



Parasitizing landscape for UNESCO World Heritage

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ABSTRACT

The work of Michel Serres has received recent attention in geographic scholarship, particularly his concept of the parasite. In this article I use this model to investigate an area of geographic study that has remained until now unexamined under this lens: the production of heritage landscapes. Through an engagement with a case from the Valtellina, a valley in the Italian Alps, I demonstrate the logic of the parasite that is evident in the actions of a local nonprofit organization that narratively and materially analyzes (culls), paralyzes (eliminates), and catalyzes (combines) local agricultural terraces in an application to UNESCO's World Heritage list. I do this by parasitizing the terraces and the application myself as I analyze, paralyze, and catalyze them to render a still partial but fuller representation of the valley's historic terraced landscapes. Parasites are ambivalent agents, abusive in some ways but useful in others.

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1. Introduction

The Valtellina is an agricultural valley in the Italian Alps, 150 km northeast of Milan, on the Swiss border (Fig. 1). It is known for being unusually fertile for its elevation and latitude, and for the dry stone terraces on its steep hillsides that help make this fertility possible (Fig. 2). Fondazione ProVinea, a local nonprofit that was founded in 2003, has applied to UNESCO to inscribe these landscapes onto its World Heritage list. It represents the heroic transformation of barren slopes into fertile fields. I contend that Michel Serres' concept of the parasite facilitates a more accurate reading of the terrace's construction and use, including ProVinea's current engagement with them. Similar to the institutions that came before it, ProVinea plays the parasite by analyzing (culling), paralyzing (eliminating), and catalyzing (combining) the Valtellina terraces to achieve its desired outcome.

People have taken their living from the Valtellina's fragile terraced hillsides for over a millennium, always organized by a series of institutions: the Catholic Church which initiated terraced cultivation (c. 700–1512), the Grisons Freestate that greatly expanded it (1512–1797), the Valtellinese nobility who oversaw its decline (1797–1920), various wine cooperatives that rehabilitated it (1920–present), and now ProVinea that would like to turn the terraces into heritage landscapes for consumption by the global tourist market (ProVinea, 2005).

ProVinea's aim is the same as those of the institutions that went before it: to engage the valley's landscape in a way that yields a product that is suitable for a desired market. The markets and products have changed throughout the Valtellina's history, but

the terraced hillsides have always been central to each enterprise, making them sites of multiple functions and meanings. I demonstrate how ProVinea narratively and materially parasitizes the Valtellina terraces in its application to World Heritage to make it more competitive by culling what is advantageous, eliminating what is detrimental, and combining what is dispersed. Like all parasites, ProVinea analyzes (culls), paralyzes (eliminates), and catalyzes (combines). The result is a story of a unified people building a single industry on a mutable landscape.

A casualty in this telling is a more complex representation, one that I partially reveal by investigating one aspect of the terraces: their spatiality. Terraces existed in many parts of the Valtellina and in diverse forms, not just in the areas and forms that ProVinea designates in its application to UNESCO. Using Serres' parasite model I build my argument by comparing the representation of the terraces found in ProVinea's application to an alternative representation that I have crafted through a combination of archival and field research. My aim is not to criticize ProVinea, but to demonstrate the logic of the parasite that is evident in the foundation's representation of the valley's terraces. Indeed, parasites are vital to the function and development of systems because they drive their evolution by catalyzing new forms through seizing and changing the relations that constitute the old forms. This is true in terms of biological evolution (Combes, 2005) as well as in a more general material and sociological sense (Serres, 2007), dynamics that I demonstrate in the section that follows.

2. Serres' parasite logic

For Serres, the important measure of anything is the aggregate, the multiple, the swarm. He revels in the undetermined potential

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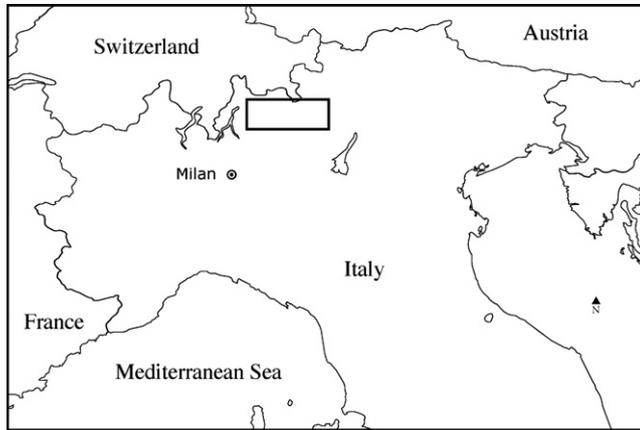


Fig. 1. The Valtellina in northern Italy and surrounding countries. Source: Jedediah R. Smith, 2012.



