I met Valentina at the San Ambrogio market in Florence in Italy last May. She was proudly propped up like an over-sized centrepiece on a banquet table, surrounded by greenish-red tomatoes, heaps of fresh lettuce and pungent herbs at her table in the market. I was surveying her display with wide eyes when I looked up and she cracked a wide grin that filled the covered market area with sunshine. I could not help myself; I had to talk to this market Venus. Valentina was in the farmers’ area of the market and the first thing I wanted to ask her was where her farm was located. I am always curious to know what connections cities still have to local agriculture and how far food travels. Valentina told me her family farm was very close to Florence in an area called Isolotto. We started to talk about vegetables, cooking and gardening. I was asking a lot of questions but Valentina also had some of her own: who was I and why was I so interested in vegetables and the market. I explained that I am an anthropologist and that, for the past four years, I had been studying markets in Italy and France. This really perked her interest: she had an interesting story and wanted to tell it to me, so I listened.

This paper is based on interviews with Valentina and Manuela Magherini at the San Ambrogio market in Spring 2005, and at their home in the fall of that year. This initial research and small case study is hopefully just a starting point for further investigation into periurban farming in Italy and the impact of urban sprawl and development on local farming and food. This paper also looks at the conflicts that are created when boundaries between urban and rural are challenged: Where does the city begin and end? Why
does farming seem to be incompatible with urban life? People living in cities often imagine that their food is produced in some far off, idyllic place, or at least that is what they seem to want to believe about farming. If agriculture has such a powerful and positive place in the urban imagination, why is it so threatening and perceived as disorderly when it infringes on urban space (or should we say when urban space encroaches on the agricultural in the case of urban sprawl)? Why does urban culture position itself in direct opposition with agriculture in Italy when, in the end, the two are reliant on each other?

The Magherini family’s land is now farmed by Valentina, her brother Leonardo, and her mother Manuela. An occasional hand is hired on to help when there is money and when it is absolutely necessary. Over a very long and delicious lunch at their house, Manuela and Valentina told me how in the past decades market gardening has become increasingly difficult for the family. They told me the story of how the city arrived at the doorstep of their farm.

The Magherini family has been farming a plot of land in Isolotto since the 17th century: they can trace their roots at their little farmhouse in via Madonna di Pagano to 1678. Valentina is very proud of her family’s heritage and long history as contadini (farmers). This is something I found unusual for an Italian woman in her thirties. Most women I had met in cities and villages in Tuscany and Umbria found the countryside beautiful and even talked about it in a sentimental way, but they were quick to distance themselves from anything that had to do with food production (dirt in general for that matter). It was something their grandmothers did, what other people did or something done in the past. The agricultural past is still a little too close for comfort for these city and village dwellers who are eager to embrace the comforts of ‘modern’ life (Krause, 2000). Upon further ethnographic investigation, the term modern seemed to signify separation from any form of food production from farmers’ markets to vegetable gardens. Modernity was symbolised by convenient prepared foods and eating out. In this vein there is a strong desire to create boundaries, physical and imagined, between urban and agricultural, present and past. When boundaries are blurred or become contested ground, there is cause for crisis. In many cases, urban is equated with modernity and this modernisation and urbanisation is seen as an active and conscious distancing from nature. Rural and agricultural are frequently seen as backward due to its close ties with nature and the human inability
to master nature. It seems that city dwellers only face nature when there are natural disasters that affect cities (from high food prices to flooding). When interviewing informants who live in Florence there was a general tendency to erase any attachment to the natural world in the city; part of this project is physically and mentally distancing the countryside and agricultural activities that evoke human dependency on nature. A priori, this also means a distancing from food and food production. The fringes of urban sprawl in Florence provide a good example of the anxiety and conflict created when the countryside becomes urbanised in fits and starts.

