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# AGRICULTURE AND SELF-SUSTAINABILITY: SUGGESTIONS FROM THE MEZZADRIA

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## ABSTRACT

Tuscany provides an excellent example of the interweaving, from many points of view, of the rural and urban worlds. The continual, often conflict-ridden, exchange of human energy, capital and cultural models between these diverse realities has left its mark on the rich history of the region, bringing about special forms of economic development, social formation, landscapes and urban morphologies.

At the very centre of this scene we find the predominance -all over centuries until the beginning of the second half of the last one- of a particular form of agricultural organisation, the mezzadria, an Italian typical share-cropping system, which gave rise to an original rural society strongly marked by its socio-cultural, economic and spatial order. It represents a key point to decode the most important features of the region: from the making of the unique Tuscanian landscape to the impressive process of a development based on small enterprise and diffused industrialisation, mainly during the sixties and seventies.

Can the mezzadria issue, which has been investigated from any viable point of view into innumerable fields of research, be looked into once again, in order to find useful suggestions toward an ecologically correct designing and planning of open spaces?

This is something crucial into a general vision in which agriculture isn't any more seen as a marginal sector, but as a strategic one in the production of environmental and territorial quality.

In this paper, moving from the illustration of some of the mezzadria well known characteristics we try to re-analyse and interpret them in this new perspective. A few examples:

The versatility and creativity of the work of which the various members of the mezzadro (share-cropper) family were capable and in particular their familiarity with artisan-type work in producing certain articles;

The natural attitude towards maintenance of goods and limitation at the maximum level of the waste and, consequently, of the production of rubbish, which used to be more or less only an organic one.

The mixed and very various pattern of cultivation adopted in order to guarantee a self sufficient farm able to satisfy all the mezzadro family needs

The peculiar features of the farmhouses, result of a continual process of growth and transformation of buildings to meet changing housing requirements of the family and production needs of the farm

The spatial organisation of the production which gave rise to peculiar high quality visual relationships between the various physical components of the mezzadria world.

All these elements, by a deep analysis and re-interpretation, can help us to meet the present pressing needs of self-sustainable life style.

## 1.

Tuscany, despite the presence of many areas affected by environmental decay and urban pollution, is still today a very rich mine of resources for the production of wealth founded on the quality of living and environmental sustainability. Many regional features can be singled out as good examples of these: the widespread precious historical and naturalistic heritage, the different kinds of beautiful landscapes (hill-farming, mountainous, coastal, insular), the network of small historical towns, the strong urban identity and long-lasting civic, administrative and social-cultural models, the diffused system of top quality small local industry and so on. Many of these features are very much connected to the traditional rural world (AA.VV, 1996).

Tuscany provides, in fact, an excellent example of the interweaving of the rural and urban worlds from many points of view. The continual, often conflict-ridden, exchange of human energy, capital and cultural models between these diverse realities has left its mark on the rich history of the region, bringing about

special forms of economic development, social formation, landscapes and settlement morphologies.

At the very centre of this scene we find the predominance, over all the centuries until the beginning of the second half of the last one, of a particular form of agricultural organisation, the *mezzadria*, typical share-cropping Italian system, which gave rise to an original rural society strongly marked by its social-cultural, economic and spatial order. It represents a key point for decoding the most important features of the region: from the making of the unique Tuscanian landscape to the impressive process of development based on small enterprises and diffused industrialisation, mainly during the sixties and the seventies (Paloscia, 1992).

If it is true that the values of historical territory are key elements of an ecological transformation and its most precious resource for the future (AA.VV., 1996), looking at the *mezzadria* organisation of work, ways of cultivating land and use of natural resources, a new question could be raised: is it feasible to return to the theme of *mezzadria* in Tuscany - deeply examined from every possible angle over at least two centuries of analysis and reflection within the most diverse fields of study - in search for clues useful in terms of ecological transformation, for the interpretation of "environmental wisdom", life styles and the territorial values they produced.

