

Family farmers between re-localisation and co-production

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Abstract

Rural sociology and anthropology has developed a sizeable scholarship on “alternative food networks”, which value short supply chains. Nevertheless, what the limits and potentials are of becoming involved in alternative food networks is unclear for smallholders and family farms. In this article, I explore the different forms of collaboration that can ensue between “provisioning activists” and local farmers, within a rather complex and fragmented scenario of localised interventions; the article focusses on discourses and practices of food re-localisation, which include many kinds of food “producers” and “co-producers”.

KEYWORDS: food activism, solidarity economy, alternative provisioning, districts, family farming, Italy.

Introduction

Across the so-called developed world there is a thriving debate about what the “new economy” should look like, while many agree that global food systems need rethinking and take the success of the local food movement almost for granted. It is worth asking: what does it actually take to re/localise at least a fraction of our everyday provisioning? Which repertoires, skills, and tools does it require? Which imaginaries does it mobilise? Does it mean the same for producers and consumers? What are the implications of this form of urban awakening for rural smallholders? These are often marginalised by global provisioning systems, because small family farms cannot meet the requirements of large distribution companies in terms of quantities and standardisation of the products. However, they are increasingly taken up as models by the urban agriculture movements. What are the implications and opportunities for family farmers?

In this paper, I will use both theoretical insights and ethnographic evidence from participant observation with small-scale producers in Italy and with a wide range of food activists in Italy and the United States. Firstly, I critically evaluate the model of the “district” economy (notably industrial districts but also food districts), a term that has been appropriated in Italy by activists of “solidarity economy districts”. Next, I introduce three examples of provisioning activism in Italy and the United States. Finally, I evaluate

their impact on family farming, both in terms of limits (such as increased expectations and performativity) and of potentials of re-localising food systems (in the form of collaboration between networks of ethical consumers and networks of local producers).

Rural sociology and anthropology have developed a sizeable scholarship on the rediscovery of short supply chains (Amilien & Holt 2007). Nevertheless, it is unclear what the limits and potentials of becoming involved in alternative food networks are for smallholders and family farms. An expanding literature has focused on the sensorial traits of craft foods and the sociocultural contexts that characterise their consumption.¹ A different set of literature considers local foods to be pivotal in developing alternative agrarian economies and provisioning strategies: from alternative food networks (Goodman et al. 2012) to lifestyle choices resisting the commodification of food through gleanings, freeganism, guerrilla gardening, etc. (Williams-Forson & Counihan, 2012).

Family farming, often connected with a typically Western European land property tenure, such as smallholding, faces significant challenges both in pure market terms (competition from agribusiness, price depression, and increasing quality and quantity demands from crop buyers and supermarket chains). The development of “typical”, i.e. local regional products, often including some elements of on-site food manufacturing such as cheese-making, is currently highly relevant to smallholders’ economy. Farmers’ involvement in networks of critical consumption in which they can collaborate directly with ethical consumers might also be promising in terms of developing not only adequate food safety, but also “food justice” (Loh & Lloyd 2013), meaning access to food for disenfranchised sectors of society and food sovereignty for consumers.

If farmers are to be recognised by planners, policy makers and consumers as key agents in multifunctional and sustainable development, issues of knowledge transmission and generational renewal are also to be faced. Often, an increasingly discerning market requires that farmers be simultaneously traditional in their techniques and cosmopolitan in their capacity to market them. In the face of significant variety and diversity within so-called family farming (including land tenure, labour division, and business models), it is difficult to provide a generalised model of cultural ecology for it, nor, to be clear, would this be desirable in principle. In practice however, the high context-specificity of models for sustainable agriculture cause them to be frequently overlooked by large-scale planning and by policy makers. Consequently the role of local consumers in directly recognising the specificities and the value of family farming for sustainable and “just” (Low & Lloyd 2013) economies is key.

However, precisely this act of recognition is dependent on dialogue, the establishing of which may be difficult due to reciprocal, often tacit, expectations. Different examples of local development strategies may rely on varying combinations of ecotourism, organic farming, high quality farming for exigent circles such as Slow Food Presidia, or farmers’ markets. All of these require an added relational investment on the part of the farmer, whether to plan suitable educational activities in concert with teachers,

¹ For example see Sutton (2001), Hayes-Conroy (2008), Donati (2005).

or by being preparing to work long hours and answer naive questions at farmers' markets, or by introducing often costly measures and techniques that respond to the requests of discerning "foodies". Such techniques and measures may include organic farming certification, the adoption of local landraces that are being rediscovered as "native" and thus important to biodiversity, or by ensuring high quality and accessible prices in small quantities to local networks of consumers. In other words, networks of local consumption can be simultaneously promising and taxing to family farmers, who can only draw on a limited pool of capital and human resources to keep up with expectations.

