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Artichokes and Fresh Veggies

Taking the Rural Out of Prison

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The unique challenges of rurality for communities and business are explored here with reference to the horticultural project within the only female prison in Italy, located in the Giudecca island in Venice. Since 1994, inmates here have transformed the rurality of the geographical location of the prison with its six thousand square meters of cultivable land, into a lucrative business able to generate emotional and financial wellbeing. The first part of this contribution highlights how by introducing and sustaining the method of organic farming when growing vegetables to be sold at the local market, the women incarcerated set up a social enterprise, undoubtedly able to challenge the social sources of the ecological and financial crisis faced by the city of Venice – culturally and geographically positioned away from any rural environment. As well as a form of self-redemption as stated in the law 26 July 1975, n 354, which identifies employment either inside or outside a penal institution as one of the key elements for the rehabilitation of offenders, in the Italian financial landscape “taking the rural out of prison” and turning it into a lucrative enterprise tells a story of how at times it is possible to halt, albeit momentarily, a spiral of poverty and financial hardship. The counterpart of this endeavor is discussed in the concluding section of this contribution which aims to put under scrutiny the almost oxymoronic rubric of “green capitalism” which in the context of Italy rests in the production of a paramount contradiction: the clash between an economy once based on unending agricultural growth and the current desiccation of the natural environment.

- Social enterprise
- Green prison programmes
- Citizenship
- Sustainability
- Urban landscape

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IN THIS PAPER, I PROBLEMATIZE discourses of sustainability, social responsibility and corporate citizenship within the context of the prison setting (Kimmett *et al.*, 2011). More specifically, I adopt as a case study the horticultural project within a female prison in Italy, situated on the Giudecca island, a mile from Venice's historical centre, to link a common theme that is the relationship between business and society (Bakan, 2004) with specific challenges posed by rurality (Hawken, 1995; Harvey, 1996). Broadly, I intend rurality here as both the use of the rural landscape—literally, the products from the vegetable garden within the prison—and the rural location of the prison situated on the Giudecca island by comparison with the urban location of Venice (Muratori, 1960). Borrowing from Douglass (1998) when he suggests a critical framework for understanding how rural–urban linkages or flows (of people, production, commodities, capital and information) can be mutually reinforcing or truncated, I intend to open a space for a discussion leading to exploring different trajectories and reciprocal or opposing relationships between urban and rural (Schot *et al.*, 1997). I wish to add to this framework the consideration of flows of natural resources and wastes (Allen *et al.*, 1999). The dynamics of these flows might be determined by local policies or strategies driven by regional and national policies (Lane, 1973), resulting often in the promotion of industrialization. In this instance, over several decades, we witnessed the expansion of Venice to the rural mainland, with its epilogue in the creation, as far back as 1926, of what later became the industrial petrochemical pole of Porto Marghera, with its commercial and industrial port. Subsequently, in the 1990s, this time driven by international processes, such dynamics saw falling prices for export, resulting in the closure of the industrial hub of Porto Marghera (Garret, 2001). As a consequence, we have an increasing internal migration of impoverished workers from industrial urban gentrified areas around Venice to (the rediscovered) rural islands in Venice, in search of alternative livelihood opportunities (Plant, 2003).

It is worth highlighting here that, in Italy, there is no single official definition of rural areas at the national level (Saraceno, 1994). Technically, the concept of what is rural has taken on different nuances and meanings over time, following progressive changes in the country's social and economic situation (Mason, 2015). By and large, it is recognized that the various processes of transformation of the economic and socio-cultural structure of the rural areas have called for revision of the concept of rural, the rural area no longer being identified exclusively as farmland (Brunori, 1994; Distaso, 1995), while the fundamentally bipolar (urban–rural) approach can no longer be considered adequate. Here I am mindful of the possibility of a critique of the interpretation of the classical works of Tönnies, Weber and Simmel that tend to focus on the bipolar distinction between rural and urban life or between complex and simple societies, to read and contextualize urban life as the epitome of instability. Furthermore, the well-known observations of Tönnies (1955) can be viewed as a definitive claim of the stability of rural life as opposed to the volatility of urban life. Thus, the *Gemeinschaft* (community) among the people inhabiting rural settlements is stronger than among city-dwellers, because rural life is “the lasting and genuine

form of living together” (Tönnies, 1955, p. 37). In contrast, the *Gesellschaft* (society) prevailing in cities is transitory and superficial.

