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RESEARCH NOTE

Empty Squares and Missing Food Festivals: The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Italian Rural Communities – A Reflection

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Setting the Scene

What does an empty square mean for the future of a rural community?

This question has been buzzing in my head since spring 2020 when my country, Italy, entered its first lockdown period due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

I am an economic anthropologist. Since the mid-2000s my research has focused on the development of local communities in rural areas of Italy. Specifically, I have been investigating the role played by folk food festivals, the so-called *sagre*, using ethnographic research in north-western Italy, an area often studied by anthropologists to understand the transformations of the relationship between urban and rural centres, as well as the area of the country where *sagre* are most frequent and widespread.

My interest was motivated not only by the large presence of such festivals in the area, but, above all, by the impact of these events and food tourism in general on hundreds of communities in marginal areas. Thus, my research aimed at understanding the role of *sagre* in the fragile economy of the rural communities; the overall positive effect they had, an effect which disappeared in 2020 due to the restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, leaving empty squares, and deprived communities behind.

The precise consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic are still a matter of debate. The impact on Italian society and its economy is still to be fully determined as much as the effects on the foodscape. Early research indicates a change in the pattern of consumption, as well as culinary preferences and practices, with issues concerning food access and food security. In the country as well as internationally, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a detrimental impact on social inclusion, the restrictions magnifying the disparities between affluent and underprivileged groups. On the issue of the foodscape, it impacted the very structure of the public foodscape due to the complete or partial shutdown of venues, such as bars, pubs, and restaurants and the impossibility

of celebrating public events. This raises questions, the answers to which go way beyond the economic sphere.

This reflection, written during Italy's third national lockdown in 2020, contributes to the ongoing debate. It highlights the effects of the interruption of the *sagre* and reflects on the possible critical consequences that the disappearance of these festivals entails. In so doing, it aims to provide an answer to the question that opens the paper and to support scholars and policymakers in the recovery process that will take place in the post-Covid-19 period. The article focuses on the case-study of San Rocco and its Ravioli festival, to outline the different ways in which the *manqué* celebration of the traditional summer food festivals affects the community. It draws on data collected in summer 2020 during a follow-up study of San Rocco, a village in in the Province of Alessandria.

All sensitive information relating to my informants, as well as the name of the village, has been anonymized following the European General Data Protection Regulation and the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth's *Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice*.

San Rocco and the *Sagra dei Ravioli*

San Rocco is on the bank of an Apennine river, one of the tributaries of the Tanaro River. The village lies at the end of the valley, crossed by a provincial road and surrounded by mountains that divide two regions in the North-western part of Italy: Piedmont and Liguria (Map 1). Few fields are still cultivated in the valley. The steep flanks of the mountains, once cultivated with grapes, corn, garden vegetables and potatoes, or used for pasture, have been reclaimed by the forest. In the past fifty years, the village has lost nearly three-quarters of its population. Today about two hundred people remain. As in other nearby villages, young people have migrated to the main cities of the North, moving away from the village and leaving empty houses behind. Thus, San Rocco is just one of the many localities affected by rural abandonment; a phenomenon that since the nineteenth century has deeply affected Italy, from North to South, leaving swathes of land and villages unpopulated.



Map 1: Location of San Rocco in Northwestern Italy

The *Sagra dei Ravioli* was organised in response to this phenomenon. As the people in the village remember, the festival started in the early 1980s, to “do something to keep our community alive.” The organisers were inspired by other *sagre* they visited in the region and other parts of Italy. They saw in this festive format a possible response to the social changes they were experiencing; a collective gathering able to strengthen the social bonds among members of the community through participation in the event, as well as being an event able to reinforce the fame, therefore the cultural importance, of the community within the wider world.

Pro Loco, a local volunteer civic membership association that aims to enhance the quality of living in town and to make it more attractive to tourists, organized the event. It was grounded in the promotion of an example of local festive gastronomy, the *ravioli*: a type of beef and pork meat-stuffed pasta, traditionally served with a meat sauce of beef sautéed in butter with carrots, celery and onions.

The festival has grown in terms of both participants and volunteers and is now renowned locally. It enlivens the valley and its communities, filling them with hopes and expectations regarding meeting friends, having fun and enjoying good food and wine. It gives them optimism for the future of the community and its role within the broader geographical landscape. The festival generally lasts three days in August; a long weekend that has become the centre of the community calendar and the fulcrum of the social gathering of the village population during a large part of the year.