In the following sections, I will demonstrate this with ethnographic examples, beginning with a discussion of how family farming can, in present times of economic farming, be equated to a model of district economy that draws on regional networks for its success.

Regionalism and the district model

What is "modern" industry? Can family farming be considered to be so? Piore and Sabel (1984) provide an unsurpassed synthesis of craft versus mass production as opposing paradigms of industrial development. They clarify how the two are not necessarily alternative to each other but rather co-existed for a long time, for example, in France and Italy. Indeed craft production was undeniably the backbone of industrial development for at least a century. Our own understanding of modernity as the mechanised production of standard items is, of course, historically determined; specifically, it is the result of a paradigm shift that occurred in the US industrial economy shortly before World War II, and superseded a number of alternative national pathways to industrial development in Western Europe after World War II, notably in France and Italy with their "industrial districts".²

In the wake of the oil crisis of the 1970s, Piore and Sabel claimed that 'the present deterioration in economic performance results from the limits of the model of industrial development that is founded on mass production: the use of special-purpose (product-specific) machines and of semiskilled workers to produce standardised goods' (1984: 4). They point both to a crisis in the 'institutional circuits that connect production and consumption as regulatory mechanisms' (ibid.) and 'in the choice of technology itself' (ibid.: 5). Crucially, in a context of heightened crisis and perceived transition that is in

² An observatory of industrial district was set up in Italy in 2010, following a regional policy of the Region Veneto to aid and support what were in fact the natural outcome of entrepreneurial mutualism in the face of bureaucratic aloofness, if not outright aversion (<http://www.osservatoriodistretti.org>). The districts' own crisis in 2009–2013 has been blamed on globalisation (which meant the relocalisation of Veneto's districts in Eastern Europe and specifically in the Timisoara region in Romania). In 56 districts, the national statistical institute Censis has estimated a shrinking factor of 3.8%, with about 2,000 manufacturing units going out of business. In the face of this, during 2013 the manufacturing districts have increased their exports by 3%; moreover, this was done at a cost of borrowing that is exactly double than in Germany. Other issues lacking from Italy's infrastructural framework are continuing and high level professional education and training, the slowness of national bureaucracy and the high taxation that increase labour costs. If, as Piore and Sabel maintained, to follow the industrial district model would mean reinventing the economy, it is governance itself that should also be reinvented (Source <http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/2013/2013-12-06/censis-crisi-non-risparmia-distretti-meno-2mila-imprese-4-anni-163626.shtml?uuid=ABh4DRi>).

many ways similar to the present one, they contend (*contra* a widely held assumption of the inevitability of a global drive towards lowering production cost to maximise profit) that:

industrial technology does not grow out of a self-contained logic of scientific or technical necessity: which technologies develop and which languish depends crucially on the structure of the markets for the technologies' products; and the structure of the markets depends on such fundamentally political circumstances as rights to property and the distribution of wealth (ibid.).

It is on this emphasis on the structure of the markets that I want to focus here, while considering the potential of alternative food networks and of 'food activism' for opening up protected markets for high quality family farming in Western Europe, in ways similar to the 'Community Supported Agriculture' models that have reaped considerable success in the USA and as the *Associations pour le maintien d'une agriculture paysanne* or AMAPS have done in France (Dubuisson-Quellier et al. 2011).

A dedicated literature on Italy's industrial districts, characterising especially the "Third Italy" namely the non-mass industrialised, post-rural North East, followed Piore and Sable in identifying craft systems as 'less rigid manufacturing technologies' than mass-production technologies (1984: 5).³ My argument here is that such model can include family farming as a form of local, small-scale, but networked entrepreneurship that eschews the vertical integration of the world's dominant agri-business producers, distributors, and biochemical companies. In the current global food system, in fact, "megafarms" dominate the US agricultural landscape and increasingly constitute a model for developing countries. A "global regionalisation" has concentrated land, labour, capital and management away from the control and needs of farming households and communities which, even in a country used to big numbers such as the US (according to Lyson (2004), in 1870, the average American "family" farm consisted of 75 acres), embedded craft productions in the rural economy, often having food manufacturing on-site, and often carrying out collective seasonal landscape maintenance chores as part of a system of local reciprocal exchanges and participation. As a result of the "functionalisation" of US agriculture and its consolidation in large industrial concerns that invest in the control of the entire supply chain from seed to shelf, in the US, the number of farms has dropped from 6.4 million in 1910 to 2 million in 2004 (Lyson 2004), now averaging 500 acres but dominated by so-called "million dollar farms": 23,000 farms turned over at least one million dollars in 1997 (42% of the national market and 1.2% of farms (ibid.)); by 2012, they had more than doubled to 50,000 farms, i.e. 82% of the market and 10% of all farms (see footnote 4).

