

The rural areas for a new sense of Europe – *Ottavia Ricci*

I have two friends, one is a woman and owns 450 hectares of land in central Italy, she is a farmer and breeds livestock. It has been difficult to improve herself in this work not only because it is a human world, but also because of the European Common Agricultural Policy.

I have another friend, he decided to invest all his money in a small village in the middle of nowhere, in Abruzzo, a village that could only accommodate 20 people. He bought 3,000 square meters of old destroyed rural houses and restored them following a philological project that aims to restore the identity of this small community. He worked with an anthropologist and an archaeologist to identify the real purpose of his project for this ancient village. Today the small village is known worldwide and offers 43 bed & breakfasts. Hotels and restaurants have been built and around 14,000 people all over the world (which to my mind are too many) come to visit S. Stefano di Sessanio every year, and and it all happened because his sensitivity to poverty and identity are the factors that attract so many people.

I mentioned these two examples because they have something in common. Both people were young when they chose this type of life, i.e. living outside the city in a rural area, spending time living there.

There are many people like them and they look like cartoon heroes to me. They left civilization to save rural areas. And I'm sure that this kind of perception that I have is shared by many others. But why, when we look at these incredible choices do we put them in the land of superman or wonder women?

Because they choose to live in areas where nothing is simple.

Because we know that they made a strong choice in their lives, because nothing is easy in a rural area.

First of all there is a lack of infrastructures, secondly, rural areas lack a great deal in terms of culture and, last but not least, to carry out projects people have to fight every day against the European bureaucracy, which then expands into regional, provincial and municipal bureaucracy.

You might have the perception that I am simplifying everything a bit, but this is what I perceived in my three-years job on the territory as a councillor to the Italian Minister for Tourism.

This incredible and abnormal word "Bureaucracy" came out during all the meetings I attended. Bureaucracy not only in the sense of an immense number of papers, documents and procedures to be fulfilled, but also of the time it "steals" leaving you with a sense of fatigue, loneliness and bitterness, but above all, a very strong sense of uncertainty and hope for a positive outcome. Uncertainty is the word on which we need to begin all our studies. People need to feel safe and secure in order to do all the work they do, and that is not what Europe gives them back. And the feeling of security can only be restored if we build a direct relationship and listen to the needs of people who choose to live in these rural areas, thus demonstrating their fundamental role in creating a healthy and innovative society.

Culture plays a fundamental role in this process. We must rethink the concept of Culture starting from its Latin derivation, that is, from the Latin verb *colere*, "to cultivate", which also means to grow a European feeling made of sharing, sustainability, listening and creativity.

Rural areas could be the place to “start” our European identity, responding to the need for a better place where quality and not quantity will be the first word to measure growth, where, thanks to the creation of a new relationship between European institutions and citizens, it will be possible for people of different ethnic and cultural identities to come together in order to build the present and the future. Crafts, manual and creative work, however, must be recognized as fundamental factors in the growth of these places, and we must therefore restore their true dignity.

Restoring the importance of the first step of culture: agricultural work and food, would give new importance to rural areas, making them attractive to a European generation already in search of democratic values based on sharing, sustainability and diversity.