern edge of Trentino, and borders the Veneto region. It forms both an ecological and an administrative unit in that its ecological boundaries roughly coincide with the administrative ones, its territory falling within the limits of the municipality of Canal San Bovo.⁷

Until the 1960s its inhabitants lived by a combination of agriculture, forestry, and animal husbandry, but the population of the valley started dwindling with the demise of the agro-pastoral economy. Although over 4,000 people lived in the area in the 1940s, nowadays the valley has a population of scarcely 1,700 inhabitants and most of the locals who live there are foresters (mainly men), people who engage in various kinds of manual trades, and retired agriculturalists (predominantly women). However, despite the decline of agro-pastoralism, most of the locals still call themselves 'peasants' (*contadini*). While until a few years ago the valley was very difficult to access despite the economic significance of forestry and timber trade with the nearby Veneto region, nowadays, notwithstanding the improvement of roads, the valley is economically 'marginal'. Yet the rate of population decline is much slower than it was in the aftermath of the Second World War, and the valley is witnessing a period of some revitalisation, especially among younger families committed to preserving the social and cultural fabric of the local communities.

Given the limited availability of jobs in the valley, most of the able-bodied have an occupation elsewhere, and commute to other places on a weekly basis. Nowadays the 'human landscape' of the area includes locals who were born in the valley and have spent most of their lives there, and retirees from the nearby regions who acquired land and houses in the valley very cheaply, particularly between the 1960s and the 1980s. According to a survey conducted by the local credit institution in the mid-1990s, over 50 per cent of the houses in the valley were owned by people who do not have kinship ties in the area or reside there. At present the valley is dependent on outside capital and subsidies from the EU and especially from the regional council, which have undertaken various development projects in the area.

It is tempting to suggest that the valley is going through a transition from 'modernity' to 'postmodernity': phrased differently, while the term 'production' describes the productive role of the area (especially as regards forestry) in the 'old days', the decline of forestry⁸ resulted in the valley's being turned into a commodity to be aestheticised. As Urry (1990: 98) has argued in this regard, 'To the extent to which contemporary appropriations of the countryside involve treating it as spectacle ... this can be seen as a postmodern attitude to the countryside, to be contrasted with an approach which emphasises its "use".'

'Natural' or political landscape?

Concern over the countryside stems from the demise of agro-pastoral activities and from the subsequent disintegration of community life: agriculture is practised by very few (mainly in the form of horticulture), only a limited number of tiny patches

are under cultivation, and the forested area is encroaching on the villages. Yet this concern was also the consequence of the alienation of a sizeable amount of land to the regional council on the one hand, and to retirees who spend the summer in the area on the other. However, it must also be stressed that such concerns also stemmed from the expansion and consolidation of the State's direct control over the valley and its resources through the implementation of protected areas (Stacul 2010: 232).

Thus, the decline of village life enhanced the advent of the Northern League (in the valley and elsewhere) that promised the reconstruction of the local community through its appeal to regional and local identity. Against the background of the decline of the nation state and the disintegration of community life, the Northern League's appeal to locality as a focus of identification was seen as a response to the changing political (and social) situation of the present, as it could meet the need for communal belonging that neither a putative anonymous and distant State, nor even the disappearing rural community, was believed to provide.⁹

The appeal that the party achieved had repercussions in the local political sphere: at a time of local elections, for example, the preservation of local identity and the necessity of preventing the land from being alienated to outsiders were high on the agenda of those running for election to the municipal council. One of the key points of the outgoing mayor during the 1995 mayoral campaign was that, in the event of re-election, he would endeavour to prevent the land's alienation to people who neither reside in the valley nor have kinship ties there. In making such promises he championed a political programme focused on the protection of locality and heralded a 'community' of the old days. Although he was not affiliated to any political force at that time, his messages drew upon those deployed by the Northern League, most notably upon the idea that people and things should stay in their own place of origin.