Within this framework, and with the support of Anania and Tenuta (2006), proposing a model for the classification of rural areas consisting of several variables, I claim that the relationship between Venice as urban dwelling and Giudecca, an island which typifies rurality not only for its vegetable gardens but for the low level of the per capita rate of income and consumption—the latter considered even a stronger indicator of rurality (Saraceno, 1994)—is a connection between urban and rural of paramount importance. The aim here is not to hit on a univocal definition of what exactly is rural, but rather to support the claim of the fluidity of the meaning of rurality. I suggest new understandings of the processes that make up rurality, calling upon the articulation of its social, economic and biophysical aspects. My argument here is that the stability of Venice, the consumer city, an extreme case of urban concentration, can be sustained when the equilibrium with its rural counterpart, Giudecca island, the producer city, is acknowledged and looked for. This interface in turn stresses the need for a conceptual and methodological shift from the physical definition of urban and rural areas (understood as clearly limited geographic and administrative entities) to a broader understanding, whereby the complex patterns of settlement and resource use, the flow of natural resources, of capital, goods, services and people, do not fit or accord with jurisdictional boundaries (Brunori, 1994).

Venice, which I depict as the unaccomplished city, is not to be considered an island, but the aggregation of many islands (Plant, 2003). Furthermore, Venice is not only the main cluster of islands, but also the whole archipelago in which each island plays a specific role. Giudecca’s role is twofold: together with St Erasmo island, this is an agricultural land but also, together with many islands which support the existence of Venice as a city, Giudecca is a place where detention and imprisonment are productive sites for exclusionary discourses (Martin and Mitchelson, 2009). As Zorzi (2002) reminds us, in Venice, islands were, and are, used as hospitals for infectious diseases needing isolation, mental hospitals, cemeteries and indeed prison establishments, where individuals perceived as dangerous, different or uncomfortable should be secluded.

Venice as the unaccomplished city

Venice has long been seen as an impossible city (Spurr, 2016), the “city that remains implicit” (Calvino, 1974, p. 86), but also, the unaccomplished city where the boundaries between urban and rural are blurred and where, to paraphrase Castells (1989) we have the opportunity to witness a “space without place”. The rhetorical trope of Venice as the unaccomplished city rests in its singularity, its improbability as an urban entity if urban exists as the opposite of rural. Ceccarelli and Occhialini (2011) talk of the many layers of Venice, and borrowing from their sharp analysis of the complex originality that is Venice, my claim is that each periphery such as the hospital, the cemetery and indeed

the prison in Venice are “something apart”, a segment that contributes to the existence of the city even when we examine more carefully the reality that is Venice. This is because Venice does not correspond to the stereotypical image of a city. In fact, Venice is not an integrated urban structure, even with all its attempts to be a self-sufficient urban system. Self-sufficiency is a peculiar trait of any city, and the hurdles for Venice to reach the status of a complete city are even more evident. The need to obtain self-sufficiency for a city that is unaccomplished has the *gravitas* of the guarantee of political independence. It is almost a sort of Aristotelian suggestion for Venice to become autarkic and finally be complete. The island of Giudecca then, becomes of dominant significance for the acquisition of a status of Venice as completed city, because, not only does the island produce vegetables and fruits but also, most surprisingly, given the size and the location of the island, until few decades ago, fresh milk was still produced by cows in stables located on the Giudecca (Zorzi, 2002) making the link between rural and urban even more significant. A closer look at the island of Giudecca can facilitate the understanding of the geometries that frame Venice as the unaccomplished city.

