

Restructuring dairy production through cooperatives in the neoliberal food regime: ethnographic glimpses from the Italian Western Alps

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Short Abstract

This contribution present how several Italian mountain family farming enterprises integrated the neoliberal agri-food system through new labour regimes. Using the ethnography of two dairy cooperatives, it provides insights on the precarisation of rural work within the neoliberal food regime.

Long Abstract

Until 1990s Italian mountain economy featured mainly small, often family farming enterprises involved in milk production. In such a context informal networks, as kinship ties, were a significant resource both in accessing means of production and organizing work. However, the following decades marked a shift towards more modern and business-oriented productive processes, resulting in an expansion in size of these enterprises and, contemporaneously, a decline in their number. At the same time, since alpine dairy production was progressively reinvented as heritage food, new figures moved into what appeared as a more secure and rapidly expanding business, whilst the entire supply chain was showing an increase in production costs. For the alpine farm system, adaptation to these new market circumstances was achieved by a diversification of household incomes, the use of migrant labour, and the restructuring of the dairy process thanks to new forms of productive organization, namely cooperatives. Focussing on the latter, this contribution will present the ethnography of a two working cooperatives that are both parts of the same Alpine dairy supply chain. By elucidating their differences as well as the manifold exchanges which take place between them, it will provide insights on how the integration into the neoliberal food regime through cooperative enterprises affected local social reproduction processes and finally resulted in more precarious livelihood in alpine rural areas.