

Community Co-operation

*Article written by Giovanni Teneggi - Confcooperative Reggio Emilia Director
March 2022*

Community cooperatives are an entrepreneurial phenomenon characteristic of our country. They are cooperatives formed by inhabitants of territories and neighbourhoods that we say are fragile because they are too distant from economic, social or, in some cases, even both.

The first is recognisable in **Monticchiello** (Teatro Povero of the same name, in the historical and rural province of Siena), born in 1980 from the transformation of a theatrical association already active since 1967 into a collective enterprise of popular artistic representation [1].

Then in **Succiso** (Valle dei Cavalieri, on the ridge of the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines near Reggio Emilia) in 1991, where some young people from the proloco reopened the bar in cooperative form, to keep their community a place for conversation and meeting [2].

Not far away, in 2003, in **Cerreto Alpi** - the same Apennines - a group of young rebels to the destiny that wanted them big only in the valley, mixed up in the most important inhabited and industrial centres of their province, set up a work cooperative, with the particular aim of transforming the chestnut groves, houses and things of the village into biography, good and work again [3].

In 2004, in the **Montanara district of Parma**, the Associazione Gruppo Scuola, which had already put its head and hands into producing inhabitants and places as pedagogy since 1972 on the initiative of a local primary school teacher, definitively transformed its activity into a social cooperative, guaranteeing its diffusion and continuity [4].

The urban context is again the scene of the establishment of a community cooperative in 2006 and this time it is the **Sanità district in Naples**. It is the La Paranza cooperative: through its initiative, local young people reappropriate, on behalf of the entire community, the cultural heritage of the catacombs, making it a place of knowledge, expertise and work. Almost one hundred and fifty thousand visitors, from the five thousand they were, have been welcomed and accompanied by the cooperative's cultural guides [5].

NEW FORMS OF LIFE IN THE TIME OF THE PANDEMIC

The narrative of community cooperatives could leave history behind and resume from its contemporaneity by referring to some of the most recent experiences. Six of them were born during the harshest pandemic lockdown. Perhaps the only enterprises for which notaries had to reopen their offices and study specific preventive measures.

We make a stop in **Rigoso**, on the mountain ridge of Parma, where some inhabitants have repeated the exploits of Succiso, forming themselves into a cooperative to reopen some of the village shops. The conditions they have set themselves are that their managers live in the community, also having to take up residence there if they come from outside, and strict compliance with the development model that these businesses have now taught [6]. The co-production - along with the making certified in the chamber of commerce - of culture, sociality, environment and relations with the outside world that simultaneously takes up the narrative. From thirteen initial partners, they soon found themselves more than sixty, all of them paying their capital share of five hundred euros each.

In **Lampedusa**, some farms and islanders have responded to the project brought by the Terra! Association and Lampedusa was born. Their account of the initiative is enough to represent its value and the trigger conditions for the aim of making the island's land agricultural and productive again. "In addition to the vegetable garden area, the land on which we will plant ancient Pelagian seeds has been made available by our Aurian, a travelling companion for years here in Lampedusa, and by the family of Pasquale Tonnacchi, a man of great heart, culture and personality who was one of the last island farmers. His memory and his wisdom urge us even more to intensify our efforts to make these windswept lands sprout again' [7].

Also in Sicily, an association retraced the steps of the community cooperators of Montanara in Parma. The theatre of the scene is the **San Berillo district in Catania**. To say it is inland is not enough to represent its distance from the rest of the city and the world. It is, however, close to the young social and community geniuses of Trame di Quartiere who remake its places, alley by alley, one small square after another, with a severe manner, capable of replicating their intuition and method. They propose that a space cannot be called a place unless it is beautiful, useful, usable and without a time for individual biography and common narration. By forming themselves into a cooperative, they publicly declare the irreducibility of their purpose, their inhabitant implication, the urgency of making it also an economy of transformation and exchange in place. The occasion is the restoration of a historic building for cafeteria and social housing [8].