The heart of the event is the main square of San Rocco. It is a simple place; just a rectangle of concrete the size of a football pitch in the centre of this small town, generally used as a car park for most of the week. The temporary restaurant is organized in the square, alongside other festival activities. Tables and chairs are placed in a commercial marquee located at the centre of the square. There is space for about two hundred people. Outside the marquee, the festival kitchen is installed, a field kitchen borrowed from the local branch of the Civil Protection Force. The rest of the square is used to host a small market for local producers and other sellers that trade in the traditional food of the region.

However, in 2020, the square remained empty and silent, as did thousands of other squares around the country: one of the tolls imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

In Italy, the early cases of infection were recorded on the 30th of January 2020 in Rome. However, the first hotspot was found in Lombardy on the 20th of February. Within a few hours, the first Covid-19 victim died. Since then, in Italy, the victims have been counted in the thousands: 74,159 at the end of 2020. In order to cope with the pandemic, the national government adopted the then extraordinary measure of mobility restriction, which culminated with the two lockdowns. During the summer, these measures were loosened. However, most of the 42,000 food festivals that are usually celebrated in the country did not take place (fig. 1). Among them, the one of San Rocco.



Figure 1: After Feb. 2020 very few festivals were celebrated in Italy. Faded posters promoting the 2020 festivals were still visible on the town walls of Montanaro, Piedmont in 2021

Preparation for the festival usually starts in the spring, between March and May: a period that in Italy coincided in 2020 with the first lockdown, the so-called “Phase 1” of the Covid-19 crisis. During this period, all retail trade was suspended, with a few exceptions such as food stores and news agencies. Schools, restaurants, bars, theatres, and cinemas, most of industry and public offices were closed. Only those firms working in strategic sectors, such as health and care, food business and agriculture, could continue their activities. Mobility was restricted. People could move outside home only for quick shopping, medical treatment or to reach their workplace. All public meetings were forbidden. The severe national measures were further intensified by the regional government in the North, which had to cope with a catastrophic medical emergency.

In San Rocco, in “Phase 1” there were only a few cases in town and no deaths. However, the restrictions made it impossible to meet to plan for the event. In May, when the off-peak period, the so-called “Covid-19 Phase 2”, and the severe prohibitions that had been enforced since the beginning of March had been eased, after some debate, the Pro Loco suspended the organization of the event. Anticipation of a second peak, and the new government’s health and safety measures, with the imposition of severe social distancing regulations for the organization of public events, were the main reasons cited by the members of Pro Loco. During the summer, when speaking with members of the group, they expressed their regret at not being able to have the festival, but they did not hide the deep sense of insecurity that they felt about the future. As one of the informants pointed out:

I feel strange not to see the festival this year. The village seems even more silent and dead than what it usually is. I feel we ended up in limbo. Like Covid took not just our health but our very future away from this community.

Thus, in August, the square of San Rocco, like other and more famous squares such as the one of San Vito lo Capo or Carloforte remained silent, becoming an uncanny presence in front of locals as well as visitors, and a reason for a rising preoccupation about the future among the local community.

The role of *Sagre*

Why should the suspension of a festival worry anyone? To understand this, it is necessary to outline the history of *sagre* in Italy and then to look at their actual role in terms of economic and socio-cultural development.

From the North of the Alps and the Po Valley to the South of the Mediterranean Sea and its islands, folk food festivals are a common recurrence in Italy. They come under many names, such as *sagra* (plural *sagre*, pronounced: /'sagra/ and /'sagre/) or *festa* (plural *feste*, pronounced: /'festa/ and /'feste/). They are popular events that take place usually between June and September and are characterized by being of limited duration, and aimed at attracting tourists to enhance the awareness, appeal and profitability of the village as a destination. They come with straightforward names that aim to attract culinary tourists. Their programmes are centred on the promotion of particular products or dishes (ingredients, such as local vegetables or meat, or dishes, such as boiled meat or fried fish), served in temporary restaurants managed by local grassroots associations (mainly coming under the rubric of Pro Loco associations), and other activities that range from religious services (e.g. Mass, benedictions, processions), to leisure and cultural activities (e.g. exhibitions, shows, theatrical performances), to official events (e.g. public speeches by local dignitaries, prize-giving ceremonies, parades) (Figs. 2-4).



Figure 2: An example of *sagra*. Regionando 2014. San Salvatore Monferrato



Figure 3: The temporary restaurant of the Agribu Festival, Budrio, 2019. Photo by Mario Marchesini.