The notes<sup>1</sup> which follow suggest a positive answer, which also aims at establishing a commitment and an invitation to examine this area of research in greater depth. Some well known elements of the world of *mezzadria* are recalled, synthetically, in order to approach a re-reading in this new guise<sup>2</sup>.

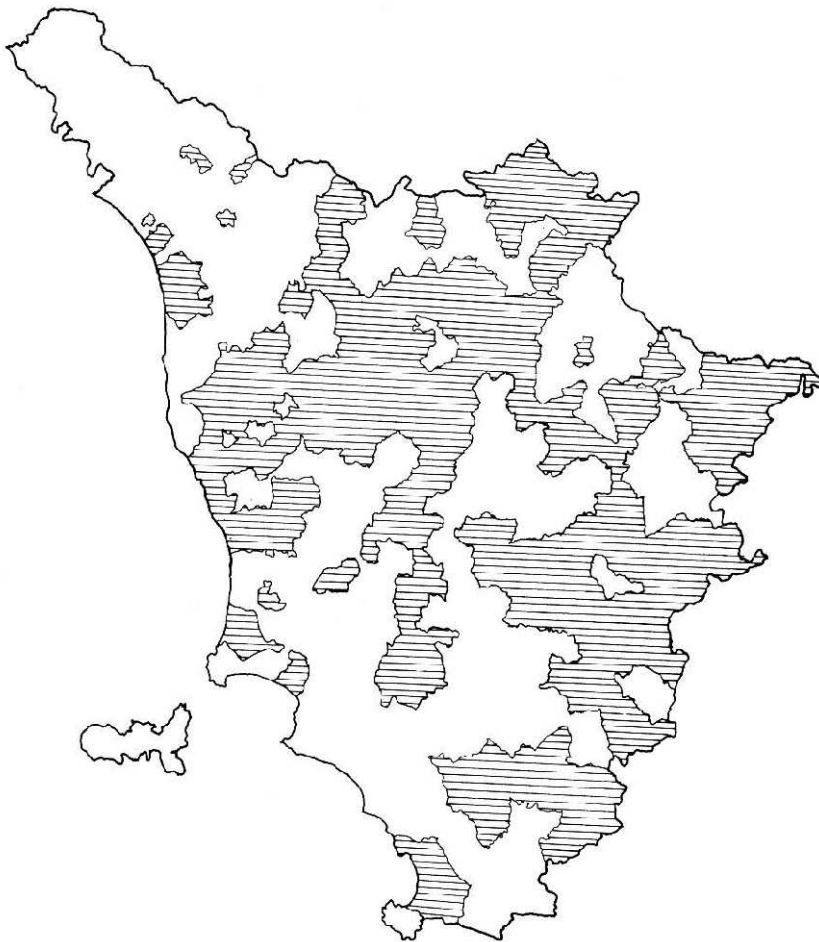


Fig.1. Mezzadria in Tuscany. The shading shows communal areas in which share cropping is prevalent.

(From G. Beccatini ed. 1975, reformulated by the author)

<sup>1</sup> These notes are based on a previous script, which has been enlarged and modified. See Paloscia, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Amongst its illustrative reference parameters this reinterpretation also makes use of some of those which Mercedes Bresso has defined as "ideas for a new economic model" (Bresso, 1991).

## 2.

The *mezzadria* consisted in an agricultural contract - in theory an annual agreement although in practice it lasted much longer - between a landowner and a cultivator, the latter becoming a *mezzadro* (sharecropper) on the basis of the contract. Under this agreement the landowner provided the *mezzadro* with a plot of land, the *podere* (farm), and a house to live in, along with various agricultural outbuildings. In return the *mezzadro* agreed to cultivate the land, guaranteeing the use of the labour force of his entire family, and also carried out various other jobs for the landowner, such as ploughing and planting new crops, maintenance of the landowner's house, etc. The expenses involved in running the *podere* and the final product were or, better, should have been divided equally between the two. The *mezzadro* in fact never got the real half of the products.

From its beginnings the *mezzadria* constituted a central and constant factor not only of the economy, but more generally of the society and way of life in the region. Its origins date back to the breakdown of the feudal system when the new urban landowners, having abolished serfdom, tied the serfs to the land once more with share-cropping agreements. However, these agreements are generally considered as the first step towards more modern types of agrarian relationships (Sereni, 1984).

