

RESEARCH REPORT

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## The right to certify?

### A grassroots response to standardization

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**ABSTRACT:** Who should have the right to certify? As the influence of certifications of all kinds increases and penetrates in more and more realms of life, the *Peasant Activism* Project investigates forms of resistance of neo-rural activists against the politics of transparency. Certifications and standards implemented in the name of transparency often favor large agribusiness. Uncovering the forces that restructure social control in the name of the moral imperative of transparency, this research report presents a circular and collaborative conversation between the team of the *Peasant Activism* Project and Andrea Zappa who represents an Italian network of small-scale farmers and food processors. The focus is on experimental practices of the Participatory Guarantee (PG) that farmers and food processors use to ensure the safety and quality of their products instead of other, more standardized means of certification. Its goal is to restore trust-based personal relations instead of implementing top-bottom forms of control. This issue touches the possibility of realizing similar models of cooperation and sharing, although in academic research: is it possible to practice forms of neo-humanistic horizontality that spare social research from some of the risks inherent in the demands for disclosure and popularization made by research councils' third-mission policies?

**KEYWORDS:** PEASANT ACTIVISM, FOOD SAFETY, TRANSPARENCY, GENUINO CLANDESTINO, ITALY.

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*The right to certify? A grassroots response to standardization*

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### *Introduction: A Kafkaesque layering of complications*

Who should have the right to certify the quality and safety of food products, to determine its standards? In Italy, the acclaimed heart of food activism, the rapidly growing campaign *Genuino Clandestino* (“Genuinely Clandestine”) questions the para-state capabilities to decide what is safe, secure and healthy. The campaign unites independent small-scale farmers who claim to produce “genuine” and “natural” food and, yet, their products often remain at the margins of official legal standards according to European Union (EU) safety and quality regulations. Small-scale cheese laboratories may not be fitted with the latest materials, products may not have undergone expensive checks and so on.

This campaign shows: Small-scale farmers and neo-rural activists are particularly vulnerable in front of an increasingly invasive governance of transparency. The *Peasant Activism Project*<sup>1</sup>, hosted at Queen’s University Belfast and realized in cooperation with University of Perugia, has carried out long-term ethnographic fieldwork with activists, farmers and consumers associated with local networks of *Genuino Clandestino* and, among publications, produced an ethnographic documentary. The core innovation of our study derives from its renewed political understanding of food activism. Despite some works on the politics of food or the political aspects of food activism, and despite its relative global resonance and notable celebrated exceptions (e.g. Mintz 1985), anthropological writing on food is usually still anchored in questions of symbolic aspects of identity and culture, often overlooking issues of governance or political economy. By contrast, we consider campaigns such as *Genuino Clandestino* in relation to broader issues of governance, sovereignty and citizenship.

The various standardization policies implemented over the last decades in the agri-food sector had a profound impact on how we define farmers, what we consider to be “safe” food, and how we manage rural landscapes. A Kafkaesque layering of administrative complications characterizes everyday life of most farmers (and more and more other professions, such as university professors or hospital nurses): streamlined certification processes are presented as indisputable, motivated by apparently objective and/or common-sense criteria, while in fact concealing well-defined political interests.

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1. The *Peasant Activism Project* is financed by the Economic and Social Science Research Council (ESRC) in the United Kingdom, hosted by Queen’s University Belfast and implemented in cooperation with the University of Perugia (Grant number ES/M011291/1). The official website is: [www.peasantproject.org](http://www.peasantproject.org).

Due to its required investments, hygienic regulations of food production are considered often as favoring large businesses, while implemented in the name of food safety. To investigate such politics of transparency is the core objective of the *Peasant Activism Project*. Politics of transparency are understood as a key-element in the restructuring of social control through practices such as certifications and standardizations (Han 2012; Fung, Graham, Weil 2007). Drawing on writing from Political Anthropology, the project focuses on the effects of the politics of transparency, often hidden behind the paradigm's guise of objectivity. Based on an ethnographic inquiry into novel forms of resistance to the official transparency-driven governance, the project also aims to contribute to renewing conventional, more culturalist perspectives in food anthropology (Koensler 2016).