Originally called *Spina Longa* (Long Thorn) because of its fish-shaped silhouette, Giudecca is the widest island and at the same time the closest to Venice, separated by the deep Canal of Giudecca, formerly called Canale Viganò (Zorzi, 2002). According to Calabi *et al.* (1996) the name would be derived from the Jews who lived here, while Garrett (2001), instead, makes the origin of the *Zudegà* (judged) with reference to those judged by the local tribunals and sent to the island as a sort of exile. The relative remoteness of the island meant also that many religious communities found this the perfect location to pray in convents, which, due to their rural location, could benefit from the many horticultural gardens, thus remaining economically self-sufficient. One of the many convents on the island of Giudecca was later transformed into a female only penal institution (Muratori, 1960).

The Giudecca prison

The female prison of Giudecca was originally known as the convent-hospice of Santa Maria Maddalena, of the Augustinian Sisters, although its origins are uncertain as historians do not agree on the date work commenced on the building, later to become the penal institution. It is now established (Zorzi, 2002) that from 1524 until 1530, some houses were purchased on the island of Giudecca with the purpose of lodging detainees. We need to wait until 1542 for a formal official acknowledgment that some small buildings on the island of Giudecca had been turned into a place of detention for female offenders.

In 1601, when the plague began to reap victims (Lane, 1973), the Venetian Senate appointed 12 governors to ensure that the Sisters and the female detainees could receive financial help and emotional support, from the whole neighbourhood, thus forging a long-lasting relationship between the prison

and the outside world. In 1835, and then in 1837 and 1848, the perimeter of the penal institution turned into a Lazzaretto, a leper hospital for victims of cholera (Garrett, 2001). In 1849, the prison was used as a military hospital due to the evacuation of nearby Santa Chiara hospital because of bombings. On 15 April 1856, the prison was officially named the female penal institution of Giudecca. Inside there were 15 Sisters of Charity as prison guards and a chaplain, looking after 320 detainees. On 31 May 2017, with a capacity to host 122 detainees—places are calculated on the basis of the criterion of 9 square metres living space per single prisoner—data from the Department for Penitentiary Affairs (2017) reveal a figure of 77 detainees.¹ All of them but two, because of health problems, are involved in paid work supervised by the Penitentiary Administration. Indeed, article 15 of the Italian Penitentiary Rules, Law 26 July 1975, no. 354, identifies work as one of the key elements for the rehabilitation of offenders by establishing that, except for cases of impossibility, all individuals detained should be granted the right to an occupation (Mattioni and Tranquilli, 1998).

More specifically, at the Giudecca prison, there are internal jobs managed by the administration, ordinary maintenance work, and a laundry room, a tailoring shop, a cosmetic laboratory and a special place, which has strong and significant links with the outside territory, the vegetable garden. The garden is an innovative form of social enterprise that combines economic equity with solidarity (Mora and Ragazzi, 1998), thanks to integrated interventions between the Penitentiary Administration, the local social and economic environment and the wider city of Venice, together with the mainland municipalities, as vegetables from the Garden of Wonders as it is known, are also sold in markets on the mainland.²

Sustainability in prison: The (vegetable) Garden of Wonders

The Garden of Wonders, managed by the social cooperative Rio Terà dei Pensieri, set up in 1994, sees several detainees working on a rotating system so that they can be employed for at least 3 hours from Monday to Friday. In the 6,000 square metre garden surrounded by the prison walls, women grow fruits and vegetables, and manage several greenhouses. They cultivate a bit of everything, including typical local vegetables: Treviso chicory, Padua broccoli, and the fine

1 www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/mg_1_14_1.page?facetNode_1=3_1_6&contentId=SST133303&previousPage=mg_1_14

2 According to most recent data from the Registry Office of the Municipality of Venice (personal communication) out of a population of 55,589 individuals legally residing in Venice in 2016, Giudecca counts for a population of 4,792. The Garden of Wonders (most recent data are from the first quarter of 2017) has a productivity which exceeds local (i.e. Venice city centre and Giudecca combined) requirements by 15% thus justifying exporting vegetables to markets in the mainland and reserving 7% of productivity for making preserves.

violet artichokes of St Erasmo. There is also an orchard and an “aromatic” section dedicated to herbs and chili peppers.