The emphasis placed by local politicians upon territorial identity mirrored some of the themes central to the propaganda of the Northern League, and had considerable impact on the inhabitants of the valley: a woman in her early seventies, for example, once told me that one of the advantages of living in a mountain village is that there are no foreign (i.e. non-European) immigrants around. Yet apart from a few people who shared this view, and despite the Northern League's crusade against immigration from non-European countries, most of the locals with whom I have conversed did not seem to worry too much about the few northern African ambulant traders who occasionally come to the area to sell their merchandise. Rather, they often expressed anxiety at the possibility that people from nearby villages or from other Italian regions could settle in the valley and acquire landed property there. In all likelihood this anxiety stemmed from the fact that while no African ambulant trader owns landed property in the area, several people from the nearby Italian regions do. While the Northern League used its rhetoric to champion the integrity of northern Italy vis-à-vis the south, or to oppose immigration from non-European countries, at the local level this rhetoric was effective for a different reason: it was seen as a

response to one of the main concerns of the local people – the integrity and ideal autonomy of the community – for it was believed to address the issue of the protection of local boundaries from outsiders, irrespective of where they come from.

The integrity and ideal autonomy of the community became an issue of heated debate in the early 1990s, when the provincial park, the Parco Naturale Paneveggio-Pale di San Martino, established in 1967, gained jurisdiction over a substantial part of the forested area in the upper Vanoi valley. The consolidation of the park was part of an attempt, on the part of the provincial council of Trentino, to implement the 1992 EU Habitats Directive and subsequently designate the area as a Special Area of Conservation.¹⁰ The rationale for choosing the Vanoi valley instead of another Alpine valley in Trentino is simple: first, 50.7 per cent of the territory is forested, and this area is distinctive for its biodiversity and for the white fir, a tree species that is disappearing throughout the Alpine region; second, the valley never became a ski resort; and third, the area does not boast ‘authentic’ foodstuffs or cultural traditions that can attract mass tourism.¹¹ As a result, the ‘natural’ beauty of the local landscape is the main resource that tourists can consume (Stacul 2010: 231).¹² Among the projects on the park’s agenda was the creation of an open-air museum on land formerly farmed. While the museum was designed to attract visitors to the valley, its creation also involved turning a territory formerly accessed by locals only into an object of enjoyment or into a resort to be visually consumed by visitors. The consolidation of the regional park, then, resulted in local people’s exposure to a different way of understanding and relating to landscape that reflects ‘urban’ views, i.e. as an intangible resource defined by its appearance. In other words, locals had to come to terms with a vision of the countryside as part of the leisure experience, something to be ‘communally owned’ as a source of enjoyment (Macnaghten and Urry 1998: 201).

Although the consolidation of the park was meant to revitalise the area and involve the people of the valley in the development projects that concern them, in fact its expansion was interpreted by many as an attempt, on the part of the provincial council, to impose legal restrictions on areas where in the past state and provincial legislation had limited restraining power on the everyday practices of local farmers (Stacul 2010: 232). Thus, the uproar caused by the consolidation of the park mobilised cultural oppositions between work and leisure, which are expressed by contrasting ways of conceiving the countryside as either ‘land’ or ‘landscape’ (Milton 1997: 17). What the debate threw into relief was also a concern over who had knowledge of the territory: the people who live on the land or an outside agency.

Although the idea of ‘landscape’ became an object of debate as a consequence of the shrinking of cultivated land, it also functions as a repository of group identity (Darby 2000: 283): it is an integral part of the political history of the valley, as the valley lies next to the regional border between Trentino and Veneto, which was the border between the Austro-Hungarian empire and Italy until 1918. Even nowadays many inhabitants of the valley describe the act of crossing the regional