### *Responding to standardization*

One way to respond to these developments in agriculture is the Participatory Guarantee (PG), one way in academia is the valuation of face-to-face relations in ethnographic filmmaking. In what follows we present a circular conversation<sup>2</sup> between Andrea Zappa (who represents *Terra/Terra*, an Italian network of small-scale farmers and first processors), Fabrizio Loce-Mandes (post-doctoral fellow in visual anthropology of the project) and Alexander Koensler (project coordinator). The dialogue evolves around experimental practices of grassroots responses to standardization, both with the Participatory Guarantee (PG), a grassroots attempt that goes beyond the scope of traditional certifications, and with face-to-face relations during screening and debate sessions of our ethnographic documentaries<sup>3</sup>. As the PG aims to establish a community of producers and consumers, it revitalizes alternative certification practices (Koensler 2015), food sovereignty activism worldwide, such as *Via Campesino* and others (Edelman 2014). From here, the conversation touches upon the possibilities of realizing similar models of co-operation and sharing in the academia.

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2. The conversation took place on 20<sup>th</sup> July 2018 in front of the cow stable of Andrea Zappa in Southern Umbria. As decided in various movement assemblies, Andrea Zappa is a placeholder for someone who speaks in public in the name of *Terra/Terra*, a local network of small-scale farmers and neo-rural activist part of the national movement *Genuino Clandestino*. This is a selected transcription of a three hours conversation. Parts of the conversation have been translated by Eleonora Branchesi. We thank the anonymous reviewers and the editors of *Anuac* for their constructive feedback on this short writing experiment.

3. The project team has produced two documentaries, *An Experimental Path* (38') and *De-Commodifying Foodways* (71'). More information can be found at the project's website section: [www.peasantproject.org/gallery/documentaries](http://www.peasantproject.org/gallery/documentaries).

*Andrea Zappa (Andrea):* Many among us had been organic farmers working with the official Organic Certification (the so-called “Euro-leaf”, *translator’s note*). We realized over time that this certification has a number of problems. Official organic certifications are business-oriented. Obtaining an official certification allows you to apply for financial aid for organic farming. We were small-scale farmers instead, we are different.

My own experience, for example, is not just a personal story, it is rather a collective one. I was in a group that left the city towards the end of the ’80s. We wanted to live in the countryside, together. What we had in common was the ideal of sharing life, as well as our common political experience in *Autonomia Operaia*<sup>4</sup> and as part of the early squatting movement in Rome. We wished for ourselves a better quality of life, happier personal relations. We soon realized that our dream did not fit with the intensive farming models, the agro-industrial business. We had to do something different. We tried to build up a reality where food is produced collectively, through horizontal relations.

*Fabrizio Loce-Mandes (Fabrizio):* Okay, but how did you Alexander come up with the idea to conceptualize a research project around this form of activism?

*Alexander Koenler (Alexander):* Clifford Geertz once wrote, possibly inspired by Wallace Stevens, «rationalists wearing square hats sitting in square rooms thinking square thoughts, they should try sombreros». Along these lines, I am interested in experimental forms of activism. In the realm of so-called “food-activism”, for example, that means to go beyond what Slow Food and the organic farming movement do. People like Andrea, if you think about it, develop original and experimental approaches to food sovereignty.

*Fabrizio:* And why do you think this is important to study?

*Alexander:* For two reasons: Firstly, the very idea of a Participatory Guarantee subverts a growing paradigm of transparency that pervades all aspects of the contemporary world. Now, anything must have some sort of seal of quality or warranty. Transparency becomes an instrument to govern people through apparently objective processes. This is still not fully understood yet, also academic writing on the subject is growing. Power is still located in obvious structures or institutions; authority used to be seen as lying within the king or head of the state, or, if you want, within democratic processes. However, a moral imperative of transparency seems to take over. A great

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4. *Autonomia Operaia*, literally “Worker’s Autonomy”, is an Italian workerist, Marxist-autonomist political movement that had its apical moments in the ’70s.

deal of contemporary decisive power is accumulated within often invisible agencies and institutions that make decisions in the name of transparency. This applies across many sections of society, take for example ANVUR<sup>5</sup>. All these certifying agencies hold the power to decide who is in and who is out of the system. Upon scrutiny, one will notice that the process of making something transparent is always a top-down one and that this state of affairs is never called into question. Now, the idea of Participatory Guarantee is subverting this dynamic. It is a form of resistance to the hegemonic paradigm of transparency. Thus, studying these practices can serve us to better understand some aspects of our governance today.

