



The photography by Antonino Condorelli (henceforth Tonino) recalls the storytellers to my mind. What does it have to do with it? The storytellers are the traditional representatives of the oral tradition.

They went about recounting the stories of people, transmitting legends and myths. Often the storytellers used to rely on pictures.

I know that Tonino is a good drummer, but I have no memories – during the several journeys together on the Salerno-Reggio Calabria motorway- of his singing skills.

Tonino, however, knows how to recount with his art, which is not that of simple photography. What has always struck me about Tonino Condorelli is his ability to get in tune with the subject he is portraying.

His photography is social and human. A photography that tells the essence of people, of places and of events that pass through the lens of his camera.

His ability to interact with reality combines with his talent of being able to see it as a photojournalist. That is to describe it without mediations, without filters. Condorelli's photos hurt, they deeply hit your soul, they make you think, with their dramatic beauty and their narrative force.

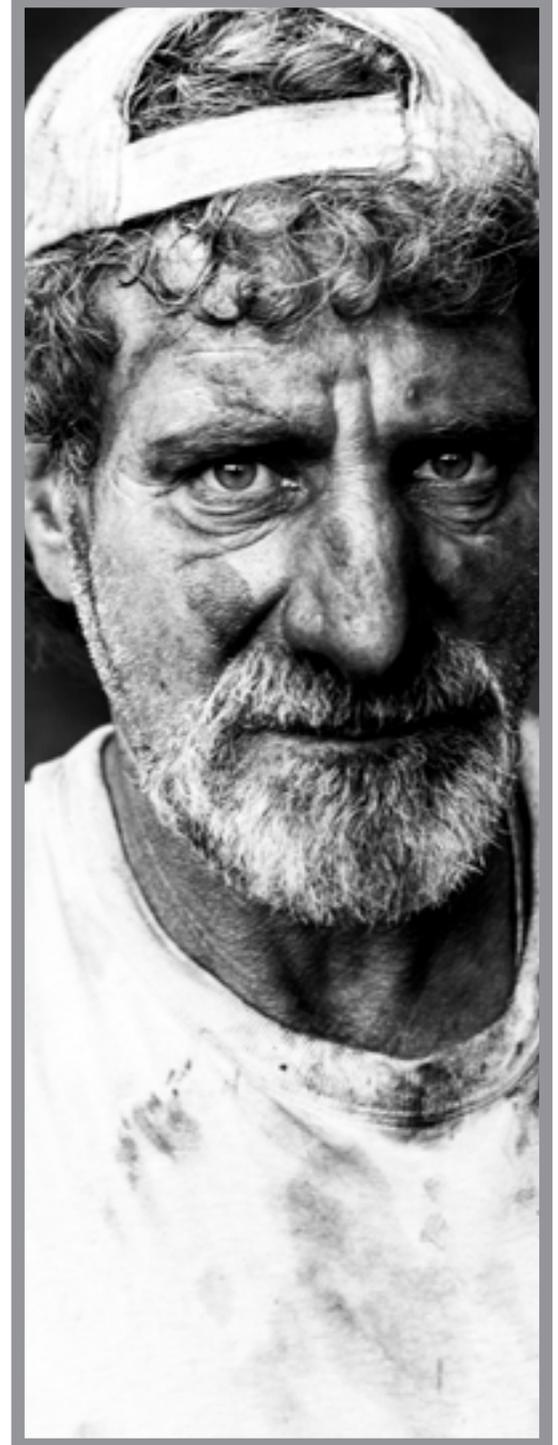
Charcoal burners is a work Tonino showed me years ago and that impressed me for the drama of the photographic account. The choice of black and white, the wide angle, the out of focus, the details, the shots on the faces, all this let those images seep the hard work of the charcoal burners of Serra San Bruno, in Calabria, Italy.

You feel like you are there with them, working near the fires, gathering the wood in the forests or resting on the bunk. You get in touch with those workers, you feel dirty with coal dust.