We have to go all the way back across the Italian boot to reach another community enterprise born in the period we are going through. It is VisoaViso and we find it in **Ostana**, below Monviso. From a refuge town that was supposed to die, with its three inhabitants, the last to leave it in 1985, to a world town that attracts young people in search of a place, with different languages and from different continents.

We leave Ostana recalled by the community cooperative Borghi Sparsi, in the northernmost and formerly rural metropolitan area of **Genoa**, which has reopened its shop in Prelo, in the municipality of Serrà Riccò, and makes the need for goods and services an opportunity to reconnect its people and reconcile their daily needs.

Then on to **Costabona**, still in the Reggio Emilia Apennines, where it is the culture of wheat and its supply chain, from the land to bread, that brings men and women with children and grandchildren back to the farmyards to talk about something else and think of themselves as a community once again as a common work.

COMMUNITY COOPERATIVES AS CULTURAL ENTERPRISES

There are many more than two hundred experiences such as those we have introduced and which we could point to in order to complete the image of a widespread phenomenon, which is now certain of its models of initiation, establishment and development [9]. They are always and profoundly cultural enterprises: because of the conditions they have to rearrange, because of the nature of the heritages they awaken, because of the visions and grammars necessary for their development, because of the learning they allow and, finally, because of the immaterial content indispensable in what they produce and propose to the market. The fundamental trait of what they do is the one in italics, and we have already pointed this out in this first introductory article of the path that Letture Lente begins. Let us retrace it.

Teatro Povero di Monticchiello, a collective enterprise of popular artistic representation. Valle dei Cavalieri, a place of conversation and encounter. Briganti del Cerreto, which still transforms chestnut groves, houses and things into biography, good and work. Gruppo Scuola, producing inhabitants and places as pedagogy. La Paranza, which reappropriates, on behalf of the entire community, the cultural heritage of the catacombs. Corte di Rigoso, which resumes its narrative by simultaneously co-producing culture, sociality, environment and relations with the outside world. Mpedusa, which, in order to make its land fertile again, remixes it with the culture, memory and wisdom of its inhabitants. Trame di Quartiere, which says no place without a time of individual biography and common narration [10].

We leave the rest to the re-reading of experiences as the key to representing possible spaces and times of work everywhere. Community cooperatives contradict the disciplinary rationality with which we have so far treated regeneration and territorial development by splitting their scenes between the biographical, the cultural, the social, the spatial and the economic. They are the common space of these competences, of their hybridisation before that of the inhabitants of their places. They present us once again, finally reconciled by a single narrative, individual aspirations, common spaces and goods, remunerations and citizenships.

THE WORK AND THE SHAPE OF THE CITY

They bring us back to the work of the city as necessary and fundamental to all that we recognise art and culture as being its 'most extreme and absolute' manifestation. These are the words of Pierpaolo Pasolini, which we listen to again on his centenary, as he climbs an anonymous path to Orte for 'La forma della città' in 1974.

"This road on which we walk, with this uneven, ancient pavement, is almost nothing, a humble thing, it cannot even be compared to certain stupendous works of art in the Italian tradition. And yet I think that this little road, so humble, should be defended with the same fervour, with the same goodwill, with the same rigour with which one defends the work of art of a great author. (...) The spot where this road leads, the ancient gate of the city of Orte: even this is almost nothing. They are simple walls, ramparts. No one would fight angrily and rigorously to defend them. And I chose instead to defend this. Something that is not sanctioned, not codified, that no one defends. But it is the work of the people, of the entire history of the people of a city, of an infinite number of nameless men, who worked within an era that went on to produce more extreme and absolute products with works of art' [11].