The second reason: The PG seems to indicate a turn within the realm of political imagination. Compared to the recent past, today's political imagination seems to most people somewhat exhausted. It seems that viable alternatives to the established system are hardly to imagine. It is difficult to argue against this. Consider the state of political institutions. Now, neo-rural activism and experiments such as the PG revive the political imagination, but in another way around. Whereas in the past a utopia would be established first, and then laboriously pursued, here we look at utopias in the making. It is very much unlike what happened in the 1970's, when well-formed utopias of communist or socialist society were thought of as being laid out there in theory, and the challenge was to turn them into a reality. What we found here instead is what we in our video called an experimental path, may be towards a yet unknown utopia based on imaginative practices. It is a process, a path along which our political imagination unfolds.

### *“Cold” and “warm” modalities*

*Andrea:* Here you touched on a crucial point: the operational modality of the State - and what we are doing instead. The State is founded on a “cold” modality: There are institutions, controlled from above by higher institutions and in turn controlling lower institutions below them. That is the way how it is supposed to assure food safety. This system doesn't even always work, as we know. When I used to be a certified organic farmer myself, I have spent much more time on paperwork than, say, turning my animals out to pasture. You lose your connection to the territory, to nature, to food, to the flora and fauna. We are trying to turn this around. With the Participatory Guarantee we open a fracture into this system. The PG is not something that exists in isolation: rather, it is integral to a set of practices - a path - that we are following and experimenting with.

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5. ANVUR is the Italian National Agency for the Evaluation of the University and Research Systems in Italy.

*Fabrizio:* If we turn back to the question of the political imagination, what is the ideological environment in which the *Terra/Terra* network developed?

*Andrea:* There is a story here, too. We started to look for ways to sustain ourselves as soon as we had enough products to sell - mind you, it was not much. It was the '80s, and the first organic shops were popping up. So, we first sold our goods to them. At one point we realized that the retail price was twice than what we had sold for, if not more than that! That is when we began to try and find alternative models of sustenance. At that time, we would be traveling to Rome a lot. Our paths crossed with those of other comrades who also had decided to establish themselves in the countryside. We decided to join our efforts. And since we had renewed our relations with some *centri sociali*<sup>6</sup> in Rome we brought our goods to their spaces. The *Forte Prenestino*, a self-managed space in Rome, was one of such centers. We organized fairs about self-production economy. We included more and more people in our debates, and *Terra/Terra* was born. It was only a matter of time before we reached other areas of the city. You see, organizing a network of neo-rural farmers was a matter of necessity. We needed to build a collective path towards peasant resistance.

*Fabrizio:* And what can be the role of such an experiment?

*Andrea:* The Participatory Guarantee (or Participatory Certification) is a set of practices that we established within the *Terra/Terra* network. There are two main functions to it. The first one is most obvious: we still need to provide some form of guarantee to the people who buy our products in city markets. Whereas if there is something like the official organic certification, people are comforted. Even though, in fact, they have no clue of what the jar, piece of cheese, loaf of bread they buy actually contains. The second reason why the PG is vital is that it allows us to aggregate more, to share more, to better raise awareness about our territories.

*Fabrizio:* And how does it work?

*Andrea:* The heart of the PG is a public visit at the farm or food processing reality that wants to become part of *Terra/Terra*. The peasants who want to enter the network organize this public tour, which other peasants from the network attend. Producers from the area who are not involved in the network - especially those whose line of work is akin to that of the peasants in

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6. *Centri sociali* are autonomous, self-managed nonprofit spaces that offer social, cultural and political services. They are often squatted buildings, not rarely tolerated by municipal authorities. The history of *centri sociali* is rather unique, although it features some commonalities with squatted places throughout Europe.



question - are also invited as observers, as well as co-producers<sup>7</sup>. For example, we rear sheep and make cheese. So, it is other shepherds and cheese-makers who visit us. It is them who have the knowledge to determine whether we work in the right way, whether we perform good farming practices. This is also an occasion for mutual exchange: we ask each other questions and advise each other about the minutiae of our work. Which rennet to use, whether we add ferments, how we manage the steps of processing and so on. This is so much more than what we would have if all the relation among us would remain limited to meeting at the market. Once you come here, to my home, you see my workshop where I make milk, you see my animals - well, once you do this, the relationship between us changes completely.