The so-called “green prison” programmes are certainly not a novelty both in Italy and in many other countries. Green prison programmes in essence provide a form of nature-based therapy to prisoners under the guidance of trained professionals (Newton and Harte, 1997). Prisoners typically engage in gardening and horticultural activities, such as landscaping, cultivating plants, green roof gardening, learning about environmental stewardship and caring for nature. Although variations exist, green prison programmes often combine gardening activities with vocational education, and teach prisoners social skills, such as how to work effectively with others in groups. Prominent examples are to be seen in the USA, in the UK and in Northern Europe (Jiler, 2006). What, however, is unique to the Garden of Wonders is the efficacy of the programme with regards to the resettlement of prisoners. When comparing the 1- and 3-year reconviction rates of released female prisoners enrolled in the green programme at the Giudecca prison with female prisoners detained in other penal institutions in Italy (Romano *et al.*, 2017), where horticultural activities are not available to offenders, we see that women did not reoffend except for a non-statistically meaningful percentage of 5% of cases. Although recidivism can be intended in different ways, by comparing for example the number of re-arrests against actual reconvictions, even if we allow for a statistical grey area where inmates are re-entering a penal establishment for offences committed prior to their participation in the green programme, we can safely argue that involvement in any horticultural activity is successful in reducing recidivism. Clearly, simply comparing general recidivism rates does not afford us with direct causal substantiation for the effectiveness of green prison programmes, nor does it tell us specifically what aspects of the programme are driving the results or whether they are more effective than other programmes, where for instance detainees are in employment while serving their sentence.

The positive impact of green programmes on offenders is well discussed in the relevant academic literature (Rice and Lremy, 1998; Jiler, 2006). Prison environments are often austere, congested, chaotic and isolating places. Green programmes offer an opportunity for relief from such harsh social environments. A close relationship with nature through horticultural activities has a restorative effect for detainees who can thus improve, even through brief exposure to the natural environment, their physical and mental health. For example, experiencing nature can improve cognitive functioning, lower stress and blood pressure and boost psychological wellbeing. An overall sense of wellbeing can in turn significantly reduce risk-taking behaviour, cultivating better decision-making skills and improving overall psychosocial functioning. Exposure to nature has also shown to promote cooperative behaviour and pro-social values (Pearce *et al.*, 1989). Once a week, inmates who are granted permission to work outside the penal institution, sell the garden’s many products at the local market managing a very profitable stall on the Giudecca island. The link with the outside world, made possible by the products sold, is of importance to the local community because the production is completely organic and certified

ICEA but it is also reasonably cheap—compared with organic products sold in supermarkets or specialized shops in Venice—thus contributing to more widespread organic food consumption among many households in the Giudecca island, otherwise unable to afford fresh organic fruits and vegetables. The cooperative that manages the Garden of Wonders has an agreement with ESAV (Veneto Agricultural Development Agency) for sustaining cultivation protocols able to guarantee excellence in the quality of the products from the prison garden. Providing products which are of excellent quality is empowering for the women incarcerated not only because they are able to earn a living, but also because they are becoming self-sufficient while not being harmful to the environment. Rather than depleting natural resources, the horticultural project within the prison is not simply an endeavour that benefits those who are incarcerated but also the population of the island, as the vegetable garden contributes to supporting the long-term ecological balance of the rural area that is the Giudecca island. Furthermore, the project of sustainability from within the prison has had many contagious ramifications, as nowadays many inhabitants of the Giudecca island have taken to cultivating vegetables and local products in their own small gardens.

The same cooperative also manages the cosmetics laboratory, employing four inmates with a regular employment contract. The cultivated plants from the garden are then processed under the guidance of a cosmetologist, and utilized for the production of distilled water, extracts and essential oils, and then processed into ointments, detergents and balms and then sold outside with the trademark *Veneziana Coloniali & Spices*. The laboratory and the vegetable market are now part of the Venetian tradition and, currently, *Rio Terà dei Pensieri* cooperative is working on a project to create a laboratory to produce preserved products (such as jams, sauces and oil).