We would not be able to read these stories and we would not be able to embark on this journey together among the enterprising communities of inhabitants of our time without welcoming their languages and reaching them at the point of focus from which their perspective emanates. It is off the paper we have studied so far and a different look is needed. Referring to photographic representation, we will propose to abandon the macro lens, habitually used by the heroic initiatives of mere testimony, passionate about resistance and permanence, or, equally, by the monodisciplinary ones, passionate about the self. We will have to do the same with the zoom lens, used by detached professionals and consultants devoted to technique. The wide-angle lens is our tool, combined with long exposure times, for it to be blurred, wide and inclusive of the spectrum of our observation. A technique taught by Paul Strand in the words of Cesare Zavattini in their 'Un paese'. It was Luzzara in 1955.

"The eye has no age. Strand's really doesn't. Because of things he took the two dimensions, the being and the making. Perhaps that is why I imagined him conversing familiarly with space and time,

even when he slept, in order to understand sleep itself with his machine, for what could he leave unused?

Strand was only in appearance peaceful. In reality, it contended with space and time to sometimes conceal its original raison d'être.

Forgive me for insisting, but of Strand I always have in front of me this doing of his craft with a continuous 'native' correctness together with the object whose presence he wanted to fix.

It could even be the case that people would assume him to be hasty or over-confident in seeing him prepare the car in front of something and then abandon it there in the street as if remarking more on the ordinary than the exceptional, but when he returned, he collected all the rights of the calculated absence during which he knew well the kind of combination that that precise time and space would make [12].

THE COMMUNITY TASKS OF CULTURAL ACTION

What, then, can we ask of ourselves - and what can we ask of the cultural and educational systems that are present - so that contemporary humanity can resume the work of the places of which this time manifests such a dramatic and profound hunger?

First and foremost, culture must once again become space, time and narrative of the living. It is an opportunity for contemporary and participatory discovery of the new common forms of life with which lost men and women attempt to forgive themselves and find themselves. The innermost areas, whether urban or rural, are revealed in these spaces to be more effective, as if the rarefaction of flows not only leads to more punctual and composed reactivity but also allows for a more lucid reading for their replicability in other contexts. Community cooperation has been and is a laboratory of innovation [13]. Villages and neighbourhoods engaged in community work do not consume inhabitants and do not shelter them, they produce them.

Illuminating in this regard is Gilles Clement's Manifesto of the Third Landscape, which points to the need for third areas (those on roadsides and in shady or steep areas) where life can generate itself, producing what is needed for cultivated lawns and orderly gardens [14].

Who will be able to look at these areas, taking care, pleasure and competence in them, if not the cultural system?

The second step is the cultural implication in the political, social and economic dimensions. We will not have representation of the territories unless we first reconstitute a common and living representation of them. In order for this to be a form of citizenship and political empowerment, however, it is necessary to participate with intentionality. The experiences we will follow will testify to the extent to which cultural action can exercise one of the most immediate functions of political advocacy and social cohesion. The initiation and cultural tools related to knowledge curation, up to artistic expressions, are in this regard priority opportunities over the usual practices of participatory codesign. There is a need to invest in cultural and artistic practices involved in regenerative processes and the care of local cultural heritage as a privileged field for their triggering. We can observe the same necessary reciprocity with regard to the issues of social outfitting and the qualification of local products for their market appeal. Moreover, it is clear that community enterprises with a cultural trigger are more effective in obtaining the four essential conditions for their economic sustainability: the consensus of the local population, access to tangible and intangible assets, public reputation translated into partnership opportunities, and qualified distinctiveness in the market.

In Mamoiada, in the Nuoro Barbagia, a long and qualified cooperative experience of the redevelopment of the Museo della Maschera was among the first and clearest applications of this condition. The museum has been reopened, making it a point of knowledge and observation of the territory by its inhabitants, a trigger for processes of belonging, social setting up and economic entrepreneurship among the inhabitants. The same can be observed in Avigliano Umbro with the cooperative and community rediscovery of the fossil forest of Dunarobba.

In Ussita, on the slopes of the Sibillini Mountains, an otherwise tourist guide to the area was built with the local population and a participatory process, to the point of making it no longer and only a tool for presenting the places but a constructive event of the same. The final publication nor is a sort of manifestation [15].

