

FOOD, TERRITORY AND SUSTAINABILITY: ALTERNATIVE FOOD NETWORKS. DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES BETWEEN ECONOMIC CRISIS AND NEW CONSUMPTION PRACTICES

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Abstract: The ongoing economic crisis and the growing concerns about food quality and safety are leading to an increasing awareness of consumption habits. Critical consumption is defining an alternative geography of consumption, distribution and production. Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) are expanding market niches based on the commitment and involvement of local actors. They add value to the relations between producers and consumers (Forno et al., 2013) by sharing a portion of their resources in order to obtain a greater mutual benefit (Sage, 2003; Graziano and Forno, 2012). By bridging the gap between producers and consumers, AFNs promote endogenous development, production relocalization and food system reterritorialization.

AFNs represent new forms of sustainable self-organized collective action (Migliore et al. 2014). In recent years, they have developed under the influence of (I) an increasing attention towards sustainability (II) the economic crisis (III) a more general loss of meaning due to consumerism and to the deterioration of relations (Castells et al. 2013). Moving from these assumptions, the paper reflects on the actual relevance of these economic practices and on their capability of resilience and resistance, while taking into account the main constraints and opportunities that foster/limit their spread. Data for the analysis came from several sources of information, such as interviews with key actors, participant observation, and an extensive mapping and in-depth analysis of key projects involved in the construction of the food supply chain systems in a medium sized town in northern Italy.

1. Introduction

The rise of Neoliberal economic systems meant a perspective shift from citizens perceived as producers (in the era of modernity) to citizen perceived as consumers (in the post-modernity age) (Harvey 1989; Clarke et al. 2007; Bauman 2007). Along with a change in social practices, social movements have also changed their priorities and methods of action, as they moved from class struggle to rights struggles. This led to the establishment of new rights in the environment and welfare domain. With the advent of large anti/alter-globalization mobilizations, the action repertoire of social movements has expanded: in the late Nineties and the early years of the new millennium, for example, boycott campaigns were quite effective along with a new focus on so-called "critical consumption" (Forno & Graziano 2014; Forno, Grasseni, Signori, 2013; Grasseni 2013; 2014).

Since the 90s the phenomenon of political consumption has become increasingly widespread, thus strengthening and consolidating experiences such as fair trade, responsible tourism and ethical finance. These practices are playing in the same arena as neoliberal globalization and market by using political consumerism as a tool to contrast its negative consequences (Micheletti, 2003). These practices allowed a certain level of stability over time in debates and practices, even when the no/new global mobilization lost intensity and newsworthiness.

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These trends show how citizens' mobilization today seems to be fuelled by critical consumption, thus making it possible for new cooperation and co-production experiences to grow and consolidate.

In the recent years, the central theme of political consumerism has been represented by mobilizations around the food. Growing concerns about products impact, both on consumers' health and the exploitation of workers and natural resources, are in fact encouraging a growing number of citizens to a greater awareness in their consumption habits (Nygård and Storstad, 1998; Murdoch et al, 2000). The choice for food from alternative supply chains is often influenced by personal requirements (i.e., access to food considered to be healthier and, in the case of "industrial" organic products, more convenient) and collective requirements (i.e., the rediscovery of conviviality and relations).

Often, these collective requirements lead to grassroots actions promoting a new integrated development of the territory arising from local problems and also aimed at having a global impact.

These growing responsible consumers niches and experiences appear to facilitate various forms of socio-territorial (re)connection: as we shall see, they are characterized for 1) their social innovation potential; 2) their potential to produce spaces in which the relationships between economy and territory are redesigned. By so doing, they stimulate and reinforce the relations among people who reside and operate in the same territory, thus increasing what has also been called the "spatial capital" (Soja 2010).

Within this changing context, we intend to analyse changes that seem to cross the varied range of movement defined "new economy".