The Magherini farm is located approximately 10 km west of Florence along the south bank of the Arno River. Up until the second half of the 20th century this was mainly an agricultural area; it was the part of the countryside surrounding Florence that played an important role in feeding the city. In 1950, Isolotto was the focus of an urban development project, which was part of a larger push in Italy to develop periphery areas near large cities. Italian urban development texts cite the Isolotto project as a model case in urban development. Its mix of social and commercial spaces and use of green areas to promote sociability were seen as extremely forward thinking. This satellite area was designed to be autonomous from Florence. Interestingly, these texts mention that Isolotto was chosen for development because the city of Florence owned five hectares in the area and could easily expropriate other tracts of land (Bigazzi 1960). Here Isolotto prior to the 1950s is represented as uninhabited, run down and lacking in infrastructure. There is no mention of the productive farms in the area and their importance in providing food for the city. Urban planners in Italy have often seen farmland near urban areas as unused, underdeveloped or abandoned; this justifies their development projects and confirms the idea that the productive countryside has no place or use near urban centres. This attitude seriously undervalues agricultural activities. This is echoed in many municipalities’ approaches to the development of periurban areas in the post-war period. Inaugurated in 1954, Isolotto was built in only two years and included some 1,000 new homes. Many of the new buildings were case popolare (social housing projects), built to house workers who had recently migrated from the rural areas to work in the factories surrounding Florence. Not only was Isolotto transformed from agricultural land to urban development, its inhabitants were farmers turned into fac-
There was a serious housing shortage in Italian cities after the Second World War and Isolotto was originally thought of as an area where the working classes could live happily together outside the city centre and close to their jobs in the nearby factory. There was an attempt to combine housing with shops and recreational spaces in order to create an independent and contained city under Florentine jurisdiction but separate from the city of Florence proper. The mayor’s inaugural speech was speckled with references to agriculture and gardening but ironically these were the elements that had been eradicated and pushed further away in order to build new roads, parking lots and modernist apartment blocks (La Pira 1954). Local government evidently favoured housing an industrial expansion, marginalising farmland and agriculture. Although the area was initially designed with the most up-to-date urban planning philosophy of the 1950s, it continued to expand outside of these plans from the 1960s to present. As a result, this area lacks urban coherence. As I passed through the area for the first time, I could not fathom how Isolotto could be cited as a textbook case for urban development.

Since World War II, the city of Florence has slowly sprawled outwards; development has been fuelled by rising real estate prices in the city centre and by urban growth. After the failure and dissolution of mezzadria, the Italian form of sharecropping, and the development of industry in and around cities, large numbers of Italians moved into urban centres and neighbouring areas seeking work after the Second World War (Helstosky 2004; Counihan 2004). This also coincided with unprecedented industrial growth from 1958 to 1963, known as the Italian economic miracle. Valentina told me the story of how she and her family watched as high-density apartment buildings were built around their farmland and home. Neighbouring cascine were abandoned and left to tumble down, as neighbouring farmers sold off their property, tempted by the profit to be made from the rising land prices.

I asked Valentina why her family did not sell up. She told me they did not want to leave their land because farming is what they do: “Siamo contadini. È quello che facciamo, è quello che siamo.” This combination of livelihood and sense of place is essential to the Magherini family’s identity. Other farmers
may have embraced change but this family resisted and saw no benefit or reason for change. What was wrong with farming? The Magherini are well aware of the importance of their work and this is apparent when they talk about what they do: “Vendiamo frutta e verdura in città al mercato. Per tanti fiorentini è l’unico contatto che hanno con la campagna, con contadini come noi. È molto importante... di non perdere le radici.” This link between producers and consumers, between people and the land is something that is increasingly weak. At the supermarket, shoppers have little idea who grew their food, where it was grown, by whom and how. Although there is a renewed interest in the food supply chain in many Western countries, price and convenience are still the most important factors that determine most consumer choices.

