
Assessing the spatial and socio-economic changes generated by the expansion of viticulture: a critical overview of Prosecco Town (Italy)

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Abstract

This paper aims at critically investigating the profound spatial and socio-economic changes currently taking place in North-East Italy as a result of the intensification of a particular agricultural practice: the viticulture. Specifically, it seeks to reconstruct the long-term processes through which low-density territories have attained, by competitively leveraging endogenous resources, successful economic performances and tourism attractiveness in a global scenario.

Theoretical considerations are supported by empirical evidence collected on the Conegliano-Valdobbiadene area, a sprawling low-density territory composed of several small towns located approximately 50 km North of Venice (Province of Treviso), where the internationally known Prosecco wine is historically produced. This case-study is particularly significant for two main reasons. On the one hand for the historical (and recent) socio-economic, political and administrative forces which basically turn a daily land-use practice – mostly addressed to self-consumption – into a competitive economic activity, and an anonymous wine into a global phenomenon. On the other one, for the collective processes which have made Prosecco Town, while still remaining attached to its rural roots, a globalizing region with peculiar forms of urbanity.

Methodologically, this study is based both on quantitative and qualitative research methods. GIS-based and statistical data analysis is used as a way to assess the land-use changes (predominantly the replacement of vast areas of arable land with vineyards) occurred in this area due to the massive spreading of viticulture. In-depth semi-structured interviews with relevant stakeholders bring new knowledge on the socio-environmental risks of such monoculture, and on the regulatory/political frameworks progressively being adopted by policy-makers (stimulated by an intense civil society activation) towards an alternative, more sustainable agri-food system in terms of production methods and working techniques.

The aim of the analysis is threefold:

a) to discuss the ways in which the long-term interrelation between physical spaces and natural capital (steep and sunny hillsides), winegrower's know-how and practices, wine industry and tourism related businesses, as well as important public and private research centres has eventually contributed to the increasing economic vitality of this local agri-food system;

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b) to understand the land-use changes generated by the expansion of viticulture, particularly over the last decade, with the massive "colonization" of areas previously used as arable land;

c) to explore the emerging social conflicts and debates related to the perceived environmental and public health challenges of such monoculture, and the policy responses being only recently introduced in order to regulate an intensive and invasive land-use practice.

In addition, this paper provides an overview of the main institutional policies proposed by local actors in order to enhance the globalization, international recognition and tourism attractiveness of the area, through specifically the organisation of small events. The area hosted in 2016 a small European event (the European Wine City) launched in 2012 by the European Network of Wine Cities (Recevin) and is currently preparing an Unesco candidacy as world heritage site. The European Wine City (EWC) is a title – annually given to a different Country member of the network – aimed at promoting cities and territories economically linked to the production of wine, as well as disseminating Oenotourism. Through such events, the promotion of local resources – landscape and environmental assets, historical and architectural heritage, agricultural production, local handicrafts, know-how and traditions – is enhanced.

Drawing on the concept of "planetary urbanization" theorized by Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid, this note tries to provide an alternative interpretation and representation of Prosecco Town. Traditionally depicted as a prevailing slow and rural setting, the socio-economic analysis will highlight a dynamic "urban" territory criss-crossed by innumerable multi-scalar networks and populations encompassing the entire world (i.e. wine buyers and tourists, hikers, cyclists, etc.), with a consequent overlapping of borders of different origins (physical, political and administrative, historical and related to the global wine supply-chain).

In this perspective, far from representing an urban context according to the classical categories defining the "urban" (i.e. size, density, heterogeneity), unusual forms of urbanity, drawn by the Prosecco's economic success even in a period of economic recession, are however evident.

Keywords: viticulture, Prosecco wine, land use changes, social conflicts, planetary urbanization