border as 'going to Italy'. At the end of the First World War, the valley (and especially the village of Caoria) became the heart of a monumental landscape connected with the arrival of the Italian army and the valley's annexation to Italy. The official, monumental time of the Italian nation state which is inscribed onto the physical landscape is expressed by the presence of monuments commemorating the Italian victory in the First World War (Cuaz 2005: 87–96). In this sense, the representation (and conceptualisation) of landscape is deeply embedded in relations of power and knowledge (Darby 2000: 9): while at that time the Italian nation state used to act as the dominant framework in the management of the historic landscape, nowadays its marks are hardly considered part of the 'local' landscape, or are looked upon as mere 'additions' to what is referred to as 'local'. Taking a hint from Herzfeld (1992), it is tempting to suggest that such monuments are 'indifferent' to the people of the valley just as the valley is 'indifferent' to the Italian nation state.

While the 'purity' of the physical and social landscape was the focus of the locals' complaints in the face of a declining community, the 'purity' of nature was instead the focus of the park and of the outsiders looking for a place they see as part of the leisure experience. The tourists and retirees I met in the valley made it clear that they wanted accessibility to places that they consider far from signs of 'modernity', that is to say woodland, meadowland or 'traditional' farms high on the mountainside. Yet their interest in the putative untamed nature of the Alps did not mean involvement in any form of environmental concern and responsibility. Rather, it entailed looking upon the countryside as an open space to which everybody has access simply because it is far from the constraints of urban life. It consists of a public space that many of these believe they have the right to enjoy; namely, a space embodied in practices that do not include work but walking, picking mushrooms and berries, fishing, etc. Even for those who were born and raised in the area, the valley is embedded in a set of social practices, and in the remainder of this chapter I will discuss how some of these practices affect past and present understandings of the countryside itself.

In the villages of Caoria and Ronco, locals evoke the social practices of the 'old days' when they complain about the fact that the place is no longer the same as it used to be, both in terms of physical appearance and in terms of social fabric. What characterises the countryside these days, one woman said, is decay (*degrado*). Locals relate this to depopulation on the one hand, and to the forest's encroaching on the inhabited area on the other. Pictures of the villages of the past seem to substantiate this view, and one cannot help noticing a stark difference between the communities of the 'old days', surrounded by terraced fields high on the mountainside, and those of the present surrounded by a huge forested area (Figures 2.1 and 2.2).

While for most outsiders who own a weekend house in the valley the huge forested area is beautiful, for locals it looks horrible. As two women said: 'E tutto selvatico qui adesso' ('Now it is all wild here') or 'It used to be cleared, open, now it is like a jail' (Noemi, b. 1926). The dividing line between the village and the forest, between the domesticated and the wild, has become blurred: 'There were not the



Figure 2.1 The 'cultural landscape' of the village of Caoria and its surroundings in the 1930s.



Figure 2.2 Caoria in 1992: the forest is encroaching on the village.

trees you see now. There used to be a footpath along which you could walk' (Virginia, 1910–2002). '(In the old days) there were fields in these villages. Everybody used to have goats, sheep, hens, rabbits, hogs ... we used to grow potatoes, beans, onions, wheat, barley ... then the forest started encroaching [on the village], and now nothing can be grown' (Assunta, b. 1931). If I were to take these statements at face value, there would be grounds for suggesting that the people's failure to cultivate their land broke the ecological balance established by the domestication of nature. Nowadays the natural landscape's going wild is associated with the community's (and valley's) 'moral fall': 'When the landscape becomes wild, humans too become wild and anti-social' (Daniele, b. 1930).

Most villagers vividly remember that in the 'old days' everybody used to have a very good knowledge of the natural environment that surrounded their village. It was 'their' place that they materially and symbolically cultivated until recently. Locals associate the cultivation of the place they live in with control over the environment in the sense that in cultivating land they were also the 'owners', and the 'wild' (and also outsiders) was kept at bay. The presence, in the past, of terraced garden patches, and the place names that distinguish each field and house suggested the existence of a 'cultural landscape' (Netting 1981: 3) used and modelled for generations by a resident human population. Likewise, footpaths are still believed to create a relationship between humans and the natural environment, and symbolise humans' appropriation of landscape: the more people have walked there, the greater the significance attached to this relationship. In this sense, what matters to locals is also to preserve a specific visual experience of the territory. In emphasising this, they focus on an immediate perception of the landscape as a reliable form of knowledge of the territory, which refers to personal experience of living on the land. This, in turn, defines a group of people who know the territory as an immediate object of experience.

