Laura Centemeri
La permaculture ou l'art de réhabiter [Permaculture or the art of re-inhabiting], Versailles, Quae, 2019, pp. 152

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Permaculture has become a buzzword, says Laura Centemeri, the author of *La permaculture ou l'art de réhabiter.* Media, in the last years, have contributed to promote it as a way to trigger a change in the face of environmental and societal challenges. Beyond *les effets de mode*, this book is the result of a long research on permaculture as a political movement. The research is mainly based on the experiences of France, Italy and Portugal. When the author started, in 2013, she noticed the absence of studies focusing on permaculture as transnational movement and of its inscription in the history of organized environmentalism. This absence, she explains, is due to the success of its founders' strategy of presenting permaculture as an a-political movement made of practitioners engaged in the elaboration and experimentation of forms of subsistence capable of minimizing the negative impact on the ecosystems while increasing biodiversity. The intention of the author was then to investigate the contribution of permaculture to the development of an "open ecological society" and in overcoming the modern political vision whereby the social and environmental values are seen as inherently in contradiction.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part is dedicated to the historical development of the permacultural movement. Its origins are situated in Tasmania – cradle of what is considered the first ecological party - in the 70's. The initiators, Bill Mollison and David Holmgren – a professor in environmental psychology and his student – wished to react to the degradation of the environment caused by conventional agricultural. They developed a method based on revisited traditional agricultural practices in order to find ways of satisfying human needs while guaranteeing the regeneration and ecological sustainability of soils and of their fertility. The original name of the method was in fact "permanent agriculture" (Mollison and Holmgren, 1978) which turned into its contraction "permaculture" later on. In order to do that they took inspiration from the ways of working of ecosystems according to a principle of biomimicry. As said their idea was to develop a method based on the technique and not a political movement. Their initiative can be considered part of the back-to-the-land movement, the intent of which was to provide practical tools to promote the autonomy of local communities through an activism grounded on the practice.

The transmission of knowledge – via courses and certification of the training – was, and still is, the structuring element of the movement as well as the organization of international conferences, where the conditions of autoregulation internal to the movement are set.

In the course of the '80s and '90s the first experience grows thanks to the contact with other experiences in Australia, then from the rest of the world, and also with other movements such as the Global Ecovillage Network, the Altermondialist movement and the Transition Towns movement. These exchanges bring to a diversification of practices as well as to different interpretations of the method to include more socio-political approaches to permaculture. The necessity in fact of taking into account different forms of discrimination (in this regard we see the creation of a Black permaculture network) and of vulnerability (for example persons with handicap) encourages the development of more intersectional approaches. What emerges from this first part is a great diversity of experiences, which go under the concept of permaculture and in the beginning of the years 2000 the necessity of founding a new global coherence within the movement is clearly stated.

In the second part of the book, the author analyses the specific type of activism expressed by permaculture and its contribution to the emergence of a "open ecological society". In the author's view permaculture can be seen as an activism of "prefiguration" (Yates 2015) and of the action rather than an activism "of protest". Permacultural design is a central concept and is seen as an individual and collective capacity of elaborating problems and of finding practical solutions in the local context. The principles on which it is built concern taking care of the earth as well as of persons, and fair share (or return of the surplus). Permacultural design is defined by the capacity to take into account the local constraints of the eco-system according to their degree of modificability as resources to build upon. The mostly known method of permacultural design is the one by zones, which consists in organizing the activities in such a way to have a good use of natural and human resources. Even though this idea is very ancient (dating back to Romans' time), what is new is the identification of possible synergies among activities and the mutualization of tools and resources. The observation and imitation of patterns of working of eco-systems is another a key element of permacultural design.

Permaculture is presented not an exact science or an engineering of eco-systems but rather a practical knowledge or, as the author proposes, an art of re-inhabiting a place. The connection with a specific place is in fact central in permacultural activism. The term to "re-inhabit" comes from the American bioregionalism which developed in California in the '70s and which played as inspiration to the founders of permaculture. It designates a way to re-establish a link to a place, which have been damaged and in which the interdependences between the social and the ecological environment become the essential trait. It is about living there and to develop different forms of wealth (ecological, cultural, social, sensorial) which are not intended to profit the single person but to feed the collective well-being. In this regard, the ethic of care – namely earth care – in permaculture refers not only to maintain or to preserve the environment but also to repair damaged soils, to regenerate the life of the soils and to

respect the diversity of its inhabiting beings (earthworms, nematodes, bacteria, fungi, etc.).

According to the author, what characterizes the art of re-habiting embedded in permaculture practices is the identification of a plurality of forms of valuation, which go beyond the market logic and utility. This represents the core of the analysis in which the permaculture experiences are put in the framework of the development of late capitalism.