Thus, the *mezzadria* was founded from the city which, during the course of its long history, would draw capital and skills from the country in a cyclic series of close interrelationships<sup>3</sup>. The eighteenth century crisis in urban manufacturing and related international trade (in which the cities of Tuscany were leaders) led to the introduction of reforms<sup>4</sup> abolishing the encumbrances on much of the land and draining vast areas of poor terrain. This involved a general reorganisation of the agricultural system through the injection of urban capital into the share-cropping countryside and gave rise to a more articulated form of agricultural production based on the *fattoria* (Sereni, 1984).

The *fattoria* in Tuscany is the name used to identify both the large building (or group of buildings), usually annexed to a *villa* or *casa padronale* (the landowner's mansion), at the very centre of a large estate, and the large estate itself, when it is divided into various share-cropping *poderi*. As a building, it contained the house of the *fattore*, who represented the landowner in relations with the share-croppers and carried out the functions of administration and overseeing, and other functions more directly related to production (processing or preservation plants for some products, commonly used machinery and tools, etc.). As the management organisation of the great noble estates the *fattoria* became the controlling element of the new economic, social, and spatial order of the share-cropping world which was essential for the development, in recent periods, of diffused manufacturing in the region.

By means of the *fattorial/poderi* system the *mezzadria* became established and reproduced itself, despite the anachronism of its pre-capitalist forms, not so much for reason of production, but as an instrument of economic and social control (Preti, 1986). At the beginning of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it still represented the predominant form of agrarian organisation in the Tuscan countryside (see figure 1). There then began a sudden decline under the effects of the devastating crisis in agriculture which followed<sup>5</sup>. *Mezzadria* was officially abolished by an act of Parliament in 1964.

The disappearance of the *mezzadria* was certainly not in itself a negative phenomenon in that it represented the passing of an archaic relationship between the owner and the tenant<sup>6</sup>. It did, however, go together with the dismantling of the entire agricultural territory in that this was in fact replaced rather than by

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<sup>3</sup> The spread to rural areas, over the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of small manufacturing, associated with a crisis in the large urban factory, can be seen as the latest expression of this kind city/country interrelationship.

<sup>4</sup> The so called Leopoldine Reforms, from the name of the very enlightened Granduke of Tuscany, who greatly desired them.

<sup>5</sup> Between the second half of the Fifties and the end of the Sixties more than 400,000 mezzadri and members of their families, usually the younger ones, left their fields. This represented an enormous number for an area with a population of only 3 million. This phenomenon would have led, as it did in the South Italy, to a mass exodus from Tuscany, had it not been for the fact that, parallel to a progressive intensification of exchange on the world markets, there was a marked increase in demand both nationally and internationally for the type of products traditionally produced in Tuscany. See Becattini, 1975.

<sup>6</sup> From the point of view of social relationships and practices the *mezzadria* system corresponds to a world dominated by exploitation and total subordination both on the part of the farmer towards his master and on that of the members of his own family towards himself. A piece of history which belongs, from this point of view, irreversibly to the past.

new forms of productive organisation in harmony with the environment and the landscape, by abandonment, speculation and polluting agriculture which destroyed the resources, specificity and territorial values. And it is from this point of view that the motivation for repairing broken threads must be considered.

### 3.

The centre and the driving force of the structure of the *mezzadria* system and of its self-production was the patriarchal peasant family, an extended family which could reach, on the bigger *podere*, as many as 30 or 40 family units. The essential conditions for a working family/*podere* relationship was that the dimensions of the latter should allow for an optimal use of the work force potentiality of the family and at the same time satisfy nearly entirely their alimentary needs and their means of livelihood in general.