According to the locals with whom I have conversed, the expansion of the regional park was the main cause of environmental decay. As a man, now deceased, said: 'When the park was established the forest started advancing' ('Arriva il parco e il bosco avanza'). According to him and to others I met, locals cannot now clear the land, fell trees and shoot game because of the restrictive laws imposed from outside agencies. That the landscape is no longer as 'clean' and 'tidy' as it used to be is interpreted as the result of the arrival of outsiders in the area.

In blaming the park and people who do not belong to the local community, locals draw a dichotomy between a shadowy and unspecified era of the past – when the State had limited power on local everyday practices – and the present when the management of the forested area is beyond local control. In other words, in the past people were 'autonomous' and could make their own rules by relying on their own means and through hard work, whereas in the present they can no longer do so, and have to abide by laws imposed by outside agencies; namely, the State, the provincial council, and the provincial park. Small wonder, then, that villagers contest the portrait of the valley, presented in the past by locally published tourist brochures, as

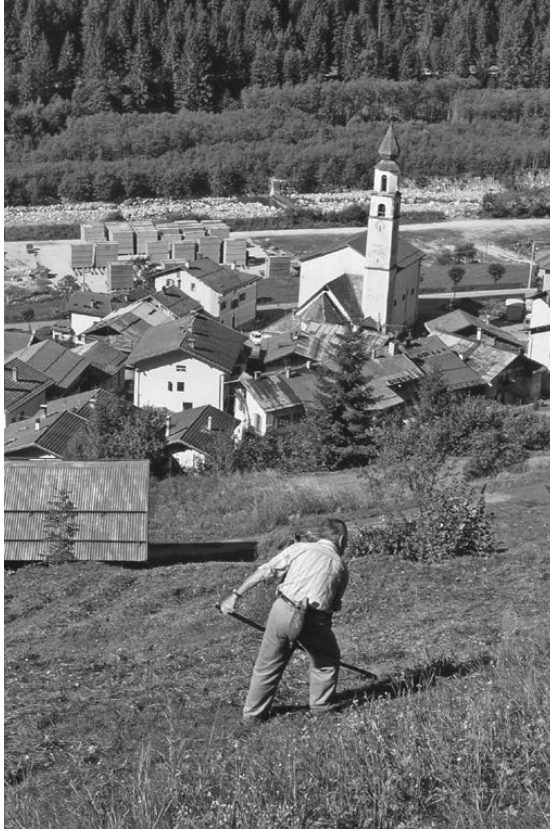


Figure 2.3 The material and symbolic cultivation of landscape: haymaking in Caoria in 1992.

‘natural’ and ‘untamed’ on the grounds that it is an image meant for the urban taste for ‘wild’ nature. In local discourse, by contrast, what looks ‘untamed’ and ‘wild’ is thought of as the consequence of the fact that few people fell trees, and even fewer cultivate the land (Figure 2.3).

In evoking a landscape of the old days, locals contest both a notion of landscape advocated by outsiders and by the park, and a vision of the countryside as an object of aesthetic contemplation, that is to say notions that cast the countryside itself not as workplace, but as part of the leisure experience. What is questioned, then, is the idea that a landscape gone wild is an object of aesthetic contemplation on the grounds that it is instead the outcome of environmental decay. As has been seen, the landscape evoked by locals is essentially a workplace, and the making of the landscape (in the form of cultivation or weed and scrub clearance) is described as a constant struggle (for a comparison with a Greek island, see Theodossopoulos 2003: 49). A landscape can be visually consumed if it is cultivated, that is to say, if it

is worked. The object of contestation is not so much visual consumption, as the idea of beauty of a space open to everybody on the grounds that an open space cannot be cultivated, and so it is likely to become wild. Thus, beauty is conditional on economic viability. This view associates a visual landscape with a landscape managed by locals who were born and raised in the local community.