*Fabrizio*: Did you establish any limitations, or shared values, that are necessary to obtain it? And how do you evaluate the goods' origin, and the work that goes into their production?

*Andrea*: The path towards the PG starts with an email from a peasant or farming reality to the network's office. The office sends them self-declaration forms, one for each kind of product they want to certify. The goal is to understand what kind of farm they are: whether they hire hands, whether it is a family-run, collective, or cooperative business, etc. Once they have declared all this, they come to one of our assemblies to introduce themselves in person. Then a public visit is scheduled. This tour is the most crucial step. There are no fixed prerequisites: as we like to say, the path towards a PG is always under way. It is a process during which we need to make contact with each other and come to a shared understanding. There is no rule saying in advance that you need to have this and that. I am saying, beyond the very basic requirements of being anti-fascist, anti-racist, anti-sexist, and of selling exclusively one's own products, of course. Actually, we had some cases of peasants who contacted us without having understood who we were: during the visit we would see, for example, that they were using chemicals on their vegetable patches, and such. We did not say that they couldn't possibly enter the network: instead, we explained that, if they wanted to, we could help them find a way to remove chemicals from their farming.

### *Potential and limitations of participatory guarantees*

*Fabrizio*: Can the PG come to terms with the problem of undocumented and seasonal labor, which are so common in agriculture?

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<sup>7</sup> "Co-producers" is the common expression to describe those who show their support by attending markets as purchasers, taking part to visits etc.

*Andrea:* This was a challenge for us at *Terra/Terra*. We discussed the issue of working conditions for a long time. We realized how hard it is to face this subject in agriculture. We are against undocumented labor, as we oppose the exploitation of all people as a general principle. After a great deal of discussing, we came to accept the presence of subordinate work, under some conditions. The farmer reality must show that workers are not merely hired hands, but that they are involved as peers in the farming project. This follows from our belief that peasants' agriculture should serve the collectivization of wealth. It is crucial to recreate collectiveness: spaces where wealth can be found that is redistributable to all.

*Fabrizio:* How did the PG evolve in light of all these considerations?

*Andrea:* We continually put our practices to the test, even at a national level: we take part of the national working group on Participatory Guarantees of the *Genuino Clandestino* national meetings. I will try to explain what the underlying issue is, and how we deal with it. Take our farm, for example. We could have organic feed for our animals neatly delivered to us, tidily packaged and stocked in a truck, and what not. Well, I have never done this in the thirty years that I have been doing my job. I have always used a grinder: I power it through the tractor's engine or plug it in the electric socket and grind my grains into a flour. I collect the seeds from the vicinity. I do all this because I want raw materials to be locally sourced. If our aim is to build solidarity and trust in the area, we just cannot buy organic feed that comes from who knows where. And there is more. I own five cows and 11,12 acres of land. We decided to put the land to pasture, which means we cannot use it to grow our own animal feed. There are two reasons why we took this decision. The first one is that we respect our animals and want them to live as healthy a life as possible. This way they can graze freely, they can scratch against a tree, they can seek shade or look for the type of grass they like. They enjoy a measure of freedom.

The second reason why we put the land to pasture is that we cannot afford new machines to work it, our tractor is thirty years old. This kind of things affect our decisions heavily. So, we decided to put to practice what we had learned from *Genuino Clandestino*: inspired by the discourse over food sovereignty, we too decided to build local communities in local territories. Therefore, we put ourselves in touch directly with the other peasants we knew in the area: it is preposterous that one of us should sell their goods to a trader for say, €5, only so that he may then sell it to another among us for €20. By doing so, we tightened our relations with the group of local producers. This may seem to contradict the practice of the PC, but I think it is well motiv-



ated. It is a critical situation. Personally, I do not want to buy organic feed is obtained from seed of unknown origin - not to mention the fact that it would raise the price of cheese. What I want is to value the creation of relations within a local space. This is what really makes us different from the cold system of rules and guidelines.