Notably for our analysis of family farming in Western Europe, there does not seem to be anyone farming anywhere in the US between the two poles of a highly intensive, vertically integrated \$2.3 million 'farm' and a farm with an annual revenue of

³ See, for example, Patrizia Messina (2011) on comparative models of rural developments in different European regions; and (2012) on the different 'territorial political subcultures' within Italy that have accompanied radically divergent practices of collaboration and co-existence of public policy and district entrepreneurship in so-called "white" and "red" regions. For a classic treatment on industrial districts in Italy as a "third" model of regional development, see Bagnasco (1977), Beccattini (1987), and Trigilia on its effects in terms of policy (1986).

\$63,000, which is typical of local producers for farmers markets, etc.⁴ How have things evolved since Thomas Lyson denounced the undoing of American family farming tradition in his *Civic Agriculture* (2004)? He warned that in 2000 ten multinationals produced 60% of all food consumed in the USA. In 2009, Carolyn Steel claimed that five multinational corporations control 80% of large production and distribution food chains in the world: (Steel 2009b).⁵ This is a critically different scenario from the one evoked by Piore and Sabel's analysis of industrial districts. Their analysis of craft industry and networked, small-scale localised entrepreneurs in the face of mass, Fordist industrial production, can help us focus on family farmers and their potential alliances with local consumers as the natural competitors of megafarms and multinational distribution. These are the social actors that we encounter, within ample ranges of contextual variations, in any local attempt to salvage marginal agriculture by preserving small-scale business models with a local impact in terms of social, environmental, and economic diversity.

New actors for local markets: Potentials and limits

According to Carolyn Steel, the logistics of urban food provisioning lies at the core of global governance: 'The feeding of cities has been arguably the greatest force shaping civilization' (2009a: 10). Policy makers and activists are debating this in conjunction with Milan's preparations to host the Universal Exposition (Expo) of 2015 on the theme: Feeding the Planet. Local food activists suggest feeding Milan locally to be a more reasonable challenge (Slow Food Lombardia 2014)? However, opting for a "reinvention of food" (Grasseni 2011) that locates value in craft production and family farming is necessarily an economic choice. It implies more than niche marketing: it projects a necessary reinvention of the market itself. A number of local actors are emerging from different national contexts with precisely such ambition with regard to food production and provisioning (Counihan & Siniscalchi 2014, Grasseni 2013).

These actors include a "new generation" of Slow Food activists that are intent on monitoring national and international agricultural policies, and determined to provide international political leadership against GM cultivation, for biodiversity, and in praise of "quality" food as a universal right (Siniscalchi 2013). However, they also include a plethora of less well-known, often more radical and more rooted networks and circles of ethical consumers, faith-based groups, and new global activists who take food provisioning as their first port of call to rethink the logic and workings of global capitalism (Graziano and Forno 2012). These are the "food activists" I focus on in this article. Local provisioning is thus not only a question of food security (having enough food) or food safety (eating sufficiently good food) but also of food sovereignty (self-determining what kind of food we eat). Such actors (whom I call "alternative provisioners") focus on local sources and providers in the hope of diminishing their dependence on technology, on large distribution networks, and on corporate governance. Ideally, a direct link to smallholders would increase the sovereignty both of farmers and consumers. Food sovereignty would start with gaining autonomy from corporate global logistics, and aim at finding adequate representation in the governance of the territory, especially regarding decision-

⁴ The CNN article is based on USDA data published in November 2012 (<http://money.cnn.com/2012/11/27/news/economy/farming/index.html>).

⁵ See also <http://www.corporatewatch.org/content/supermarket-local-sourcing-initiatives-corporate-control-food-system-and-rise-supermarkets>.

making over public procurement and rural development policies). In other words, opposing the current orthodox models of food provisioning (which rely on intensive production, large distribution networks, and corporate consolidation of the supply chains) has significant political implications: it means contrasting technocratic, top-down, and often gendered approaches with bottom up, local, and systemic approaches to local provisioning.