Very similar views inform the ways social actors talk about hunting, another practice in which the countryside is embodied. Formerly a subsistence activity, hunting is now a pastime which reveals much about the ways locals relate to the countryside.¹³ It is significant because, unlike agriculture, it involves movement through an open space, and it seems antithetical to the cultivation of a 'closed space'. Yet hunting is also connected with humans' relations with nature and its appropriation. Interestingly, although local hunters have the right to shoot wildlife throughout the valley irrespective of where they live, in fact each hunter does so in an area that he knows very well. This area is usually handed down from father to son, even though this symbolic alienation does not entail legal rights to it, but simply social appropriation.

Because of the significance of such practices, hunting land is described as individual property, and is like a bounded field to which ideally only locals have access: 'The hunter is like a cultivator of animals, as it were, whereas the farmer grows plants, since he knows well his territory ... If hunting is done properly, he may be able to increase the number of animals even though he kills them' (Raffaele, b. 1962). 'If you want to grow something, you have to cultivate it ... so you watch if a roe-deer remains in the same area or moves in search of females ... and from time to time you give him a piece of salt ... You have to know your territory' (Federico, b. 1963). Hunting, then, 'produces' locality as it creates the boundaries within which hunters 'cultivate' their animals. It involves mastery of nature just as it establishes a relationship of sharing. Like the 'cultivator', who looks after his fields and crops, the hunter pursues his prey when the time is ripe, that is to say when the animals he intends to pursue have already reproduced themselves, so the life cycle goes on uninterrupted. Wildlife, from the above persons' standpoint, has to be 'cultivated' just like fields. The idea of 'cultivator' not only projects positive traits on those who materially and symbolically 'cultivate' the land, but also legitimates their actions. Implicit in this is the view that who 'knows' territory also 'owns' it: through its symbolic 'cultivation', territory is turned into 'private' or 'individual' property. By stating that who 'cultivates' the land has an implicit right to 'harvest', locals also define a 'moral order'. As Nando (b. 1918) said: 'Many people say that the hunter destroys. This is not true. The hunter protects too.'

The hunters I have interviewed described hunting as a traditional, local practice that underwent changes because of the actual enforcement of national and regional laws. In the old days all hunters used to have their own territory which they symbolically cultivated, however, now they have to abide by laws imposed from outside agencies. In the past they could control their own territory, now they have to move through areas they do not know well. Central to this view is the idea that those who

control the land also keep it clean and tidy, whereas those who do not possess it (for example, outsiders, and tourists) cannot be interested in keeping it clear, simply because it does not ‘belong’ to them. In stating that, locals also evoke the image of a territory that was under local control and was eventually alienated to outside agencies (in terms of ownership or jurisdiction) that made it open to everybody.

It seems arguable, then, that in local discourses there are many parallels between cultivation and hunting: they both entail ‘cultivation’ (material and symbolic) of the territory and, implicitly, serve to assert possession and control by locals. Yet the idea of cultivation of the territory also casts light on the ways the countryside is conceptualised, because both agriculture and hunting map a bounded domain to which outsiders should not have access. By making use of an environmentalist idiom (epitomised by the idea of ‘protection’), locals also avail themselves of the principle that keeping a place clean is a sign of civilisation, and that those who show disrespect by littering it are to be considered uncivilised or the ‘other’. Such ideas reflect the opposition between a clean property managed by locals, and one controlled by outside agencies, to which everybody has access.