In the research we present here, we postulated this changing context to depend on the tensions caused by the loss of purchasing power of a large part of the middle class. We also expected this to be linked to growing unemployment, as a result of the economic crisis of 2007-2008. Finally, we expected this changing context to depend on a growing "research of sense" (Castells, Caraça, Cardoso, 2012) that appears as a new angst of the "consumer society" (Bauman, 2010).

The paper is based on a mapping of grassroots organizations promoting "sustainable practices" (elsewhere identified as the acronym for SCMOs³ - see Forno and Graziano, 2014) in the Bergamo area⁴. We analysed these through a series of in-depth interviews with the coordinators of some of the groups that are contriving an alternative food system.

The investigation focused on organization dynamic, internal and external governance dynamic, projects and what these groups expect from the "new economy". The local scale, which today seems to be basic for organizations of "critical consumption", imposes a research approach closer to the territory. In that context characterized by high contamination problems, high level of urbanization and huge loss of agricultural land and negative economic trend (de-industrialization and young unemployment), these new economies seem, the contrary to expectations, to sow the seeds for a territorial reconnection (reterritorialization) based on a more virtuous relationship between the economy and the environment, in which economic activities respecting environment and society can be a driving force for a new form of territorial development.

2. Between CFNs and AFNs. From deterritorialization to reterritorialization

In the scientific literature, the new economic arena growing around sustainable and quality food is referred to as Alternative Food Networks (AFNs). These are considered to be able to re-create

³ Sustainable Community Movement Organizations.

⁴ That includes Bergamo city and its surroundings, and that could (or not) coincide with the Province of Bergamo.

networks as well as social and spatial relations, to relocalize productions and reduce distances between producers and consumers, and to promote the endogenous development (Morgan et al., 2009).

These emerging experiences seem to be a possible answer to the sense of anomie generated by the processes of deterritorialization of the "Conventional Food Networks" (CFNs), which, in turn, are modern systems of production and distribution where often production costs are externalized into the territories in which it is practiced. This model has become dominant on a global scale and has driven farms to introduce capital-intensive technologies in order to intensify production. This involves a heavy capital investment in machinery, pesticides, chemical fertilizers and genetically modified crop varieties (Johnson, 1975 and 1993).

Currently, AFNs represent a smaller emerging market. The companies involved are described as marginal but high quality producers, typical of Western countries. AFNs bring together different critical points in a production and consumption network, by creating alternative systems of food production, distribution and consumption both in a social and geographical sense (Maye, D., Holloway, L., Kneafsey, 2007).

Often AFNs reconstruct ideal spaces (opportunities) for the rights of those who, in our affluent society, are pushed to the margins. An example of this would be a cooperative of citrus fruits producers from southern Italy selling their produce to Solidarity purchase groups of northern Italy or, on a global scale, the alternative supply chains of the fair trade: in both cases, the emphasis is on fair working conditions. In these networks, the idea is to share a portion of resources in order to achieve mutual benefits, which are greater than those that the conventional systems is able to guarantee (Sage, 2003; Schifani and Migliore, 2011; Graziano and Forno, 2012). Among the benefits found in most short supply chains are, for example, the promotion of bio-cultural diversity, the reduction of transaction costs, transportation and energy consumption, the reduction in consumer prices (compared to organic products sold in traditional commerce) and the enhancement of local and traditional quality products.

In short, these practices have a strong "embeddedness" within the social and territorial system, and can foster a process of reterritorialization of the food system.

3. AFN in a typical context of the Italian province of the North

3.1 Research design

Restricting the area of analysis to the province of Bergamo enabled us to capitalise on the knowledge accumulated through previous research on the same territory and connect it with research aimed to investigate the mechanisms of internal organizational and strategic decisions implemented by each organization.

Following a series of quantitative studies of specific groups within the "new economy" (Forno, Grasseni and Signori, 2013), this search analysed those grassroots organizations that promote sustainable practices with particular attention to the "meso level" (i.e. on associations or networks). This was achieved through research tools that allowed to investigate more deeply the dynamics intra and inter-organizational.