The family which had settled on the *podere* therefore made up a sort of complex and self-sustainable micro-organism, its various elements working in different areas. There were numerous wide-ranging activities going beyond the work in the fields themselves or concerned with animal husbandry (cattle and oxen kept for working and providing manure), which were the central areas of activity and corresponded to the main source of income but also including a wide variety of cottage craft production. Being bound to cultivation cycles imposed by the seasons and weather conditions, there was discontinuity in agricultural work, the enforced breaks favouring the carrying out of a variety of complementary work which led to intense self-production activity. It was often carried out, in the case of demanding work, by making use of an exchange of labour between different *poderes* - this was particularly common at harvest time or at other phases in the cultivation calendar which required greater manpower.

This work was wide-ranging: periodic building works, concerning extension or transformation work to houses or small new annexes, the care of pigs, cattle or farmyard animals for the production of meat, milk and eggs, the preparation of dried food, preserves, cheeses, hams and sausages, looking after the woodland which a *podere* always had along its border or in some outlying part, wood cutting (wood being the principal source of energy for domestic eating and cooking purposes), the making of more or less rudimentary clothes or tools for everyday use, making use of the raw materials produced on the *podere* (wool, leather, straw, wood, fibres etc.). The "production of utilities" involving a parsimonious use of materials, goods made to last and to be used until they were entirely worn out, was without a doubt the hallmark of the frugal style of life of the family living the *mezzadria* system. In this type of work, moreover, the more talented and able members could express themselves in the creativity of skilled craft work. Waste was kept to a minimum and so also the production of rubbish, the composition of which was almost exclusively organic and so in no way interfered with natural reproduction cycles and the course of biological cycles.

### 4.

Following the same logic, which quoting Daly (1991), we could define as maximisation of the productivity of natural capital - in this case the land - the organisation of farming was characterised by a great variety in cultivation. From a poly-cultural and self-sufficient point of view, within the spatial dimension of the *podere* and rising out of the need to extract from the *podere* every means for supporting the family, every nook and cranny of the ground had to be cultivated in order to increase the overall yield and to obtain a harvest that was as abundant and as varied as possible. The basic element - above all in the intensive *mezzadria* system which characterised the part of Tuscany corresponding to the basin of the Arno river - consisted of "mixed cultivation" in which several wood crops (generally vines with olives, less commonly with fruit trees) were associated with a great number of sown crops (forage and cereals in prime position, with smaller portions of land being given over to fruit and vegetables). In fact *mezzadria* gave shape to an agricultural practice in which was performed what Farinelli called "triplication of agricultural soil" (Farinelli, 1989). In this way it was possible to grow together, in the same place and at the same time, plants which were naturally hostile to each other, thus exploiting in an extremely intense fashion, ground which from a geo-pedological point of view was often very problematic.

This intense use however, thanks to constant and meticulous farming practices and appropriate organic fertilisation, made easy by the production of manure on the *podere*, never produced wasteful effects but entered into an uninterrupted process of regeneration of the vital components of the soil.

### 5.

The very life style of the *mezzadria* family was characterised by another element, namely the day to day maintenance work that had to be carried out. This concerned every type of mendable product subject



to wear and tear, above all farm equipment and buildings. It was, however, extended to the whole of the *podere* and even beyond, with continuous care and attention being given to the many components that go to make up a territory and are represented by numerous and precise jobs required to be done on the land keeping everything spruce and in good working order. Streams, ditches, wells and drainage systems, roads on the *podere* and paths through the woods, terracing, embankments and dry stone walls are all elements linked to agricultural production and which the tenant had in most cases inherited from his predecessors pledging to keep them in order and look after them so that they could be handed down to the next generation.

This was a type of maintenance which went beyond immediate priority needs, a spontaneous attitude of respect and harmony with the environment, condensed into a collection of instruments and techniques produced by local culture the *sapienza ambientale* (environmental wisdom) which Magnaghi talks about (Magnaghi, 1994) and relating to it in a harmonious way.

## 6.

The result of centuries of *Mezzadria* experience in this environmental wisdom has had a spiralling outcome which, from a morphological viewpoint, it would not be an overstatement to define, as quite plainly exceptional on a qualitative level. The *mezzadria* system was the author of a process of territorialisation, summed up, in a more immediate image, in the landscape of the Tuscanian hillsides, rich in those aesthetic values which, as Braudel said, make it "one of the most exciting stretches of countryside in the world".

