

## #May the cows graze at all? The battle for pastures in Pinzolo, Italy, V2

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Hello everyone and good afternoon. At the time I am recording this video it is quite early in the morning. Thanks to the Faculty colleagues who are not that early birds, the background is as quiet as it gets. Fortunately, as well, it is autumn which means that birds are not too noisy either. Silence at last. So, there you have it, once the stage is properly depopulated, we can finally talk! Or, at least, I can talk! And you get to listen through a flat screen. I thought that setting the stage like this would be an adequate introduction to metabolic politics. But, for now, I guess that what I am trying to say is how sorry I am that I cannot be with you physically, and I really hope these exchanges will continue in other times and places where I can join.

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Back to metabolic politics then, or the politics of metabolism, or metabo- or metabolo-politics — pick your favorite up. I think that the notion of « metabolism » directs our attention to the bodily responses to some situations that are made to them. I mean, in a sense, it is a corporeal notion that necessarily speaks about the materiality of the body; what it is capable or incapable of, of course not in abstracto but in very concreto. If you follow me, what I would like to do today is to frame me-tabolism as an answer to infrastructures, and infrastructures as answering to meta-bolic features or limitations. Well, hum. I assume I lost you already!

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I was saying, to put it otherwise, that we should consider infrastructures as im-portant definitional traits of a situation. I consider infrastructures as plural, as what enables very material circulations – of goods, of people, of animals, and so on – but also as modes of valuation, involving epistemic, affective, or aesthetic repertoires. Then infrastructures appear as complex propositions that are made to bodies. Let's assume that focusing on metabolisms as answers to such propositions is a good starting point for an « art of consequences »; how do metabolisms answer to such propositions, and how do infrastructures adjust or don't adjust to these answers? I am not looking for primary causes or foundational determinations here, but more something like, say, a misbalanced dialogue — propositions, answers, all evolving over time along the demands of the day.

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But I am afraid I lost you again. I should have started by the beginning, that is by the middle of things. In the middle of things, I saw this PICTURE 1. On this pic-ture you see a cow in a mountain pasture, with scenic mountains in

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the background and a funivie, a funicular cabin that transports people all the way from the valley village to the top of the mountain, either in summertime for hiking or in wintertime for skiing. The village down the valley is called Carisolo / Pinzolo, in the Italian Alps near the city of Trento. I was in this mountain village conducting fieldwork with my colleague Daniele Valisena this year in September, and in 2021 on the kind invitation of Roberta Raffaetà, a dear friend and colleague.

Carisolo is a small mountain village that finds itself in the midst of so many transformations, much more than I could account for. I can tell you that carrying out fieldwork there is quite stunning. Mountains are at the forefront of the « new climatic regime ». There is a French collective of scholars and artists called « The collapsing of the Alps » and that name is telling of a situation that evolves very fast, faster perhaps than in other places — at least this is the feeling that you get when you are there. It really feels like an acute critical zone. A place where tensions literally get critical, between rapidly changing environments and rapidly disappearing forms of life, between greater openness and connection to the outer world and yet the constant remaking of the valley boundaries. So, in short, it is a well bounded scene, delineated by the Alps on one side and Dolomite mountains on the other, at the point of convergence of two rivers that flow from each side.

Remember the picture I showed you. Now I would like to think about how hard, how demanding it has been to make this picture possible in the first place. Not difficult for me, for sure. All I had to do was to jump in the Funivie just like many hikers were doing on that beautiful sunny day, and even some elderly who were just getting at the top of the mountain to enjoy the scenery (PICTURE 2). No, I mean difficult for this particular cow on the picture, and its kin and its kind and its breed. This breed of cow is called Rendena, « la razza Rendena » in Italian. It is a dominantly brown cow, that shares some common ancestry with the Swiss brown breed. It is rather purposed as a milk breed of cow, to make mountain cheese, rather than meat.