This is particularly relevant to the economic situation in southern and western Europe today. For example, on December 14, 2013 (towards the end of a year that exterminated vast amounts of Italy's districts and family enterprises, with two enterprises bankrupted every hour in the first five months of the year alone),⁶ Giacomo Beccattini, the renowned economic expert on industrial districts, suggested in the well-respected financial newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore* that the formula for economic upturn was to couple Italy's "historically and socially sedimented" capacity for dexterity and creativity with the naturally connected fields of the arts & crafts, food, and tourism. This would be 'a model of development that exalts manual skills and imagination at once, coupling the district-like distribution of the Made in Italy with that of tourism, which feeds on our culinary districts and our art cities.'⁷ In other words, Italian food systems are considered by this expert of industrial districts to a promising area of intervention. In fact, in a very critical context in which registrations for university degrees are decreasing, agronomy is one of the very few faculties of specialisation in which student registrations are increasing. For example, hybrid forms of farming entrepreneurship are sometimes supported by regional and local administrations in the form of educational farms, agro-tourism, and most recently "social farms", i.e. farms employing vulnerable workers such as the chronically mentally ill, recovering addicts, or ex-prisoners in protected productive activities.

However, as observed by cooperatives that are actively developing "didactic" and "social" farming, this very hybridity defies existing categorisations of "productive sectors" that classify farms as simply food producers for the market, for example in the local chambers of commerce. Consequently, many of these socially useful forms of farming enterprises that are both relevant to regional economies and to social sustainability are underrepresented in professional trade unions and producers' associations.⁸

Certainly, local food production and supply is a focus area for innovation: family farmers are interested in direct access to quality markets where they can sell their produce at premium

⁶ This followed the equally humbling years 2010, 2011, and 2012, with about 11,000 to 12,000 bankruptcies of small and medium enterprises a year: <http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/impresa-e-territori/2013-05-07/fallisco-imprese-giorno-064448.shtml?uid=Ab11ohtH>

⁷ Source: <http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/2013-12-14/quel-valore-settori-e-distretti-082109.shtml?uid=ABjai0j>. Similarly, the Industrial National Association Confindustria, in the wake of the painful 2013 accounts on firm bankruptcies, juvenile unemployment, and stagnating internal market, advocates a visionary manufacturing renaissance hinging on Italy's entrepreneurial and artistic culture. <http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/notizie/2013-12-20/conti-italia-luci-e-ombre-mondo-crescita-vivace-064112.shtml?uid=ABR4EC1> – including possibly actively embracing 3D printing technologies as a form of next-generation artisanship coupled with massive doses of design: <http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/cultura/2013-12-20/festeggiamo-sono-tornati-artigianii-liberismo-visto-il-binocolo-154353.shtml?uid=ABfZGJI>

⁸ This became increasingly clear to me during my participation, in 2013, in a working group sponsored by the provincial administration of Bergamo to explore how social farms could be regulated and incentivised at a regional level. I am grateful to Patrizia Messina for her comments on the role of the reinvention of food in the economic politics for manufacturing districts in Italy. Published sources on district policy are available at <http://polisdoc.cab.unipd.it/politiche-per-i-distretti-produttivi>

prices, and consumers are becoming aware of the environmental and political implications of food logistics (from carbon footprinting, to zero-mile provisioning, to the increasingly documented presence of organised crime in large distribution networks (cf. Forno & Gunnarson 2010). In the coming section, I will offer three brief examples of how such innovation can be not only knowledge-driven and production-oriented, but socially and environmentally aware. My argument here is that food activism and family farming are ‘unlikely’ allies, with great potential but also with a number of often undiscussed and unobserved hurdles that need to be identified and overcome together. While I am fully aware of the innovative trends by which food activism is attempting to move beyond alternative food networks, specifically by focusing not just on changing patterns of consumption, but also on collaboratively co-producing with farmers (see Grasseni 2013), I will raise some critical observations in the conclusion regarding how much consumers/producers alliances need to be carefully constructed and maintained. Firstly though, I wish to provide some detailed examples and a definition of provisioning activism.