Figure 4: The commercial marquees used for the temporary restaurant of a *sagra*. Budrio 2019. Photo by Mario Marchesini.

In the past decade, *sagre* have reached a surprising prominence in the Italian foodscape. In 2019, the Federazione Italiana Pubblici Esercizi (Italian Federation of Commercial Enterprises), the largest association of shop owners in the country, surveyed over 32,000 *sagre* with an estimated turnover of 900 million euros. Coldiretti, the largest Italian farmers' association, pointed out that in 2019, four out of five Italians considered these food festivals as one of the most appreciated attractions during the summer. These figures outline the relevance of *sagre* to what are mostly rural communities across the country, with a higher concentration in the North-Western regions, i.e. Lombardy, Piedmont, and Emilia Romagna.

Thus, *sagre* are a fundamental pillar of food tourism in Italy. While in other Western countries the rise of food festivals is a recent phenomenon linked to the main urban centres, the organization of food festivals in Italy emerged following the so-called Economic Boom of the 1960s and 1970s and involved mostly rural communities (Fig 5). If for the tourist these events are an easy and approachable way to get access to the rich gastronomic heritage of the country, for the communities, *sagre* are not only an important economic stimulus; they play multiple socioeconomic roles directly connected with the marginalization of rural communities since the late nineteenth century.

After its unification, in the mid-nineteenth century, a path of socioeconomic development turned a country that in 1871 based its economy mostly on agriculture (over 70% of the active population was working in agriculture) to an industrial and service economy in which the main economic centre corresponds to the main cities (while only 5% in 2019 still work in agriculture). This trajectory did not lead to a decline in the productivity of Italian agriculture. However, there was a progressive depopulation of rural centres, first due to emigration directed largely abroad, between the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the early 1920s, then after the Second World War emigration toward the industrial centres. This process has slowed down in the past two decades, but this “rural exodus” has not stopped, with young people still moving away from the countryside seeking better job opportunities and services. Rural centres face a dramatic process of impoverishment and senilization. This that has led to a vicious circle, which combines reduced profits, ageing, and impoverishment in a dynamic that is unable to trigger new investments and offers the farmers an uncertain perspective on the future that is dangerous for rural development.



Figure 5: The rural landscape of the valley of San Rocco in 2016.

In the face of this decline, as I have shown in my previous work, food festivals emerged as an apparatus able to counter to some extent the effects of marginalization. First of all, they foster socialization in the context of declining sociality. They are events in which the local population participates, and the participants construct and share ideas, feelings and relationships. For this reason, food festivals can reinforce and extend the local social network while communities face population reduction and the weakening of social ties.

Secondly, they foster a new understanding of the community, its surroundings and their future. Facing an everyday reality of abandonment and the ruination of the landscape, a *sagra* is a device with the ability to reconstruct the local space on different levels.

A festival affects the imagination of the community, crafting and narrating a new sense of place. This is a creative process through which local communities draw on their past and their present, their history and memories as well as their current customs and tastes and weave a new narration of the community and its surroundings. In this process, the *sagra* is the apparatus that affirms this new narration of the local and legitimizes it through public participation. As the new understanding celebrated by the *sagra* is shared by the members of the community, it becomes the lens through which the local space is viewed, creating the conditions for changing the very use of the surroundings.

Finally, the *sagra* contributes in terms of economic development to the community and its businesses. It intensifies local producers' exposure to consumers, supports collaboration among all the social and economic actors of a community, and increases the visibility and value of local products.

The festivals are not just mundane occurrences, but rather they are a fundamental element that reinforces the community and the social, cultural, and economic bonds that links its members, and holds out the promise of a future for the community. In the face of this decline, as I have shown in my previous work, food festivals emerged as an apparatus able to counter to some extent the effects of marginalization. First of all, they foster socialization in the context of declining sociality. They are events in which the local population participates, and the participants construct and share ideas, feelings and relationships. For this reason, food festivals can reinforce and extend the local social network while communities face population reduction and the weakening of social ties.

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The impact in San Rocco

Yet, the 2020 pandemic silenced that promise. In San Rocco, people were talking of San Rocco without its summer festival as 'empty'. This expression refers first of all to the very spatiality of the village and how people use and experience space during festivals.