I learned from my colleague Daniele, who is a brilliant historian with whom I am lucky enough to co-inquire with on la Razza Rendena. I learned from him that this razza almost went extinct for its metabolic insufficiency in the eyes of the fascist regime of Mussolini. The fascist politics in the rather young state of Italy was trying to delineate some features of « italianess » to stitch the varied regions and senses of belonging that were there before

the unification. As it so happened, that political regime got very excited about zootechnics and decided somehow that healthy, productive, and steady men of the nation needed healthy, productive, and steady livestock animals. So, they banned some breeds to favor some other ones that were delivering more metabolic outcomes, more milk, more fat, more protein. But the breed survived. The local legend has it that some farmers were building fake walls in their stables to hide the Rendena sire reproducers from the inspectors of the regime. It remains that a strong attachment ties the inhabitants of Carisolo / Pinzolo to the Rendena cows. And to the tourists, too. Carisolo / Pinzolo economy is not as self-sufficient as it probably has been in the past due to physical constraints and the intensiveness of labor, human or animal labor, to bring stuff in and out the valley. That all changed of course with the road infrastructure, availability of cheap gas, desertion of rural localities by their youth, and so on. Incrementally, the order of values changed in the valley and so did the infrastructure. For example, there used to be a marketplace for cattle livestock exchange. Sellers and buyers would meet yearly in the village, there would be a beauty contest to elect the most beautiful cow and popular celebrations. I can't be specific as for the time this used to happen, but I can tell you it stopped at some point. The place was probably too remote, the market too narrow, the burden of logistics too costly to maintain. So, it stopped. Until fourteen years ago when it was reborn and rebranded as « Giovenche di Razza Rendena » (PICTURE 3) — forgive my awful Italian accent. From there on, there would be no more market of Rendena cows, but a series of events addressed to a wider audience, celebrating the mountain way of life, traditions, folklore, as well as the traditional beauty contest accompanied by a small market of local producers, and public events and discussions for prospecting the future of the valley and of the Rendena breed of cattle.

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I guess what I am trying to say here, to put it short, is that perhaps the Rendena breed matters more today as a touristic device than a production one. It is a living celebration of the folklore and of the "traditional way of life". Rendena cows are of course still producing milk and cheese and that is important, but the farmers who are doing ok with their cows diversified their activities towards agroturismo and ristorante. Tourists who climb up the mountain in summertime expect to find Rendena cows in the malghe — malghe are the traditional mountain pastures. Malghe are themselves all taken up in a ski infrastructure. PICTURE 4 here you can see a ski track

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turning into a malghe in summertime — I don't know which one came first. PICTURE 5 and here you can see a management trail, that is pretty much a highway to construction sites for the mountain infrastructure — ski stations, restaurants, stables, and so on. You can see on the picture another example of this coexistence. So, the very existence of the Rendena cow is maintained by the attachments of the people of Carisolo / Pinzolo but also by its recasting as a scenic, local and « belonging », part of the tradition that never ceases to be reinvented and as a constitutive part of the landscape.

Finally, the existence of Rendena cows has undergone trials in terms of their access to the malghe. Malghe belong to municipalities who are putting access rights to auction every year, for farmers to bid. This represents a lot of hectares which come with few strings attached and low maintenance costs. But with a lot of subsidies. Since the EU agricultural policy delivers subsidies by the hectare, it is a lot of hectares, so a lot of subsidies with few to none associated costs. You do the math.

As a result, there has been many problems, such as depopulated malghe that just weren't used at all, or populated by some random cows who were put there just to pretend the malghe was actually used; in occasion, in other places, some big fat milking cows from the valley were even transported to the pastures one by one by helicopter. That sometimes resulted in dramatic events because these cows were not adapted to the steepness nor to the frugality of the menu up there – the poverty of the grass. One of the oldest farmers of the village, who was instrumental in setting the razza Rendena and its standards, said that for these mountain pastures you need a humbled car of the people and not a formula 1. Formula 1 go faster but need much more intake. He put it very simple, saying that « the environment just won't work ». And there you have it; one can't take any metabolic shortcomings.