After a mapping of these experiences in the area, which took place during the first half of 2014, we carried out a series of interviews and focus groups based on a methodology inspired by the Participatory Action Research (PAR). This methodology is used to reveal opinions and difficulties perceived and experienced by the different actors, with the aim of understanding potentiality and limitations through a dialogic interview method (Forno and Maurano, 2014).

The mapping exercise revealed the existence of several organizations implementing "sustainability practices", also categorized as SCMOs. On the one hand, these experiences are oriented to increase citizens' awareness of the negative externalities of individual and collective consumption and production. On the other, these experiences provide opportunities for actors to rebuild relations in order to influence the model of community development, where local development is the starting point. Examples can be found in groups and organizations promoting fair trade, ethical finance, critical consumption and new forms of swap and alternative food supply chains. The actors promoting these experience are both the so-called consum-actors and new organizations (networks and formal or informal associations) of "local" (usually small/medium sized) producers. Within these organizations, AFNs play an important role, acting as cultural facilitators and bringing the alternative food vision into the urban and the local space.

We carried out thirty-one in-depth interviews with representatives of the main organizations involved in the movement of creation of AFNs. These allowed us to look deeper into commonalities and differences between the organizations of the new economy and the "old" social movements, as well as to reflect on what lies behind these differences. In general, it emerged that some differences depend on the historical context in which these organisations were founded. The organizational characteristics of each company and its actors appear to depend very much on the historical period, or the mobilization cycle, within which these experiences are born and developed.

3.2 The local context

The province of Bergamo is traditionally a rich area. Like many other provinces in northern Italy, it has recently experienced deep processes of de-industrialization. Despite this, the province has high levels of per capita wealth, also thanks to a strong work and saving culture. Although agriculture only accounts for a small percentage of the province employment rate (as is often the case of industrialized Italian regions), the primary sector in the Bergamo area has several local specialties and high quality products to offer. This is thanks to the region's unique geographical morphology, which is characterized by a great variety of landscapes: the territory is formed by plains (24.7%), hills (11.8%) and mountains (63.5%).

Plains are characterised by conventional monoculture, while hills and mountain areas are characterised by a tendency to multifunctional agriculture, where farmers integrate production with other services, such as wine tourism, cultural events and education. If on the one hand this multifunctionality is a necessity in such a terrain specific context, on the other hand it has brought along some interesting employment and tourism prospects in rural areas.

Politically speaking, Bergamo belongs to that political area defined as "white" (an area of Italy where Catholic parties were very strong). In the 80s and 90s Bergamo experienced an increase in per capita wealth thanks to an economy characterized by a strong presence of small and medium-sized enterprises. Interesting is also the fact that rising income levels in those years was not followed by an increase in the level of education. Below the national average is also the female employment rate. These factors reflect a somewhat novelty adverse culture that is typical of the area. The area is in fact historically considered "closed" at the cultural level but also "generous". It is traditionally characterized by a rich social fabric of voluntary associations and social realities of cooperation especially of Catholic footprint.

Like many realities in northern Italy, the city of Bergamo has also been undergoing important demographic changes. Since 2004, the population has grown. This is mainly due to the growth of the foreign population. In 2004 the proportion of foreigners was 5.3%, in 2013 it increased to 13.8%. This value is higher than its province (10.9%) and than the Italian average (7.4%).

On average, the city population is older than in the province: people over 65 account for 24.6% of the population in Bergamo city against 18.7% in its province. The composition families has also greatly changed in recent years: from 2001 to 2011 the rate of single-person households has increased from 34% to 41.6%. This is mainly due to the aging population (however, this percentage is lower, 22%, if we consider residents only). In 2013 the percentage of over 65 living alone is 33% of the Bergamo population.

It is clear how this social, cultural and economic fabric entails limits as well as opportunities for the development of organizations and experiences of the new economy.

