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Panel: Social cooperatives and inclusion

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Title: SOCIAL COOPERATION, INCLUSION, AND THE RE-USE OF ASSETS CONFISCATED FROM THE MAFIAS: THE CASE OF NCO IN CAMPANIA

Abstract

Basaglian thinking and, above all, practices arising from the idea of the elimination of public mental asylums are the source of the experiences of the social cooperatives that make up the NCO Consortium (Nuova Cooperazione Organizzata [New Organized Cooperation]) in the Agro Aversano area in Campania. Here, the idea of voluntarism, thanks to the Basaglian reforms in the treatment of people considered to be mentally ill, has led to a profound transformation of pre-existing social and economic structures, and has shown at the same time how systems of power, often criminal in nature, can be effectively opposed beginning with the involvement of marginalized people or "criminalized" assets.

Interesting connections are immediately apparent between the Basaglian movement to free people seen as mentally ill and the economic possibilism of A. Hirschman and E. Coloni. One example is the close connection between theoretical formulation, the practical application of the newly formulated ideas, and the immediate political reflection of the experience. This was in fact what happened with the Italian "Statute 180" which closed the mental asylums and the prototype for what would later be type B social cooperatives—those committed to the employment of disadvantaged subjects. But there is also the perennial and at times obsessive search for conditions that will let us imagine, experiment with, and build possibilities different from those we now know—possibilities considered out of the question up until a certain moment.

The NCO case is especially interesting not only because it demonstrates the extraordinary creative strength of the Basaglian movement, but also because it offers some important lessons in possibilism that are worth exploring and connecting with other similar experiences.

In the first place, it is important to recognize that the Basaglian idea of liberation needs to be backed up. This is an important lesson because it helps us recognize that the moral and ethical tension that accompanies many social movements can be of enormous benefit if we can help transform it into a tension that is productive, and keep it from lapsing into narrow political visions and platforms typically based on principles of efficiency or economism, which often cannot be translated into concrete reforms.

The NCO case is instead emblematic precisely because the volunteering impulse linked itself to a slow but tenacious process in the direction of entrepreneurship, a process which also leveraged some important concomitant factors that led to a favorable situation for development. Among these, the opportunity to manage assets confiscated from the mafias played an important role. Some examples are a building intended for catering activities and land destined for agricultural purposes with restructured buildings to be used as laboratories for processing products from organic farming. This possibility interacted in an extraordinary and singular way with the voluntarist drive and the liberating tension mentioned above, triggering mechanisms that have transformed basic ethical and moral energy into an extraordinary economic and productive propellant with broad social repercussions.

And yet, in the case of NCO these results would very probably not have been achieved if certain other mechanisms had not been activated. Specifically, for example, the civic movement that was born following the killing of a priest by the mafia, or the movement of citizens' committees created to oppose the phenomenon of the "Terra dei Fuochi" (Land of Fires) phenomenon in Campania. And even these mechanisms would not have produced positive results if the entire process had not also been encouraged and supported by external assistance (banking foundations, for example), by enlightened public reforms (such as the "Health Budget" for the treatment of people considered mentally ill) and other types of external support such as managerial assistance that favored the drive and the "possibilist" process of becoming entrepreneurial.

In conclusion, the NCO case is an important example of economic and social possibilism. In the Hirschmanian perspective, which here interests us particularly, it is able to show "How one thing leads to another" or "How an initiative manages to last" and perhaps even "How to pass reforms," considered pillars of the Colombian and Hirschmanian teachings.