*Fabrizio:* Is there any chance that the PG may undergo a process of institutional recognition?

*Andrea:* Terra/Terra is not at all interested in that. Nor is there any interest among the people of *Mercato Brado*, which is another network I am involved with, based in the Terni area. See, for us the PG is a practice - a tool - that we use to achieve something. Our reasoning is very different from that of large-scale farming businesses, so we are not interested in institutional validation. I believe there will always be regulations that favor large businesses while preventing people like us with a flock of thirty sheep from bringing cheese to a market - because, with a flock of thirty, you simply do not have enough assets to make the required investments. So, again, no. We are not interested in existing in an institutional form. The movement goes on, 'genuine' and 'clandestine'. Should laws be emanated that regulate our practices, we shall be at the market no matter whether or not they protect us. We cannot do otherwise, or we'll die. Processing 5 tons of milk per day is a very different deal than processing 50lts. Because to process 5 tons, the processor must necessarily have somebody bring milk to the processing plants: this requires transportation in bulk tanks, milk refrigeration, fuel consumption. Those working with 50lts do it in a workshop which is just a few yards away from the milking barn - and that is the added value.

*Fabrizio:* Do you believe the research we carry out can have an impact in other parts of society? Say, upon legislators?

*Alexander:* I somewhat agree with Andrea: there is something vital and emblematic in the lack of interest in recognizing the PG by governmental authorities. Research funded by major research agencies in the UK and Europe today is subject to so-called "impact" or "dissemination" strategies, to justify the expenditure in the eye of taxpayers. Impact here is generally conceived in a rather mechanistic way: the researcher is supposed to archive some kind of social change, but I do not think this lies within our capacities as social researchers, if we want not go back to colonial interpretation of anthropology, for example. In our case, we developed a different approach. Our research resembles Andrea's sentiment: «we will go ahead in any case» with or without institutional recognition. This is the reason why we did not distribute our documentary on the internet or in social media. We go where

people discuss about food, governance and politics and we can talk with them, face to face. We also bring along one or two of the protagonists of our documentary. Thus, we end up usually with rather deep conversations. This is our alternative impact strategy.

### *Research as an artisan artifact, passing from hand to hand*

*Andrea:* I think that the idea of making a documentary that raises awareness through personal relations - that is, the idea of entering public spaces to screen it together with the protagonists and discuss it, gives it an added value. It can be done regardless of institutional validation.

*Fabrizio:* That is certainly the case. Evidently, the visual medium alone, distributed on content sharing internet platforms, cannot communicate all the information we collected during our ethnographic research. It only scratches the surface of the topic. The format we choose instead, where screenings are combined with a presentation of our research allows us to open an in-depth discussion.

*Andrea:* Maybe one day a politician will drop by and learn a thing or two.

*Alexander:* Okay, everyone is welcome. But that is not one of our chief purposes, though. We conceived of our documentary in the same way the neo-rural protagonists of *Terra/Terra* conceive their products: it is an artisan artifact that passes from hand to hand, sparking an interest; it is much alike the PG in that it raises the other person's awareness by establishing a contact - it is a warm relation. Not an extraordinary feat. Although, in its modesty, this project was approved precisely because the idea of escaping certain system dynamics was innovative, as I mentioned earlier.

*Fabrizio:* And the analogies run even deeper than that. The way we conceived our research's impact shows parallels with the associative practices of the communities we worked with. We developed this research in an age when scientific research clings onto impact scales and researchers are encouraged to maximize their impact using tools that deploy cold relations, such as websites. As Alex said, our research output is made available in much like the same way the farmers' products are: people stop at the market, ask questions about processing directly to the processor, gather information about the farmers' exchange network, learn about the PG. This, however, does not unfold along a unidirectional, chronologically path. Screening events for our ethnographic film work the same way. We facilitate forms of interpersonal exchange similar to those of *Terra/Terra's* farmers. We present the research project and describe the stage it is at; we introduce the protag-

onists who in turn tell their stories, their path towards the PG. The public watches the documentary and asks questions, most times in an informal setting. Thus, people who take part to a screening leave the room bringing an experience with them, because everything is based on personal relations. Much like after an open visit for the Participatory Guarantee, you go home and tell what you learned to friends, family, and acquaintances. In this way the presentation and screening morph into something different, that goes well beyond the simple visual product or film screening. Making an impact through, let's call them, "warm" relations. We reach fewer people, but touch them at a deeper level.