The difference between a ‘cultivated’ private property and a ‘wild’ public one is predicated both on visual experience and on ways of interacting with territory. This difference brings to mind the view, upheld by some theorists (e.g. Bender 1993; Hirsch 1995; Ingold 1995), that landscapes are constructed by people interacting with spatial areas. Ingold (1995), in particular, in developing his ‘dwelling’ perspective, has argued that landscape has to be understood as the world as *known* to those who have dwelt there, who do dwell there, who will dwell there: it is a place of memory and temporality. The interpenetration of past, present, and future centres on practices which produce the social character of any such landscape: these persist ‘as long as people are actually engaged in the activities of dwelling’ within that particular landscape (Ingold 1993: 161; see also Theodossopoulos 2003: 167). Yet dwelling in a physical space is not simply a matter of interacting with it: rather, as we have seen, it is also involved with the ways political identities are inscribed onto landscape itself, and with the ways political ideologies are accommodated to local-level discourses. The idea of a ‘public space’, to which the people of the valley became exposed, had to coexist with the significance attached to ‘private property’ as a result of the privatisation initiatives taking place all over the country and of the emphasis placed upon it by the Northern League.

Conclusion

Although in the 1990s the protection of locality against State agencies was at the forefront of locals’ concerns, in the years that followed the people of the valley ended up accepting both the park and its environmentalist directive. There is little doubt that the decline, at the local level, of the Northern League’s appeal played an important role in altering people’s views. Yet what also played a crucial part in

this change was depopulation, the passing of many elderly, formerly regarded as the repositories of 'local knowledge', who had strongly opposed the consolidation of the park, and young people's limited interest in their landholdings on the mountainside. In this sense, the account I have presented analyses a situation common to many post-peasant communities in Europe and throughout the world: it brings to mind a situation where a community of farmers is dispossessed by ruthless capitalist aggressors and evokes a better community of the old days when it is on the wane. This situation seems to highlight the dichotomy between peasant (or post-peasant) and urban values, and those between 'modernity' and 'postmodernity', and 'production' and 'consumption'. Yet if we were to take such dichotomies at face value we would have to infer that what is evoked is the countryside as a 'collective' space, as a resource that locals, as a collectivity, can use. The renewed stress upon the countryside as something 'made' by the people who own it conveys instead ideas of ownership, of exclusive rights. The idiom of cultivation of territory, which informs local discourses, does not mirror ideas of collective ownership, but evokes instead images of individual or family property.

What emerges, then, is a view of the countryside as an exclusive domain. It is exclusive because it is treated as property; and property, by its very nature, comes into being with the exclusion of others (Abramson 2000: 13). What local-level discourses about the countryside reveal is a conceptualisation of the territory built upon the dichotomy between public and private. What is perceived to be under threat is not a collectively owned resource, but individual property – a mosaic of privately owned lots ideally inaccessible to outsiders (including the Italian State). Nowadays the dichotomy between different ways of constructing landscape emerges as a political issue, as a result of the symbolic confrontation between the local community and the Italian State. The struggle over landscape, then, is caught in the symbolism of power relations: it was not so much environmentalism that was frowned upon, as the fact that conformity to an environmentalist directive entails the acceptance of rules imposed from people who do not belong to the local community. In other words, the main issue was not environmentalism per se, but *who* has the right to talk about it. On the one hand this debate reflected the dichotomy between an understanding of place as 'landscape' (i.e. an object of aesthetic contemplation) which all have the right to enjoy, and the idea of the countryside as 'land', that is to say private property and place of work (Milton 1997: 21). On the other hand, the debate revealed that an understanding of place as 'landscape' did not clash with the idea of private property: rather, these merge seamlessly and are intertwined in a transformative process. What at the local level is alluded to as 'landscape' is private property. Thus, landscape's being an object of aesthetic contemplation is conditional on its being worked and owned privately.