Taking the rural out of prison is then a process that embeds the main founding principles that characterize any cooperative enterprise (Defourny, 2001). We can witness here both internal mutuality—inmates supporting each other—and external mutuality—taking the prison out of the penal institution. Other deep-seated principles seen in any cooperative enterprise and replicated in the Giudecca prison's horticultural project are: non-profit distribution (products are sold at a much lower price compared with similar products with the same inherent quality) and participation of inmates and the local community. We also have other characteristics such as: representativity as women detainees' voices and needs are finally heard and acknowledged; accessibility as women inmates can have access to the local community; and intergenerational solidarity—again this relates to the relationship between the inside and the outside. We also have intercooperative solidarity where women employed in the cooperative, once they have served their sentence, often maintain a strong working relationship with the cooperative (Ortmann, 1996; Borzaga and Solari, 2001).

Because of these principles, the main aim for *Rio Terà dei Pensieri* is not so much to achieve the highest return on capital investment but, rather, to specifically engage in the integration of disadvantaged women into society (Mattioni and Tranquilli, 1998).

In accordance with the cooperative principles outlined earlier, the cooperative that manages the Garden of Wonders covers caring activities (i.e. initiatives for the care and the protection of the local environment intended as the horticultural garden and the wider rural landscape) and training activities (introduction for female detainees, who are unable to enter “normal” productive circuits, to business activities and employment opportunities). Rio Terà dei Pensieri is able to substitute the public sector in providing employment for the women detained at the Giudecca prison, also displaying greater levels of effectiveness in the large-scale distribution of horticultural products and efficiency in the deployment of human resources. Furthermore, this particular cooperative proposes innovative schemes for women incarcerated who are not only offered real jobs but frequently become entrepreneurs themselves (Ravagnani and Policek, 2014). It should be noted that, according to the typical criteria of efficiency and effectiveness found in lucrative firms (Travaglini, 1997), Rio Terà dei Pensieri has demonstrated a great inclination to set up networks with other actors in the same region, especially “trust networks”, which have lower bureaucratization, higher worker motivation, including empathy, greater end-user involvement, and a progressive attitude to the environment.

The Garden of Wonders speaks therefore the language of corporate citizenship (Cunningham, 1999; Davenport, 2000) from the prison to the community in which it seeks to operate and it does so within an ethical framework that is clearly encompassed in discourses of social responsibility as an organization that shows the willingness to maintain an obligation to act for the benefit of society at large, balancing the economy and the ecosystems of the Giudecca island.

It is worth highlighting here that most of the women detained at the Giudecca prison (Ravagnani and Policek, 2014) come from socially excluded backgrounds. Not only are they removed from their own communities in their current situation, but they may not have been fully part of society prior to their imprisonment. Supporting prisoners to set up their own social enterprise or to be involved in one while in prison thus introduces the element of active citizenship. While addressing social issues, prisoners are assuming their responsibility as citizens. Citizenship learning for those who are in prison can have a number of positive effects (Edgar *et al.*, 2011). It can encourage socially responsible behaviour and can, for some, be a first step back into society. It can help reduce the risk of re-offending by encouraging prisoners to draw on their own experiences and consider the impact that an individual’s actions can have on society and the wider world. And it can provide opportunities for prisoners to have a genuine voice, to feel listened to, and it can contribute much to improving their low self-esteem and confidence (Dobson, 1998).

Social enterprises in many ways represent an ultimate form of the active citizen as they involve people who are determined to make an ongoing difference by establishing a permanent organization to achieve desirable social ends (McWilliams and Siegel, 2001). The way in which these elements can be brought together is by linking social enterprises to sustainability (Redclift, 1987). Enabling prisoners to set up social enterprises in the (metaphorical and physical) space of the prison is of great value not simply in the business sense

and because of the therapeutic value of being in employment but because it facilitates for prisoners the understanding of why “green” issues matter and their social benefit and wider application.