Provisioning activism

I offer the following definition of provisioning activism, as consumers’ and producers’ collaborative efforts to provide alternatives to the global corporate agri-food system by promoting social and economic justice through collective provisioning practices. The goals of provisioning activism are various and are by no means limited to consumption or collective purchase alone: they may secure food access in food deserts,⁹ or raise awareness about food justice, for example promoting “mafia-free” networks of direct orange sales between Sicilian producers and northern Italian consumers (see Grasseni, Forno & Signori forthcoming). Firstly, I will illustrate examples of alternative urban provisioning in Europe and North America, then I will focus on recent ethnographic fieldwork I carried out with more formalised networks of “solidarity economy” activists in Italy. These are more similar to structures networks of commercial or activist nature such as the American CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) schemes (Henderson & van En 2007) or the French AMAP (*Associations pour le maintien d’une agriculture paysanne*, see Dubouisson-Quellier et al. 2011).

Food activism includes alternative urban provisioning: instead of attempting to re-engineer the supply chain, urban “gleaners” may recuperate resources that would go to waste because of the way the current supply chains work. Food pooling, food banking and gleaning are especially diffused in vulnerable urban neighbourhoods and food deserts.¹⁰ Gleaning has been studied in several cities, including Barcelona (Delgado 2003) and

⁹ For a definition of food deserts, see Blanchard and Matthews (2009). This is by now a commonly used expression to define neighbourhoods where no quality food supply is available to residents within walking distance or within reasonably accessible distances coverable by public transportation (mostly these are urban areas, but even rural locations apply). This is a common problem in many inner-cities boroughs in America where local residents can literally have no access to fresh foods and are only serviced by convenience stores for their everyday food provisioning.

¹⁰ Food not Bombs is a network originating in the USA to promote salvaging foods that are being thrown away because they are close to the expiry date, and work to redistribute them for free: <http://dumpsterdiving.meetup.com/4/> Food not Bombs (<http://www.foodnotbombs.net/>) is a global network with 14 known groups in Massachusetts and 12 in the Netherlands. (according to <http://www.foodnotbombs.net/NETHERLANDS.html> and <http://www.foodnotbombs.net/massachusetts.html>)

Boston (Morrow 2012), where it has clearer connections with urban home-steading and the local food movement. Sometimes gleaning engenders important social dynamics, as in the Bologna case studied by Federico De Musso (2010). In Bologna's fresh food markets, students glean (i.e. provision off discarded food) and by doing so they interact with vendors and each other. They collect, select and re-distribute perishable vegetables, which they quickly need to cook, eat, or preserve. De Musso argues that through this sharing experience, gleaners oppose the hegemonic spatial and temporal imaginary of global food logistics as centralised provisioning for individual consumers, who in turn are bound to produce an unsustainable amount of discarded food. By pooling, sharing, holding social dinners, or collectively canning, gleaners resist this individualisation. Secondly, gleaners substitute a "homeopathy of trash" to the consumerist imagery of perennially clean and fresh supplies. Young people learn together that spotty vegetables and misshapen fruit can be eaten. Thirdly, by organising alternative practices of consumption of perishing vegetables, they exuberantly debunk the depressing social outcomes of austerity policy in Italy while they gather, process, and share wasted food as new collective wealth, i.e. as commons. A student himself, De Musso shows how this is thus not just a survival expedient but a process of collective re-signification of the edible through non-exploitative relationships: a joyful "contamination" of self and community through capitalist refuse.

As a second example of alternative urban provisioning, the League of Urban Canners (LURC) in Boston, is perhaps a unique model of what its founder calls 'a community-based cooperative' in the Boston Greater Metropolitan Area. The stress is not only on the occasional coming together in social occasions, but on the cooperative effort of locating, storing, and processing food that is freely available in the urban landscape. LURC members firstly map fruit trees on Google maps (whether in public or private lots) then ask for permission to harvest them and offer pruning in exchange. Those who take part in the pruning, harvesting, and preserving get a share of the canned foods. Hence, the cooperative model, which does not imply any monetary exchange. The League of Urban Canners gleanes backyard fruit from ripening trees and, in addition to pruning trees and gathering their fruit, the organisers are also working at developing "harvest tool kits". They set up a number of spill-over collectives to take care of associated tasks, such as mending and re-using bike-trailers. These are a fundamental tool to keep urban harvesting radically sustainable (one should bear in mind that this happens in one of the most highly urbanised areas of the American east coast, where use of bikes for self-transportation (let alone goods transportation) is considered alternative, and thinking of ways of consistently avoiding using a car is definitely radical). In addition to sharing bike-trailers for everyday use (such as transporting children or goods behind a bike), they adapt some trailers as complete urban harvesting kits to make harvesting local sites easier.¹¹

While some commentators interpret community gardens and urban foraging as subversive and interstitial food spaces (McLain et al. 2014), it should be kept in mind that gathering food from trees and gardens in the city may be carried out in the spirit