The Ravioli festival, as any *sagra*, is a pervasive presence that transforms the community space with its programme of activities. A festival creates a new geography for the community, imposing new uses on spaces. In San Rocco, for example, the square normally used as a parking lot turns into a restaurant and a marketplace, and the church courtyard into a concert hall. Hence, a *sagra* is an exercise in an alternative, almost subversive, use of space that blurs the distinctions between public and private, between religious and secular. Through this subversion of the ordinary, the festivity fosters a spatial transformation that is functional to the life of the community because it renegotiates the relations between the members, their environment, and their values and beliefs. However, for this transformation to work the presence and the experience of the crowd is necessary. The sense of a festival is deeply connected to physical contact, proximity, being pushed and pushing in return. This commotion conveys the sense of celebration, of exceptionality, of participation in the community, and, above all, of the embodiment of the sense of belonging to the community. When the crowd is missing, this process is interrupted, and the feast loses its power. What remains is, using the words of one member of San Rocco Pro Loco:

a village with an empty square and a community with an empty heart.

The sense of emptiness reported by the people in San Rocco is also about recognition of abandonment. The festival is a moment of liveliness that interrupts the sense of

abandonment that distinguishes how the quotidian landscape of the village is perceived; a landscape that is marked by the haunting presences of empty houses and shops left by the many migrants in the past fifty years, as another member of the Pro Loco explains:

When we walk in San Rocco, we see so many empty streets and empty houses. They may be even quite recent buildings, constructed in the 1970s and 1980s by people who left the village but wanted to build the house for their old age in San Rocco, but they never used them. The festival was able to break the silence, bringing people and activities in the village. It was reassuring to see the people in the streets, to see there is an alternative to the decline. This year... well... Covid has taken this alternative away from our life...

Sagre give hope for the future of San Rocco, but in 2020 this remedy for a sense of abjectness was not put in place. The memories of the 2019 festival were fresh, so this interruption did not result in an inconsolable sense of desolation. However, the difficulties and worries linked with the pandemic mixed with a deep discomfort at not seeing the life of the village kindled by the *Sagra* led to doubts about the future, whether there was a real possibility of relaunching the festival in 2021, and in general about the future of the community itself.

These perceptions were compounded by the actual economic impact of the event *manqué*. The festival is a moment of economic activity. It is about consumption and trade and supports a vast economic network made of different actors: visitors, farmers, local producers, merchants, associations, and public institutions. The event both directly and indirectly attracts economic resources to a community otherwise precluded. The impossibility of celebrating the festival meant depriving the community and its economy of these supplementary resources. The deep effects were still unknown; however, it was clear the absence of the festival would affect the community. As explained by the Pro Loco president:

The decision of not celebrating the festival was very difficult, but it was madness to do otherwise. However, there are going to be consequences. For the community, the festivals meant gathering resources that were used by the Pro Loco for organizing new events during the year. We do not have these resources this year. I also regret that we will not be able to support the school and the parish as we were used to. Next year it will be difficult for everybody. I hope we will be able to celebrate in 2021 and making the wheel [the economy of San Rocco] spin again.

Conclusion

The pandemic left a hole in the life of the community; an emptiness that is at the same time spatial and affective, linked to the very idea of a future shared by the inhabitants of San Rocco. It leaves a gap in the ritual calendar of the communities and a hiatus in the *tempo* of their life. Facing the empty square, the fragility of this grassroots strategy

aimed at easing the impact of rural marginalization becomes clear. Consequentially, the need for complementary economic and political initiatives to support the communities, particularly in this moment of uncertainty, becomes even clearer. This is true in San Rocco but can be extended to all the other communities that organized *sagre*. If the suspension will be limited to just one year, the impact will be mainly economic and caused by the impossibility for the community at large to rely on the resources the *sagra* used to produce. However, those who have already been undermined by the pandemic will be those who will pay the greatest price: small producers, restaurateurs, hotel owners, and shop keepers who benefit from tourism. They are the first who ought to receive assistance from initiatives to support the rural community.

The case of San Rocco tells us why an empty square means so much to a local community. It is because *sagre* are a fundamental opportunity for cultural, economic and social development for rural communities and a bridge between rural and urban worlds. The Covid-19 pandemic greatly undermined the stability of that bridge. The empty squares are, thus, a call for reconstruction, a call to commit public and private efforts to put an end to the uncertainties of these times. If empty spaces can be easily filled, this is the moment to invite reflection on what old and new devices can be employed to achieve this goal. New research will be needed to explore what role *sagre* will play in the post-pandemic world and to support rural communities with new insights and tools for paving their way to a better future.

Further Reading

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