The mixed agriculture with its terraces and embankments, the line of the *podere* roads defined by the intermittent rows of cypress trees standing out against the landscape, the spatial relationship between the cultivated areas, the woodlands and the scattering of the dense settlement are at the origins of the specificity of this landscape picture.

Within it, the eye is taken by the farmhouses (see figure 2) which, observed in detail could appear to be the result, presented in a great variety of morphologies and typologies, of a process through time of continual growth and transformation, the fruit of a dialectic weave between local building culture, the living and production requirements of the *mezzadria* family, and in more recent times design methods drawn up by urban culture (Di Pietro, 1980).

This very high quality of the *mezzadria* landscape provides an essential stimulus for anyone aiming to put forward ecological transformations, from two points of view, at least: the rediscovery and reallocation on the purpose dimension in comparison with the outcome, which is immediately visible, of a balanced and constructive relationship between man and nature; the possibility to grasp the sense of certain component rules which lie beneath such a relationship, rules to be identified, analysed and interpreted so that, in a planning context, new ones may even be invented which are consistent with them and run along a line of continuity and not of censorship (Paloscia, 1995).

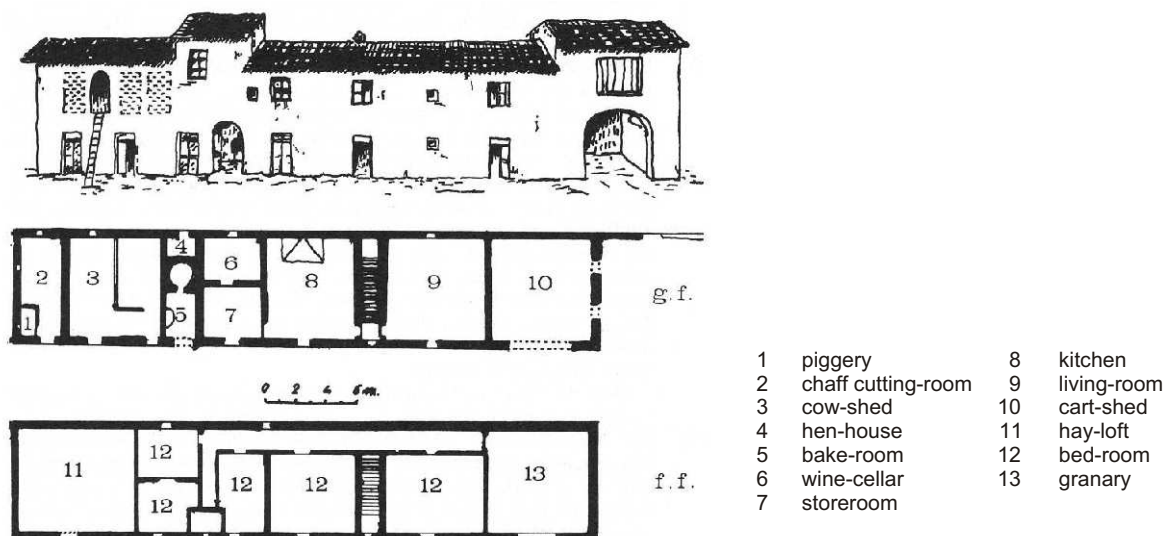


Fig. 2. Farmhouse in the Commune of Sesto Fiorentino.  
(From R. Biasutti, 1938, reformulated by the author).

7.

Self-production and limiting of monetary exchange, wasting as little as possible and reducing rubbish to the minimum, a culture of up-keep and maintenance, completion of biological cycles, the use of renewable energy sources and resources, environmental wisdom, the production of territorial values, the contemplative attitude represent special elements present in differing forms within the world of *mezzadria*. These elements should be examined minutely in their different aspects and ways of working and brought into line with today's requirements, in order to provide precious indications for ecological planning aimed at satisfying the ever more pressing need for environmental quality and the restitution of the feel and significance of places and their inhabitants' sense of belonging to them.

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