4. Main results

4.1 *AFNs in Bergamo: mapping and field analysis*

In the area of Bergamo the (re) construction of community networks of production and consumption has recently become a matter of growing interest. As in other contexts, many different resources are at play, here. For example, we can count 70 farm parks with teaching activities for kids, 144 agritourisms, more than 350 farms with direct sell or "pick your own" initiatives and over 260 farms that work in the short supply chain. Furthermore, 243 companies are present on the territory that process milk directly, and 34 that have a vending machine (Provincia di Bergamo, 2004 and 2013). Bergamo is the second province in the Lombardy region for number of GAS, with its current 70 groups (Forno, Grasseni and Signori, 2013). There are a dozen urban garden initiatives, including interesting collaborations between schools and the municipal Botanical gardens.

However, these resources are often not connected to each other, which is why for a long time they remained outside the attention of both citizens and administrators. In Bergamo, however, the economic crisis that began in the years 2007-2008 seems to have imposed a different approach both by citizens and by the local political class, which has manifested growing sensitivity to these issues in the latest years.

The interviews have shown that behind the process of reconnection and territorial development of AFNs, a major role was played by some movement organizations that developed around the 90s and reached a point of relevant success from the late 90s. This is the case of organizations like Fair Trade (1990) and Banca Etica, which have been active in the territory since 2003. Time Banks (1997) and the Slow Food organisation (1987) are also important actors on the territory.

These early organizations have somehow created the social fabric within which the new organizations are born. However, the latter seem to have a different form of organization, which is less structured and more horizontal. This is especially true for the case of Solidarity Purchase Groups, but also for urban gardens (especially those driven by young people, such as the association Quarto Paesaggio [Fourth landscape]), the Movimento per la Decrescita Felice [Movement for Happy Degrowth], Gli Armadilli, Pedalopolis, and Regalo e Presto [Gift and Barter] and Mercato&Cittadinanza [Market & Citizenship].

Unlike the older organizations, which generally have a more defined structure, with a national and various local level, the organization of the new economy operate especially at the local level, with a structure generally consisting of a rather limited core of people which are the real driving force for the group. However, in some instances these organisations can include several hundreds of people, particularly - although not exclusively - through the web.

This is the case of "Regalo e Presto", a "P2P" organisation which was founded on the idea of "barter and reuse but [with] the idea that this could also help the relationship, [and] also create a network into the territory" [Regalo e Presto. Date of the interview 01/23/2014]". The organisation was

founded by two people, but quickly expanded to include hundreds of people, with the current network involving over 500 people across the Bergamo province. The network consists of six groups based on geographical proximity, some of which are active in the different Bergamo neighbourhoods, and others in the surrounding province. The socio-economic profile of its participants are also relevant: although young people are not entirely absent from these groups, our interviews outline a type of participation which is mainly by older, the middle class and educated people. Many associations, including those initiated by young people, also rely heavily on retired people. Interestingly as one of our interviewees says: "You will have noticed that we put great emphasis on older people ... The elderly are our greatest resource... They have much more time for us" Il Quarto Paesaggio [The Fourth landscape]. Interview with a founder of a community garden, Date of the interview 07/02/2014].

As stated above, the social context we are researching here is characterised by widespread prosperity and wealth often related to family savings, so those young people who are involved in setting up these practices are often few and supported by elderly people with greater economic stability. This is also a possible explanation for the mainly voluntary nature of these groups. These forms of new economy are in fact only rarely able to create new jobs, even in the cases of larger groups (as in the case of markets, groups of barter, solidarity purchase groups etc.).

In fact, these young "social innovators" are only rarely trying to develop these activities as a possible form of subsistence, often in the hope to find an alternative to traditional labour market employment. Labour market is, indeed, a critical issue that is becoming increasingly central into the debate within SCMOs and especially with the intensification of the crisis.