Revisiting urban and rural through the Garden of Wonders

My contention that the stability of Venice, as urban dwelling supported by her rural counterpart that is the Giudecca island, finds in the Garden of Wonders the possibility to revisit the concept of urban community. The market stall where vegetables are sold talks in Weberian terms of a distinct and limited pattern of human relationships embedded within a system of forces merged together into some sort of precarious equilibrium. The balance between urban, that is Venice, the consumer city, and rural, that is Giudecca, the producer city, is maintained by the process of defining what practices, mechanisms and institutions are necessary for cities to exist (Anania and Tenuta, 2006).

The Garden of Wonders facilitates the relationship between Venice and the Giudecca island by encouraging active citizenship. It achieves this aim by offering women detainees a purpose to their time in prison, but also a chance to acquire new skills, the opportunity to earn the trust of others and an increased capacity for responsibility. Women detainees can therefore have a route from passive recipient to a contributor to society (Martinelli and Lepri, 1997). Through these acquired benefits there is the potential to encourage desistance, a transformed self-image marked by a personal commitment to turn away from crime. Active citizenship can encourage desistance by developing the person’s caring, other-centred side, building up their self-confidence and sense of independence, and focusing their thoughts on the future. These activities can also develop the prisoner’s social capital—their ability to work with others and to seek support—because these are skills that will help them after their release.

One final point should be addressed here and that is in relation to the fact that the cooperative Rio Terà dei Pensieri through the horticultural project that is the Garden of Wonders can activate not merely “problem solving” but also “problem setting” policies which are particularly important when we discuss the experience of women in prison, their needs and their requirements (Ravagnani and Policek, 2014). The horticultural project, then, is a ticket to “getting out and staying out”. In light of these considerations, I argue that the horticultural project within the Giudecca prison is yet another opportunity to go beyond the politics of detention (Ravagnani and Policek, 2014). It is an opportunity for imprisoned women to obtain paid employment but, most importantly, it is their ability to have an impact within the market that affords women the opening to have an effect on the entire community (Policek, 2011). The wonder of the horticultural project lies with its capability to retrieve hidden, lost or underutilized socioeconomic resources (Martinez-Alier, 1987).

When taking the rural out of prison, it is possible to talk about sustainability, social responsibility and corporate citizenship, thus acknowledging different

and fluid layers that make up the relationship between urban and rural. More consideration, however, needs to be paid to the synergies and trade-offs of such a relationship which embeds a potential strategy for enhancing sustainable and fair citizenship, as highlighted in this contribution. The prison setting with its political underpinnings, conditions and ramifications, is characterized by geographical and administrative boundaries which could prevent a strategic and meaningful approach geared towards the elimination of conditions which are derived from socioeconomic inequalities and political processes. It would be misleading, therefore, to conclude this account without emphasizing the complex network of shifting relations that characterizes productivity, power and prison (Policek, 2008). Although it falls outside the scope of this contribution to adequately take account of the fact that there are differences in power which have material effects within the prison and within the market, my concluding remarks rest with the almost Foucauldian question “who has the power?”, since no one, especially incarcerated women, can be said to possess power. Power instead is something that is negotiated within interactions. Working through this position leads to an analysis which stresses resistance and challenges by those who are in institutionally weaker positions as prisoners clearly are.

A strategy to benefit a particular social group such as women in prison is essentially a political enterprise. The most important aspect of this enterprise is obviously related to the possibility of participation of the women themselves in the definition and the shaping of priorities and in decision making, given the legal constraints imposed on those who are incarcerated. In addition, a focus on the improvement of living conditions alone is insufficient to address the challenges brought by a broader process of change affecting the urban–rural interface which, in turn, affects not only the long-term sustainability of urban and rural areas but also the quality of life and livelihoods of those living and working in the urban–rural interface. With these premises, work still needs to be undertaken for the strengthening of a specific academic approach that links discourses of sustainability, social responsibility and corporate citizenship into a coherent system.

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