There is little doubt that this conceptualisation of the countryside reflects the significance that property has, in rural society, in shaping social relations. Yet it emerged as a political issue at a time of economic and social transformations, when

privatisation initiatives took place all over the country, and when political forces with an Italian version of Thatcherism on their agenda achieved considerable appeal. While this conceptualisation embodies the values of a rural society, it also reconciles such values with those of Thatcherism, and does not necessarily stand in conceptual opposition to them. The emergence of a notion of the Alpine landscape as a 'private place' brings us back to the question asked at the outset, namely, what meanings are attached to the countryside 'from within' as a reaction to those superimposed 'from without'. While a rural society appeals to its values and produces this counter-discourse to come to terms with a rapidly changing world, it also draws selectively upon the values of the encompassing society. It draws upon the 'modern' concept of 'production' (i.e. the idea of a countryside 'made' by those who are active in it) to challenge a vision of their place as a 'postmodern' object of 'consumption' at the same time that it appropriates the idea of 'privatisation' for its own requirements.

In sum, what unites these conceptualisations is a vision of the social world and of a political landscape that casts the State as the 'outsider' and projects the values of a putative 'individualised' society onto the local social landscape. Thus, there is no automatic contradiction between an approach which examines the countryside as a context for political action and one which stresses its aestheticisation. If anything, it is the symbolic confrontation between different ways of defining the Alpine countryside as an object of aesthetic contemplation that forms the background against which the State is contested. It seems arguable, then, that local-level views about the countryside are the product of a transformative process and that they draw selectively upon different ideas, of which a vision of the countryside as 'privatised' is probably the most powerful.

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Notes

- 1 The literature on the countryside as a site of resistance is vast. See particularly Scott (1985) and Reed-Danahay (1993).

- 2 The last few years have seen an increasing interest in anthropology, and in the ways local communities resist attempts to turn rural areas into natural parks or 'heritage'. See, for example, Heatherington (2010).
- 3 See, for an examination of the concept of 'landscape', Hirsch (1995) and Stewart and Strathern (2003).
- 4 The 2001 census revealed that only 5.5 per cent of the employed Italian population engaged in agricultural activities (Merlo 2009: 87).
- 5 The Northern League's popularity has been failing as a result of a series of corruption scandals, and the party suffered humiliating defeats in local and European elections held between 2012 and 2014.
- 6 Despite the radical-right overtones of its political propaganda, the Northern League also succeeded in capturing the vote of former supporters of left-wing parties (for details see Cento Bull 2000: 18).
- 7 The territory of the municipality, whose shape is roughly that of an elongated oval, extends approximately 13 km from north to south and roughly 6 km from east to west. It has a total land area of 125.54 km², and numbers seven villages: Canal San Bovo (the municipal seat), Caoria, Cicon, Gobbera, Prade, Ronco, and Zortea. Only the two ends of the valley are inhabited; its central part, by contrast, is steep and narrow, uninhabitable, and too rocky even for pasturage. Both slopes rise sharply from the valley floor and differ greatly from each other in most respects. Because of its unfavourable orientation it is uninhabitable and covered with forest for the most part, and almost all the settlements lie on the eastern side. Mountains range in elevation from 2,000 to 2,500 m, and the average altitude of the valley floor is about 700 m.
- 8 The local sawmill was shut down in late 2002.
- 9 The Northern League created this community of values and meanings defined by regional 'ethnic' criteria. A curious aspect of northern 'ethnic' identity was that it was not defined by language, but by territory. The Northern League differentiated itself from most of the separatist movements of other parts of Europe, which stress language as a marker of differentiation, because it did not make use of language as a basis for the mobilisation of 'northern Italian consciousness'; more importantly, it succeeded in creating a myth of northern Italian identity even though being northern Italian had never been an issue before.
- 10 The municipal territory of Canal San Bovo is part of *Natura 2000*, a Europe-wide network of nature protected areas established in 1992.
- 11 See, for a discussion of this issue, Camanni (2002: 81–3).
- 12 It is not purely coincidence that in the early 1990s the valley was designated as the 'Trentino's green heart' (*Il cuore verde del Trentino*).
- 13 For details see Stacul (2003: 70–89).

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