Initially, the Magherini farm produced enough fruits and vegetables to be able to sell their crops at Florence’s central wholesale market. Valentina told me they made a pretty good living and had several hired hands. This is also when Valentina’s father was still alive and the farm consisted of three hectares of land. As development progressed a portion of land was expropriated from the Magherinis for the construction of an apartment block in the 1980s. This cut the Magherini’s off from one of their more productive fields; they now had to use the roadway to access their land. Once again in 1999, this little farm was caught in the middle of larger development plans when the city expropriated a substantial tract of land just north of the Magherinis’ house to create an access road to a parking lot that was being built for the 2000 Jubilee festivities in Florence. Although Valentina and her mother officially protested, there was nothing they could do. The city paid them for their land but it did not compensate for the continuing loss in profits and productivity of their farm. The last straw came when the city granted a permit for the construction of a multiplex cinema on the land neighbouring the Magherinis’ house. A gigantic cinderblock wall casts a shadow on the house and courtyard where chickens cluck and pick at the ground, while at night a neon sign blazes high above casting an unnatural blue glow. The contrast between rural and urban could not be sharper than in Magherinis’ backyard.

2. “We sell fruits and vegetables at the market in the city. For many Florentines it is the only contact they have with the countryside, with farmers like us. It is very important ... not to lose your roots.”
The Magherinis’ farm has become an island of green in a sea of asphalt and concrete. The family has only half a hectare of land left and they have had to stop selling at the wholesale market. In addition, they can no longer afford their hired help because of their diminishing production. Three years ago Valentina started to go into the centre of Florence six days a week to sell at the San Ambrogio market. She explained to me that her grandmother used to sell at that very same market and she felt that in some ways she was getting closer to her family’s roots. At San Ambrogio the Magherinis get more for the fruits and vegetables they sell, however, it is also a lot more work. Although she finds selling at the market interesting and enjoys the contact with all kinds of people, Valentina told me it is exhausting to sell at the market and then return home to work in the fields. When they sold their produce at the wholesale market, they had to go only a few times a week and it was just for an hour or two in the morning.

When I went out to visit the Magherinis’ farm in September I took the number 9 bus to the end of the line. On the way out, I was surprised at how green Isolotto is and how there are large intensively cultivated fields amidst high-density housing. Many people call this area a green belt or the pantry of Florence. As the bus rolled along the main avenue, I caught glimpse of the green water of the Arno. In many areas the banks of the river were densely planted with illegal garden plots, heavy with tomatoes and mature fruit trees, attesting to the permanent nature of these gardens. The bus rolled up to the capo linea, its final stop. I got off the bus and the multiplex cinemas loomed larger than life in front of me while the motorway buzzed in the background. It was a disorienting landscape: was I in the countryside, an industrial area or a satellite housing district? The streets were empty as I made my way down the road and spotted Valentina who was coming to meet me. We walked a block down the main road, turned left and went down a rough side street. To the right a new glaring white palazzo stood in stark contrast to a falling down 17th century farm complex with a beautiful iron gate that was rusting off its hinges. The grass had grown long in the yard, which was speckled with garbage. We walked on a path until we were behind the cinema. We came to a low cascina (complex of farm buildings) and went up the drive where chickens were pecking at the gravel and roosters were strutting their stuff. Valentina introduced me to her mother, Manuela, and she proceeded to show me around the farm.
I had to close my eyes and use my imagination to get an idea of what this place once looked like twenty years ago. Was this still a farm? Could it be one now that it was no longer really in the countryside? The Magherini are no longer allowed to raise pigs and cows because of city bylaws limiting animal husbandry in urban areas. Larger farmyard animals are considered unhygienic and disruptive by neighbours and local bylaws that privilege urban expansion and penalise existing farms. This has created a lot of problems for the Magherini family, who now buy their meat from relatives and other farmers who live further from the city. They still prepare their own sausages but Manuela explained there is not the same satisfaction when you do not raise the animal yourself. This was just another one of many grievances related to the encroachment of urban sprawl on farmland.