#### Conclusion

As a conclusion, in Carisolo / Pinzolo, you can't account for the existence of the Rendena cows in mechanistic terms or as production machines, as implied by the modern zootechnics endeavor and its local translation by the fascist regime. That simply wouldn't work. If it was for those business-as-usual criteria, it would most likely have gone extinct, like so many other local breeds of cows, a long time ago. But it didn't, there. Many breeds did go extinct, however, in many other places and settings.

How come it didn't happen in Carisolo/Pinzolo? Obviously, there is a fair

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share of mountain stubbornness involved, both human and bovine. A willingness to per-sist. It takes strong attachments. It takes an image of the cow cast as a central feature of the touristic infrastructure in the quest for a strong winter / summer polarity and complementarity, as well as an aesthetics of the landscape. And finally, it takes to undergo all sorts of political and administrative trials that show increased porosity of the mountain economy to outsiders and increased dependency to public authorities and their subsidies.

It seems to me that the bare fact this particular breed strived through, and survived to, all these trials is in itself telling of something about the metabolism. Seeing a Rendena cow grazing in a malghe happens as an event, a surprise, a wonder renewed day after day, which is impossible to account for in somehow utilitarian terms. As we very well know in this panel, metabolisms are in history and are not metaphors. If infrastructure entails a power of enunciation, the ability to formulate propositions to particular bodies and their metabolisms, arguably in the modern endeavor of productivity and zootechnics, the main question addressed to metabolism is; how far can you go? If livestock animals were machines, it was a matter of powering the engine as much as possible. Then the main stake becomes the compliance of the metabolism. How much can they deliver? How far can they bring this metaphor of the machine to reality?

Here, in the very situated village of Carisolo / Pinzolo, perhaps metabolism is telling us something else. It is telling us that if metabolisms themselves are not metaphorical, yet there are ecologies in and out of themselves. I mean that there might be some streamlining of the work of infrastructures, as expressed through the mountain village metabolism, with the work of bodies, as expressed through their metabolism. And these infrastructures keep on evolving, valuing much more the image of the cows, the way they partake to, and then produce, the landscape, a desirable mountain place. The heroic accounts of survival tell something of the desperate attachments to these cows and how their fate is intertwined with the very possibility of forms of life that autochthonous people from the village feel endangered. That expresses a need for legacy and recognition. Arguably, cows are always taken up in some sort of idealism or some other. There is no place where the intention put in the infrastructures and their material surroundings — valuation if you will — does not translate and reflect down the bodies they concern themselves with, and vice-versa.

And finally, bottom down, their rumen and digestive capabilities testify to

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an acute earthly belonging that not all other cows can afford. « We can process this land » the Rendena cows seem to say. In that sense, metabolic processes are telling of something like non-compliance, or unfitness, or inadequacy, or some sense of "not belonging". They tell us when a limit-point is crossed, when specific bodies cannot cope or deal with the situation they find themselves in. What are Rendena metabolisms the name of? "Inadequacy"? Inadequacy would imply that they don't really fit or don't really relate but would probably be too passive. "Resistance"? Re-sistance would be too active, as it would seem to imply some sort of intention of voluntarism. Perhaps the "recalcitrance" from Isabelle Stengers is the most appropriate word, designating a capacity of bodies to object to the situation in which they find themselves involved in, and implied by. If infrastructures are the proposition, then metabolisms answer. There is nothing dialogical about it, obviously, but continued processes of attunement, of adaptation, of bodily reasoning, in a largely violent, demanding and/or unfair setting. When a situation becomes unbearable, sometimes it is good to listen to the whispering guts. In their own way they may express bad mood, temper, or desperation; that's not really for us to tell. All we can say is that such answers are not indifferent.