Fig. 2. Wine terraces with *La Chiesa di San Siro* in the center, in Bianzone. Source: T. J. Puleo, 2006.

of chaos and the infinite possibility that exists in disorder. In the introductory essay to a later edition of *The Parasite*, Cary Wolfe cites Gregory Bateson (2000) in discussing the Kantian notion of creation that derives not from selecting certain facts from a known set of facts, but rather from “an infinite number of facts (Wolfe, 2007: xxiv).” In this vacillating and multivariate sea Serres swims most happily. The reality of the world is a disordered aggregate and chaos is the rule. Within this ocean of chaos our systems, including our landscapes, take form (Serres, 2007).

But what causes systems to emerge from this chaotic flow of things and beings to make the reality that we recognize? Serres offers the parasite as one such mediating agent. In both French and English the word ‘parasite’ denotes an organism that lives by exploiting another. A social parasite happily accepts an invitation to dinner but never extends one in return. It ‘analyzes’ its host by taking but giving nothing back (Serres, 2007). A biological parasite enters the brain of a fish, causing it to swim in a way that makes it vulnerable to being caught and eaten by a bird in which the parasite will find a larger, warmer, and more nutritious host (Combes, 2005). It ‘paralyzes’ and ‘catalyzes’ its host by interrupting its usual activity and making it act in a way it would not ordinarily. In both the social and biological examples, the parasite enters a chaotic field of hosts that nurture it at one level and then turns it into a more supportive habitat by analyzing, paralyzing, and catalyzing the hosts who can provide even greater nutrition.

Parasites carve order from chaos by abusing their hosts. I use the word ‘abuse’ here as Serres does, to indicate less a mistreatment and more a syphoning. Serres parses the word as ‘ab-use,’ with the prefix ‘ab-’ signifying ‘away’ to render a meaning of an unreciprocated taking, a tangential redirection. So in this sense, parasites are abusive but they are also useful because through their abuse they disrupt the social and environmental systems that host them, thereby catalyzing their evolution. Parasites are not productive in the sense that they make things. Rather, they are productive in the sense that they *make things do things* by seizing the relations among them. “Nesting on the flow of the relations,” parasites steer the course (Serres, 2007: 53).

Serres uses the parasite model to explain the course of global social and environmental development. He claims that history is not as full of conflict as historians represent it. Peasants rarely rebelled against their lord; most of the time they did not even know where he was. So in Serres’ vision, the history of human relations and engagement with the material world is not configured as opposition ($\rightarrow \leftarrow$) or predation ($\rightarrow \rightarrow$), but parasitism ($\uparrow \leftarrow$). Things happen tangentially. Oblique and one-way sequences of confiscations and abuses subtend social, political, and economic systems. The same is true of human engagement with the natural world, especially in modern industrial times. “What does man give to the cow, to the tree, to the steer, who gives him milk, warmth, shelter, work, and food? What does he give? Death (2007: 5).” Most activity on the Earth’s surface occurs in a series of unidirectional parasitic relations. These relations are not reciprocal but abusive, and as such they are more parasitical than oppositional or predatory. By being unidirectional, they cause systems to adapt, leading to their evolution.

Serres turns to fables to further explain the dynamics of parasitism, its serial and one-way nature in particular, using Aesop’s “City Mouse, Country Mouse” (Boursault, 1988). Aesop opens the story with the invitation from the city mouse to the country mouse. The country mouse arrives and dines with his cousin on the leftovers of a fancy meal of game birds served on a Persian rug; this is clearly the city, but something is odd. The man who owns the house where the mice dine is a farmer, but he is a farmer only in a legal sense because he produces nothing. He lives off of government subsidies—he is paid *not to produce*, but to *not produce*. He eats for nothing, just like the mice. Who has paid for the meal? Those who pay the taxes that provide the farmer’s subsidy (Serres, 2007).

Here we see the tangential relation of parasitism in a series rather than as a single occurrence. At the head of the chain is the dirt farmer who struggles everyday in the field. He is parasitized by the tax farmer who is important to the system of agricultural production because by not producing he maintains the prices of agricultural goods. He eats *not although* he does not work, but *because* he does not work. The system may not be fair to the dirt farmer, but this is how it has evolved to work most efficiently. The tax farmer then goes upstairs to bed, leaving the remains of his meal on the table. He is in turn parasitized by the city mouse that likewise eats for free by nibbling away at the tax farmer’s leftovers. In fact there is so much left on the table that the city mouse invites his cousin the country mouse over for dinner. As they nibble away however, the tax farmer gets up and makes a noise that scares the country mouse. “I’m going back to the country where I have nothing to eat but my own chestnuts,” says the country mouse, “but at least I will eat them in peace (Serres, 2007: 53).”

Serres says that the country mouse is a fool, a rough political character who does not understand how complex social and economic systems work and who ruins them by not maintaining his role in them. As Steven D. Brown makes clear, the country mouse is more committed to maintaining its own principles than to facilitating the functioning of the larger, richer, and more efficient

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