That's why the storytellers came to my mind: because, even without singing, the images that Tonino Condorelli catches with his camera, get you involved in the reality he is telling.

**Giuseppe Pipita Editorial Director at "Il Crotonese"**

## Antonino Condorelli - Charcoal Burners



Serra San Bruno is a town in the province of Vibo Valentia, in Calabria, southern Italy. Here, and in most of the area of the Serre Vibonesi, since the early years of the twentieth century, wooden domes covered in mud stood up to six meters high, as evidence of one of the hardest jobs in the Italian mountains: the charcoal maker. There is a strong sharp smell of fire in town, that fills the air with a winter atmosphere. This is one of those places in Italy where the tradition of working as a charcoal burner has been strong. It was a job which was handed down from father to son. In the past, plenty of families have grown up and carried forward thanks to the incomes deriving from such a job. Once, the charcoal burners used to leave their home and move into the woods from spring to autumn. Whole families relocated and settled among the trees until there would have been enough wood to make coal. Men, children and women: the latter, in addition to helping their husbands in the production of coal, had also the task of looking after and raising their children and, when necessary, carrying their pregnancies to term. Life was hard at the time. Everything was done manually and the coal was very important for the restaurant industry, for heating and for the different uses that were made of it. The trees were cut and the “scarazzo” was prepared, a sort of dome shaped wood pile, built with the largest trunks inside and the smallest ones outside. Choosing the wood and arranging it has always been the art of the master charcoal burner. The expert ones were left to teach the younger ones how to set certain types of wood in

the scarazzo. At the center of the sheaf a fireplace was left. From this fireplace some embers were thrown and they slowly started to dehydrate the internal wood in order to carbonize it all. The scarazzo was then covered with straw and soil and the charcoal master, with his patience and wisdom, had to take care of it during all the time of “cooking”, in order to prevent the fire from weakening or being too strong. The color of the smoke showed if the scarazzo was working well or not and gave information to the coalman about the pressure inside the sheaf. The stockpile of combustion gases inside the dome could cause the explosion of the scarazzo, so the burner had to monitor the charcoal day and night, for all the twenty cooking days and he had to drill or close holes in the scarazzo to balance the pressure inside the stack, he had to adjust the air draft and manage the cooking of the internal part. Transparent smoke was the sign that the cooking was completed and that the coal was ready. At this point “scarbonizzazione” took place, that is the undoing of the scarazzo in order to pick up the coal. This was the moment when the skill of the master charcoal and the quality of coal could be verified. The latter, in fact, to be of excellent quality, had to “sing well” that is to make a nice noise. The cooled coal was then bagged and sold for domestic or industrial use in the city. Nowadays, the job has not technically changed. Today’s master coalmen must carry out the same work, the same procedures and with the same times, day and night. The only difference is that today it is the wood going to the charcoal and not the

opposite. As a matter of fact, the charcoal burners still working have special private sites, called “cantieri”, where they get big trucks loaded with ready for processing wood. Here, the master charcoal maker begins the building of the scarazzo, and goes on with all the above procedure, exactly as it was once carried out. The coming of manufacturing has brought innovation but also a bit of a downfall in one of the most traditional professions of Calabria and Italy. It is clearly all about costs. A factory manages to produce in a day what a man, with his own hands, makes in a month, but not with the same quality. The industrial coal is not as good as the one prepared by the charcoal burners, since they only use wood coming from trees whereas in the factories it often happens they use the remaining wood from industrial processing. This is also the reason why once several families could make a living thanks to the production of charcoal, while today the remaining master charcoal burners can be counted on the fingers of one hand. In Serra S. Bruno the few families still working in this sector must necessarily supplement their incomes with those from other different jobs, above all in the agricultural field.

Young people no longer want to undertake a job that, despite technology, is still hard, dangerous, long and dirty. Many prefer to start a business, go to university and, even if some of them help their parents in the production, they will finally end up carrying out also other different activities and this will make the charcoal burner an endangered job.