*Andrea:* I would not say fewer, though, that is a relative estimation. They were an occasion for different communities to come together, which was extremely useful to spread knowledge of the Participatory Guarantee. People might start considering that maybe there are indeed alternative ways, that they might want to learn more about the realities that surround them. They ask questions to themselves, gradually stepping out of the "cold" schematic modality of thinking we had mentioned. Going back to question of what is your impact, well, I see an analogy with what we do at our markets, i.e. establishing relations with urban communities there. The more we succeed in adding something to the market, in bringing about information and education about food, aggregation and exchange, the more our practices are accessible to the public. This explains why we keep our practices so open-ended: we want to leave room for new horizons and possibilities.

*Alexander:* Yet, one must guard against some risks that are common when seeking an impact. There are the pitfalls of the cultural industry. We were suggested, for example, to craft short three-minute videos to upload on YouTube. At first glance, this might sound like a good idea. But three minutes is nothing if you want to understand a complex message. It is not our aim to reach this kind of dissemination. We prefer to engage in discussions that may take hours, animated by personal relations because they really get to people's imagination, they spark something that lasts longer than what they would get from watching a one-minute video. It is the same problem as with all industrial products for mass distribution: you can sure make a lot of money with them, but then... what else?

*Andrea:* Yes, we all need to sit together and think things through. Like when you screen your film within some marginal, local reality where you can hope to intercept maybe twenty people at most... but those twenty get involved: they discuss patiently and ask questions to each other and to themselves, furthering the conversation. It is the kind of circumstance where one

can make meaningful contact with other social realities and exchange information. Had you not been this way, and had we not been this way, this whole business here – this relation – wouldn't have been born.

### *Final considerations*

“Cold modalities” of standardization permeate more and more all realms of contemporary life, farming is only one example. The ever-rising number of regulations in matters of health, sanitary, and quality certifications (organic, PGI, PDO) cannot be analyzed disjointedly from the systemic trend toward the inclusion of more and more products in the commodification processes. As a result of this trend, objects become more and more fluid, i.e. salable and re-salable at all times; increasingly subject to mutual comparison; progressively more capable of generating profit (asset making). In other words, the demand for transparency constitutes a precondition for the expansion of financial capitalism in the agri-food sector (Epstein 2006; McMichael 2006). This is the reason behind the accusations farmers and activists raise against the way official certifications are regulated, which they regard as frustration- and alienation-inducing.

This conversation highlights how the capability of social actors to respond and resist to the demand for standardization represents the forefront of mobilization in the era of transparency (Koenler 2018). The subversive character of the PG can be illustrated in a comment made by one of the founders of *Genuino Clandestino*, which we collected during an assembly:

Nowadays industries and retail chains offer somewhat trendy product lines using slogans that imitate the original mottos of our movement: “short production cycle”, “zero food-miles”, “ci metto la faccia” (“I put myself on the line”, t/n) ... They took them for marketing purposes because they carry great communicative power. Our power, instead, is the power of the network, the community, of the people who believe in our project. This they cannot copy, this they cannot take. While they have consumers, we have co-producers.

Based on this attempt to distinguish between commercialization and community, it might be possible to conclude: If the vanguard of power dynamics proceeds by means of the promotion of transparency through standardization, then the vanguard of political mobilization advances by re-defining transparency. In this context, the example of the Participatory Guarantee of the neo-rural network Terra/Terra can reach far beyond the realm of agriculture and food production and can offer, for instance, new insights also into the practices of restitution in academia.

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**Andrea ZAPPA** is a placeholder name for someone who speaks in public in the name of the network of *Terra/Terra*, one of the local networks that compose the national neo-rural movement *Genuino Clandestino*.

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