The training in permaculture, she explains, can be seen in fact as a form of reawakening (*éveil*) to a variety of forms of valuation connected to those places: such as the preservation of species or the production oxygen (universal logic), or the taking into account of human or other species' needs in the conception of a place (goal-oriented logic) or the experience of place through the senses or through contemplation (emplaced logic) (Centemeri 2018). As the author explains the acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of forms of valuation is subversive *per se* as the capitalistic system is based on the progressive expansion of forms of commensurability based on monetarization. The challenge is then to conceive forms of organizations and institutions capable of preserving and developing this plurality and to develop tools capable of taking into account and not to eliminate the problems of commensurability connected to it.

The relationship with the market economy, we understand from this work, is in fact very sensitive in permaculture. Here the author recalls Tsing's beautiful analysis (2015) of contemporary capitalism, which feds on the value, which is created at its margins and which it is appropriated through the supply chain. According to Centemeri, the economies generated from permaculture projects can be described as "peri-capitalist" forms of economic organization (Tsing 2015) in what they remain more or less dependent on the market economy. Controversies on the relationship and compromise with the market economy are in fact present inside the permaculture movement. In this regard, the author proposes to see the experiences, which try to reduce the effect of these logics connected to the idea of "multispecies commons" (Centemeri 2018). These are socio-ecological systems organized on the basis of value logics and practices alternative to the market as they are locally rooted and situated.

An example is the experience of an orange farm in Sicily taking part to a multiplicity of logics of exchange: from traditional market ones to others based on reciprocity and cooperation. Very often, these experiences prefer not to apply for public funding which requires standard principles of production. The aim of multispecies commons is not to generate profits, but to allow a system to maintain itself and to regenerate in time.

Permacultures initiatives, the author observes, are typically to be found at the boundaries between different cultural and political systems (*écotones*) and often in the grey area of regulation. Forms of auto-certification of products – like *Genuino Clandestino* – develop in reaction to conventional ones. They have no legal validity and are based on the participation and acknowledgment of its members.

So according to the author, while the idea of earth caring gathers a strong consensus, the notion is not politically neutral. In this regard, even though premature, it is well rooted in democratic values of social justice and emancipation, it can gather also reactionary positions exemplified by some experiences in Italy. The thesis of the book is that, contrary to the affirmation of the founders, permaculture is the expression of a political vision, which can go from an ecological reformist critique to a more radical posture towards the economic system based on accumulation and exploitation. It is also expressed in terms of practices that values the margins and the interstices as spaces of freedom and experimentation "despite capitalism".

This is an interesting and rich analysis of permaculture in its historical development and in what it challenges actual capitalist forms of production and of living in the western world. The research is soundly rooted in the sociology of environmental movements and raises the central question of valuation brought by solutions at the margins of capitalism.

However, if the attempt to show permaculture not as a pure "technique" but a political movement is well achieved, this is at the price of putting the material dimension of the experiences in the shadow. In this sense, readers of *Tecnoscienza* will find that the practice itself lacks in visibility and in concreteness. Since permaculture is proposed as a way of re-inhabiting places through re-invented collaborations between the ecological and social systems, one would have expected detailed accounts of those cross-boundaries interactions. Some concrete and detailed examples of permaculture experiences throughout the text would have been beneficial to the analysis and would have allowed the readers to better understand the variety of solutions, their interconnections with the ecosystems and the implications of the sensitive relationship between the technical and political dimension of the practice which the author significantly points out.

Some methods – like patterns or zoning – are named in principles but we as readers who, contrary to the author, have not attended the training in permaculture have difficulties in understanding what the taught method is really about and also the connections between the "technical aspects" of the teaching and other aspects of the training, such as ethical issues but also for example the relationships with political institutions, funding and regulatory systems.

Some examples of multispecies commons are given at the end of the book but without entering into "technicalities". Synergies between the ecological and social system are evoked but not presented. Even though the intention of the author was to talk about a movement, the reflections on an "open ecological society" imply also an engagement with the complex assemblages and heterogenous interactions (Braidotti 2013; Puig de la Bellacasa 2010) between humans and other-than-humans.

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Communities at a Crossroads: Material Semiotics for Online Sociability in the Fade of Cyberculture, Amsterdam, Institute of Networked Cultures, 2018, pp. 226

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"Digital community" is a tricky term. It is used in such a variety of contexts, that both words constituting it had almost lost a meaning. Giant social networking sites like Facebook, influencers with thousands of followers, small activist groups, neighbors, who have a chat for solving everyday issues – this is just a small list of those who can name themselves as participants of an online community. Moreover, not only these groups, but plenty of scholars follow this definition and write about digital and/or online communities and their role, structure, dynamics, etc. It becomes almost impossible to outline the boundaries of the concept. Probably, it is not a term at all, and we should abandon its conceptual roots and speak about all the listed phenomena only nominalistically describing them, shouldn't we? But even when we would try to avoid this word, it will pursue us of speaking about "members" or "participants". So what we need in this situation as scholars is probably not to escape the vagueness of the term "community", but to face it, analyze its controversies and