The situation is different in the case of small production companies (often with social cooperative status) which operate mainly in response to the new economy emerging demands of social inclusion. The research also confirms that in northern Italy, new economy experiences are activated in most cases by the demand of pro-active, responsible consumers. In less affluent areas such as southern Italy, producers usually have a more proactive approach (Andretta and Guidi, 2014).

A very good example of this is the experience of "Mercato agricolo e non solo" [Farmers market and beyond], a space promoted by a network of associations (Mercato e Cittadinanza [Market & Citizenship] - M&C) with the aim of bringing together small enterprises and sustainable producers with consumers in order to promote mutual acquaintance, information exchange and sharing of the values of sustainability and solidarity, as is evidenced by this piece of interview:

"When we organize the markets, we always try to make it clear what sits behind the event" [...] "giving the opportunity to support them [the producers] also economically. They have a place where they can sell, where they are expected to be fair, transparent, In their transactions etc. "[...]" Many consumers ask for information on the products, and they know that the producers only sell the stuff that they make"

[Mercato & Cittadinanza. Date of the interview 02/14/2014 – translation by the authors].

The use of shared, recurrent spaces (like in the case of markets always taking place in the same neighbourhood venue) is important for these organizations as a form of collective action providing opportunities for new, fertile connections. In Bergamo, for example, two informal networks of small organic producers originated (Orobio and Agrimagna) thanks to the experience of M&C. Both organisations aim to create new markets as arenas for better relationship among society, economy and environment.

The analysis of Solidarity purchase groups in Lombardy (Forno, Grasseni and Signori 2013) confirms the trends recorded in the areas of northern Italy in relation to socio-economic and demographic status of those who are active in these experiences: (a) there is a low presence of young people, which is explained by the fact that Bergamo remains a relatively rich area where the family

institution still represents a social safety network, and (b) there is a high representation of middle class members. This also means that young people rarely try to turn these initiatives into a proper job, as their perception is that these activities would be too risky to be their only source of income. Overall, the picture emerging from our research confirms that, at least in this area of Italy, these forms of self-organization do not tend to arise from lower socio-economic contexts or profit oriented cultures. Indeed, these initiatives tend to thrive through the action of people who are already active (or with previous experience) within social organizations and associations (Carfagna et al. 2014). The current situation still presents several limitations: in particular, although these good practices often entail a social aspect aimed at helping people deal with the economic crisis, they rarely organize themselves into a "system", and this fragmentation reduces their impact on a political level. They do not manage to build practices of resistance against the cause of that crisis, which is not only economical, but also ecological, political and a crisis of care/meaning. In brief, this is a civilization crisis (see D'Alisa, Forno and Maurano, 2015)

4.2 AFNs and crisis: the relationship with the state and competing with the market

In the current economic recession of Western society, social movements are facing two different challenges: on the one hand, they must deal with institutions that are often unable or unwilling to meet new demands of environmental demands and social justice. On the other hand, they have to rebuild bonds of solidarity and cooperation within a highly individualized social context, where individual identities consolidate around consumption. This is in opposition to the past, where collective identities have been very important for the emergence of new initiatives.

Compared to the past, these new initiatives are more pragmatic. Their action is not only aimed towards the promotion of more sustainable consumption, but also to the creation of "spaces" where people can find information and also concrete answers to the daily problems (such as the supply of healthy food or "ethical" clothing). Within these experiences, active participation often takes the form of exchange, "downshifting", or more conscious and responsible consumption. The main result is the creation of new relations and a new, shared sense of collective identity.

Generally, it seems clear from the interviews that the protagonists of the new economy think that the crisis led to a re-conceptualisation of the environmental and social conditions generated by consumerism and by the economy of unlimited growth. The crisis has also encouraged the emergence and proliferation of some new, context specific experiences.