The third step concerns the pedagogy of communities and demands that the school of inland territories be a cultural institution. A territory cannot be called a community if it does not know how to indicate its school, and there will be no recognisable school if it is not steeped in and imbued with its biographical, social, environmental and economic landscapes. We need a common space in which people's dreams, desires and fears become a common demand for a sense of their own urbanity. This space must be the school, a time of capacitation and unfolding of this conversation [16].

"Of a city," say Italo Calvino in Invisible Cities, "you don't enjoy the seven or seventy-seven wonders, but the answer it gives to your question."

Of all the cities dreamt up by Calvino in his tale, we are particularly fond here of Octavia, the spider's web city.

"If you want to believe me well. Now I will tell what Octavia-city looks like. There is a precipice in the middle of two steep mountains: the city is on the void, tied to the two ridges with ropes and chains and catwalks. (...) This is the base of the city: a net that serves as passage and support. Everything else, instead of rising above, hangs below (...). Suspended over the abyss, the life of the inhabitants of Octavia is less uncertain than in other cities. They know that more than that the net does not hold [17]."

NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

[1] <https://teatropovero.it/>

[2] <https://www.labsus.org/2017/02/succiso-storia-di-un-paese-che-voleva-vivere-e-di-un-bar-che-e-diventato-un-bene-comune/>

<http://www.vita.it/it/article/2016/05/23/succiso-il-paese-cooperativa-dove-ogni-giorno-si-cambia-lavoro/139495/>

[3] <https://www.ibrigantidicerreto.com/>

[4] <https://www.grupposcuola.it/>

[5] Nocchetti C., Vico Esclamativo. Voci dal Rione Sanità, San Gennaro FSG, 2018.

[6] Teneggi G., Cooperative di Comunità. Fare economia nelle aree interne, in De Rossi A. (ed.), Riabitare L'Italia, Donzelli, 2018/2020.

[7] <https://www.associazioneterra.it/2020/03/10/nasce-agricola-mpidusa-cooperativa-di-comunita-lampedusa/>

[8] <https://www.tramediquartiere.org/>

[9] IrecoopER (ed.), Feasibility Study for the Development of Community Cooperatives, 2016.

https://www.mise.gov.it/images/stories/documenti/allegati/coop/SF_SVILUPPO DELLE COOPERATIVE DI COMUNITA.pdf

- [10] Pazzagli R., Il valore trasformativo della cultura per la rinascita delle aree fragili italiane, in Territori della Cultura (Rivista on line), n.46/2021; Teneggi G., Cultura e sviluppo territoriale. Paole, Echi e Rimbombi, in Territori della Cultura (Rivista on line), no.46/2021.
- [11] <https://www.teche.rai.it/2015/01/pasolini-e-la-forma-della-citta-1974/>
- [12] Zavattini C., Strand P., Un Paese, Einaudi, 1953/2021.
- [13] Teneggi G., La spinta delle cooperative di comunità, in Osti G., Jachia E. (eds.), AttivAree, Il Mulino, 2020.
- [14] Clement G., The Manifesto of the Third Landscape, Quodlibet, 2005.
- [15] AAVV, Ussita. Deviazioni inedite raccontate dagli abitanti, Ediciclo editore, 2020.
- [16] Tantillo F., Luisi D. (eds.), Scuola e innovazione culturale nelle aree interne, Loescher, 2019.
- [17] Calvino I., Invisible Cities, Einaudi, 1972.

ABSTRACT

Community cooperatives teach us that cultural action is essential for the qualification of territorial regeneration strategies. These are mutual aid companies set up among inhabitants of inner, rural or urban places for their rebirth. The more than two hundred Italian experiences are all cultural enterprises because at the centre of their initiation and their affirmation we find narratives of the territories and their biographies, within global conversations. This business model makes cultural competence a contemporary place that holds together territories and the market of inland areas more effectively thanks to their fragility.