



Under Siege. Alpine Sheep Farming amidst Multiple Compounding Stressors

Gabriele Volpato

University of Gastronomic Sciences, Pollenzo, Italy

Introduction

Sociologists and psychologists describe ‘siege mentality’ as the experience of being under siege, that is a belief, shared by a group of people, to be surrounded by a hostile world with explicit or implicit intentions to inflict harm on one’s own group (Bar-Tal 2011). Some authors have used the notion of siege mentality in pastoralists’ studies to address herder-farmer conflicts in Sahelian Africa, referring to the feelings and experiences of farmers dealing with pastoral raids and occupation of fields, as well as addressing pastoralists dealing with loss of rangelands and marginalization. The application of this notion to pastoralists’ experience seems justified by the multiple stressors that are pushing pastoralists toward destitution and marginalization across the world’s rangelands, compounding increasing levels of uncertainty about their lives and future (Nori and Scoones 2019). Many capitulate to the siege, sell the animals, and leave the pastoral enterprise altogether. In this presentation, we discuss Alpine sheep farming in Northeast Italy and the struggle of shepherds to retain, through (and with) the sheep, a meaningful relation with the Alpine landscape amidst multiple ecological, cultural, social, ideological, and economical stressors.

Materials and Methods

The information discussed is based on anthropological fieldwork – semi-structured interviews and focus groups – with thirty sheep farmers in Prealpine and Alpine areas of the Veneto Region, Northeast Italy, namely in Lessinia, Altopiano di Asiago, Conca di Lamon, and Alpago. The research took place within the project ‘Sheep Up, PSR Veneto 2014-2022, DGR n. 736/2018’ (website: <https://www.pecoredimontagna.it/>) funded by the Veneto Region. Throughout the field study, the ethical guidelines adopted by the American Anthropological Association were followed.



Results and Discussion

Extensive sheep farming has been an important livelihood activity across the Alps for centuries, producing milk, cheese, meat, and wool for sale and household consumption while shaping landscapes, cultures, and gastronomies (Pastore and Fabbri 1999). However, this central role of sheep farming has crumbled in the last half a century amidst processes of urban migration, industrialization, and collapse of regional wool and meat markets. Sheep farmers and animal heads have decreased tenfold or more, and autochthonous breeds like the Brogna, Foza, Lamon, and Alpago of Veneto now number between few hundreds and few thousands each and are facing inbreeding and extinction. Shepherds have reoriented the pastoral system by diversifying into the wage sector, tourism, and the hospitality and catering sector, and maintaining sheep farming as a hobby or as a side activity producing a complementary income through the sale of lambs.



While the important role of sheep farming in the maintenance of the Alpine landscape and in producing quality meat from marginal grasslands is increasingly recognized at public and institutional level, shepherds speak words and express feelings of victimization and mistrust. They experience gaps and discrepancies between discourses, actions, and initiatives of support on one hand, and meaningful outcomes on the other hand. They widely acknowledge the importance of EU subsidies in their pastoral economy, but regard them as a ‘useful distortion’, a bandaid to systemic problems that prevent them from feeling dignified in their activity.

Feelings of abandonment have heightened with the return of the wolf in Northeast Italy after at least a century of absence, and with the diffusion among part of the general public of animalist and vegan ideological positions that have taken lambs as ‘sacrificial victims’ of meat-eating civilizations, and in some instances ‘lamb farmers’ as incarnation of the evil. While livestock fairs have become targets of animalists’ campaigns, wolves are having an over-sized effect on the small herds managed as hobby without guardian dogs or electrified fences typical of the Veneto Alps. The adoption of these defensive systems, however, implies more costs, knowledge, and labour in conditions of already strained household economies, and can become issues of contention with tourists and other mountain users, who could get shocked or bitten. Shepherds exchange pictures of wolves’ attacks through WhatsApp groups, anguishing in a landscape of fear and feeling under siege by wolves and environmental groups and institutions that they perceive ‘on the wolves’ side of the trench.’

In a rapidly changing context, new opportunities appear that sheep farmers need to negotiate with their economic organization and ethical values. One of such opportunities is the emerging market for old lambs and rams among immigrants of African and Balkan origin and Muslim religion in Northern Italy, who are the only sector of the general population witnessing increasing sheep meat consumption. Although the requests of these new customers resemble those made by Italian families decades ago – they buy live animals at the farm and slaughter them for family and ceremonial consumption – they beget moral dilemmas among shepherds regarding feeling forced to sell informally and at lower-than-average price, and regarding the welfare of the animals themselves, as some shepherds express concerns about the *halal* form of slaughtering and what they perceive as an undignified treatment of their animals.

Conclusions

All these stressors impinging on extensive sheep farming in the Veneto Alps generate in shepherds a siege mentality. Shepherds refer vividly to their passion being extinguished. Distress and uncertainty predominate while Alpine sheep farming morphs in ways that are often felt as undesirable, moving along trajectories of need rather than choice. Shepherds resist forms of extinction that transform their worlds beyond recognition, ‘worlds that were hitherto shaped and characterized by practices, by modes of inhabiting, by landscapes that are no more’ (Despret and Meuret 2016, 28).

References

- Bar-Tal D (2011) *Siege Mentality*. In: The Encyclopedia of Peace Psychology, D.J. Christie (Ed.), Wiley.
- Nori M, Scoones I (2019) Pastoralism, Uncertainty and Resilience: Global Lessons from the Margins. *Pastoralism* 9:10.
- Pastore E, Fabbri L (1999) *L'allevamento ovi-caprino nel veneto: analisi e prospettive future di un settore ricco di storia*. Veneto Agricoltura.
- Despret V, Meuret M (2016) Cosmoecological sheep and the arts of living on a damaged planet. *Environmental Humanities* 8 (1): 24–36.

Contact

Gabriele Volpato
University of Gastronomic Sciences, Pollenzo, Italy
Email: g.volpato@unisg.it

Acknowledgements

We are very thankful to all the sheep farmers encountered during fieldwork for their patience, kindness and hospitality during fieldwork.