All groups analysed reported an increase in sensitivity to the issues of environmental and social sustainability. However, only some of the initiatives reviewed were successful. Others suffered from the negative effect of the crisis. The most negative case is that of fair trade:

"[...] While the crisis was an eye-opener for many people [...] a downside is that there is less money around, so our cooperative has not been able to employ people in the last two years."[Il Seme. Interview Date 12.12.2014].

However, it is interesting to note that some groups recognize the positive influence of the crisis. For example, for the representative of Banca Etica representative we interviewed, the crisis seems to have fostered a new awareness, driven by the need to reduce expenses. Indeed, some Solidarity purchase group members have increasingly been turning to Banca Etica.

The same positive trend is can be seen in the case of collective gardens, the Farmers' Market and the new circuits of barter.

In fact, all these groups consider the crisis as the main driving force to the success of these initiatives groups. As in the case of Regalo e Presto, these times of recession led to people generally overcoming some of their prejudice about second hand items:

"I think it was also favoured precisely by the difficult economic situation. Because if I am the only person that gets used clothes for my children, I feel a little '... I don't want to say like a beggar, but like someone who does not want to ... Instead, if you know others who do it, it becomes more... normal. Everyone else does it, or at least some people, so you can do that, too. The crisis, from this point of view, is a facilitating factor. Someone does it out of necessity, others do it by choice [...]" [Regalo e Presto. Date of interview 23/1/14].

The crisis has in some cases required a realignment of the goals of some organizations such as Time Banks, which now seem much more interested in the issues of inclusion and poverty than in the past. *"[...] We can say that there has been some sort of evolution: perhaps the bank is more open, now. For example, we have opened up to the territory. Now, the relationship with institutions has become one of our top priorities. In response to the current economic recession, our national association is now involved in a one year project aimed at social inclusion [...]" [Officina del tempo. Date of interview 09:02:14]*

The development of the Orobiebio and Agrimagna organic farmers networks is an interesting case. These networks share many goals with work cooperatives. In times of economic crisis, where citizens' trust in traditional forms of market tends to falter, cooperatives offer a valid alternative to future uncertainty and long-term investment.

According to the coordinator of Orobiebio, the crisis "has not affected us. Personally, I think this is because we meet people's needs by keeping our prices competitive with those of the conventional market. Through participatory involvement, people come and collect produce directly from the farmers (or they even pick the product themselves), and this enables us to keep our prices competitive.

So, overall, we have not suffered from the recession" [Orobiebio, interview 07/04/2014].

As the coordinator of Agrimagna reports, their business has been thriving and expanding, and they even struggled to meet demand at times. The crisis, for him...

"became a driving force for resuming agricultural activities. People are experimenting and building... In these 2-3 years I have seen the growing trend. [...] The number opportunities has actually increased. This is not to say that things are simple or easy. Far from it, but this is a real fact: our brand, "Il tesoro della Bruna" [...] our sales have increased by 20% over the last two years. And the demand was even greater than we could provide for" [Agrimagna, interview 08/04/2014].

The company is currently hoping to collaborate with the public administration, and they have already had a promising response in terms of key aspects such as organization, promotion and education.

"I think one of the main weaknesses in the system is that our industry is quite young. This means that we are not yet organised into a systemic structure like big industrial districts do. We are still such a new reality that we cannot rely on the same level of organization. And there are no organisations that could support us. In our Country, such systems do not exist, and we are not yet strong enough, economically, to be able to create this structure by ourselves." [Orobiebio - Focus group 19.05.2014].

One risk is that, after an initial phase of enthusiasm and participation, many of these alternative, volunteer based practices will fade away due to lack of human and economic resources. Alternatively, some of these initiatives lose sight of their initial mission and end up conforming to the laws of conventional market.

As is the case of other experiences (Bresnihan and Byrne, 2014), the difficulties relating to the sustainability of the new economic practices reflects an inequitable distribution of power, where private interests are favoured over public ones. Therefore, the fundamental problems of the contemporary economic, social and environmental crisis cannot be simply managed by creating alternatives within the current market system. Useful and necessary as they are, these practices need to be supported by a political action on public policies and government plans. Unfortunately,

this seems impossible until the general public attitude towards politics moves from a sense of indifference to a greater involvement.