The contrasts between modernity and tradition, urban and rural are quite extreme in this case: the Magherinis’ farm demonstrates the conflicts that arise when urban development and planning do not have a unified vision and there is little consideration for the traditional use of land. I had to see the farm to understand what Valentina had told me at the market. Shoppers at the market wax on about the quality of the produce sold by the farmers at the San Ambrogio market. However, the countryside is not the idealised place that is often spoken of in the city; it is not necessarily a far away place either. Farming practices seem incompatible with urban life. At present, agriculture requires large tracts of land in order to be economically viable. In rural areas small-scale farms struggle to compete with agribusinesses and in periurban areas small farms not only face harsh economic realities but they must deal with legal and social discrimination and exclusion as well. The Magherinis’ neighbours complain about the flies and the smell of the farm. The contrast between rural and urban creates a sense of disorder because of the striking physical differences in the spaces. Housing developments rise high into the sky, stark whiteness surrounded by asphalt parking lots carefully divided into parking spots. Adjacent farms are organic and in constant change as the seasons unfold. Farming equipment and animals are scattered about and plastic on greenhouses flaps in the wind. Agriculture is not always scenic and the practical use of space and resources does not usually privilege aesthetic considerations. The Magherinis do their best to keep the farmyard tidy and their fields are in constant cultivation. Nonetheless, this farm seems incredibly out of place between the housing
projects and motorway. This does not seem like a healthy place for food to be produced and not necessarily the healthiest place for humans to live.

Periurban areas are *liminal* spaces that are neither city nor countryside (Turner, 1967). They are spaces undergoing transformation and this process is sometimes brutal. Cities, once easily defined by their walls and fortifications, now creep out endlessly from their historic centres. The countryside surrounding much of Florence was once seen as a positive space surrounding the urban core: it was a place where people could get in touch with nature, a place that fed the city and was good for its general health. However, the mixing of urban and rural has caused tensions when it comes to conceptions of land use, space and food production. The city, in the current popular Italian imagination, demands distance from nature. This can be seen not only in a general lack of green spaces, but in the segregation of food production to far off places that are connected to the city by modern transportation networks. To the city dweller food seems to appear in markets and stores by some sort of magic. There are fewer farmers each year at Florentine markets and the link between production and consumption risks being lost altogether in the near future.

Manuela, Valentina, and Leonardo are managing to hold out against development. Although Leonardo sometimes talks of selling up and buying a piece of land where it is quieter in the hills surrounding the city, the family remains attached to their livelihood and their dwindling piece of land. They now focus on growing quality produce, which they proudly sell at the San Ambrogio market in the heart of Florence. As consumers become increasingly concerned with food miles and sustainable food supply the issue of local farming must be addressed by the municipalities of major Italian cities. Florence has a wealth of locally grown food that needs to be taken into consideration, cultivated and managed so that it is accessible to local consumers. However, rising land prices and weak local government have meant that many small-scale periurban farms have closed up shop. Small farms like the Magherinis’ are vital green spaces amongst the concrete sprawl of social housing, parking lots and motorways. These farms put city dwellers in touch with the people who grow food. It teaches them about how food is cultivated and strengthens bonds between Florentines and the city’s surrounding areas, creating a sense of place that seems to be slowly undermined by the detached nature of contemporary everyday life that often uproots and disorients individuals.
I have chosen to focus on one isolated case, but the Magherini family is not alone. Inhabitants of periurban areas throughout Italy are negotiating the use of space. It will be interesting to see if small farmers near cities will get the support they need from local government and consumers. Periurban farmers are potentially points of connection between the urban and rural, rather than spaces of conflict between differing conceptions of modern life.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Counihan, Carole

Bevilacqua, Piero (ed.)

Bigazzi, A.

Gobbi, Grazia

Helstosky, Carol

Krause, Elizabeth L.
2005 “Encounter with the “Peasant”: Memory work, masculinity and low fertility in Italy” in American Ethnologist, vol. 32, n. 4. 593-617.

La Pira, Girgrio
Nugent, Rachel

Turner, Victor