The members of these groups often prefer to focus on small, concrete objectives, rather than trying to influence public policy:

"We act as a local group with concrete objectives. These objectives may be perceived to be small, but they are not, if you think that last year we started out with a hundred seeds of Wipper Snapper tomatoes, and we now have a whopping hundred thousand!" [Civiltà contadina, interview of 24/01/2014].

"We have small goals [...] Active citizenship, responsible citizenship, lifestyle ... [...] An idea, a lifestyle linked to something else ..." [Circolo della Decrescita Felice di Bergamo, interview of 04/02/2014].

A pragmatic approach appears to be the only way to achieve results in the short term. This is definitely a step forward, and might pave the way to other types of action.

"Some political representatives will approach us, but I don't want to have anything to do with them. They are looking for votes, obviously. And we don't trust them" [Il Seme, Fair Trade, interview of 12/12/13].

Even when other groups have been open to collaborating with national institutions (such as Banca Popolare Etica) or local institutions (such as Banche del Tempo, Civiltà contadina, Il Quarto Paesaggio, MDF), these collaborations have always been aimed at reaching small concrete objectives:

"We pursue an idea, in the sense of a philosophy linked to lifestyle, self-production, culture, and you cannot address a single political party: that does not make sense. It has to be a project bringing a broader message, and that goes beyond political orientation. Moreover, you have to be open to working with local administrations, whichever their political orientation might be" [MDF, interview of 02/04/14].

5. Conclusions

This article proposes a first reflection on the changes brought along by the current recession on the new economy organization.

As it emerged from the interviews, the development these forms of collective action have undergone in recent years appears to be driven by three main factors:

- the growing public attention to environmental, social and economic sustainability;
- the economic crisis and its negative impact on society, including members of the middle-class;
- a more general loss of meaning due to consumerism and degradation of social relations, together with the misalignment between happiness and GDP growth (as observed in the Easterlin paradox, 1974).

In this sense, our research confirmed what was already highlighted in other studies, namely that these forms of action create some interesting "spaces" of experimentation and social innovation where individual consumption is replaced by collective identity.

Among the main issues emerged, there is a new emphasis on production in times of crisis. While the emphasis on consumption is a product of consumer society and welfare, production is now becoming more central to the current debate.

The new emphasis on creating partnerships between producers and consumers within a local context also seems to bring these experiences to forms of commoning, already present in urban areas, as described by Bresnihan and Byrne (Antipode, 2014). At the core of these initiatives is a shared vision about environmental, social and economic sustainability. The experiences of Banche del Tempo, Civiltà contadina, Il Quarto Paesaggio and MDF reflect the core values of prosumption, but they add a

collective dimension to it, where collaboration is realized through a shared sense of product, service and experience design. Another central issue is the emphasis on the territory and reterritorialization of production, through exploitation of local resources at an integrated level, recruiting agriculture as a driving factor for strengthening the local economy.

Finally, it is also worth mentioning that some have criticised these emerging groups for their niche quality, as only middle and upper class citizens are able to afford involvement with these groups, and therefore also have access to healthier food (Goodman et al., 2012).

It is possible that these collective actions will continue to be just a symbol of an alternative way of life, operating only at the fringe of the market arena. The general attitude seems to be one of holding back until new generations will take over and develop a fairer society. Probably, this lack of participation in the political arena is due to a lack of trust in existing political parties and think that it is almost impossible to change the socio-economic context: at present, they prefer to achieve small, practical objectives than pursue greater political changes.

However, it is also possible (and indeed desirable), that this model will act as a driving force for a broader perspective shift on mass consumption and social innovation, and possibly lay the foundations for a more structured political action.

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