¹¹ <http://leagueofurbancanners.org/>; <https://www.facebook.com/LeagueOfUrbanCanners>; <https://sites.google.com/site/cambervillebiket trailersshare/>.

of community activism, but also as necessary thrift to supplement families' income. Additionally, the idea of homesteading and of reclaiming the city as productive space suits a discourse of national self-sufficiency, as well as the expected performance of gender roles whereby the woman takes up an active role as main food provider through extra gardening work, both discourses being clearly illustrated in the Victory Gardens war-time movement (Gowdy-Wygant 2013). Interestingly though, such discourse of self-sufficiency and "thriftiness" is also projected onto more recent immigrant urban populations. For example, in Somerville, bordering Cambridge, Massachusetts, Mayor Joseph Curtatone passed the first Urban Agriculture Ordinance in the State, publicly claiming that growing up in Somerville as a son of Italian immigrants was a cultural asset enabling him to value and introduce urban gardening in the city planning. Growing and cooking draw on a set of practical skills that southern European immigrants claim as their own, appropriating some of the ethnically inflected stereotypes that still circulate about them in American society. In a presentation to students of Tufts University, for example, the representative of Somerville Urban Agricultural Initiative, a woman of Portuguese origins, explained how 'Portuguese and Italians have one thing in common when it comes to food: they have more common sense, good taste and less litigiousness than Americans.' She implied that not only do immigrants have more skill and taste thanks to practices witnessed and handed down in their families, but also that they approach issues such as chicken-rearing and bee-keeping as a matter of fact and without immediately conjuring scenarios for neighbourly dissent and lawsuits (over smell, noise, rats, or stings).

My third and final example comes from Italian solidarity economy networks that involve more directly professional farmers and specifically local family farmers. Solidarity economy networks connect them to the so-called Solidarity Purchase Groups or Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale, or GAS. A District of Solidarity Economy is primarily a network that counts on the support of networks of alternative consumers: it can be simple and small, connecting just one farmer, one grain miller, one baker, an agronomist, and a group of families buying locally produced bread. In Brianza near Milan, one such district has re-localised bread production and consumption near Milan thanks to the planning efforts of a network of 500 families (de Sanctis 2010). More complex networks may link consumers' collectives, local administrations, private enterprises, and farmers, for example through Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS). According to the IFOAM definition, Participatory Guarantee Systems are locally focused quality assurance systems. They certify producers based on the active participation of stakeholders and are built on a foundation of trust, social networks and knowledge exchange.¹² The solidarity economy districts of Como, Varese and Monza have initiated one such experimental project with local farmers in Lombardy (Vergani 2013).

In *Beyond Alternative Food Networks* (2013), I provide an ethnographic account of Solidarity Purchase Groups as they strive to attune, enable, and "convert" local farmers to serve the demand for both quality and ethically produced food. GAS are groups of, on average, 20 to 40 families who directly manage the logistics of collective

¹² <http://www.ifoam.org/en/value-chain/participatory-guarantee-systems-pgs>.

food purchasing on a grassroots basis. This work is largely based on voluntary and informal self-organisation: in practice, GAS members convene periodically (usually once a month) in local libraries, parish churches, in each other's houses, to share information about local producers, collect orders, and organise advance payment and bulk-buying from them. These producers may be local smallholders (for vegetables, fruit and meat, especially), milk and cheese retailers, or farming cooperatives. They are preferably, but not exclusively, organic; when possible, in fact, special care is taken to buy locally, and to promote conversion to organic farming. GAS require transparency from their producers, conduct on-site visits and often hold social events or market fairs in collaboration with their providers. In exchange, they collectively do the work of provisioning: have meetings, contact producers, negotiate price, arrange deliveries, collect and store them, pay upfront, redistribute food in the group, collecting payment from the other members. Each member has to do this with at least one product, on a voluntary basis. As a result, the supply chain is dramatically shortened at virtually no added cost, so that GAS members get favourable deals on bulk buys of quality local food, while local farmers get a significantly higher price on their sales. The ever-growing number of provisioning activists in Lombardy far outnumbers that of Slow Food members. In November 2013, the Slow Food association had 4166 members (Slow Food Lombardia 2014); at the same time, independent research mapped 429 GAS groups in Lombardy and established that they serve 7,122 families (Forno, Grasseni & Signori 2013).

Instead of binding their producers to a consortium for a protected denomination or to systems of organic certification, GAS offer individual farmers to enter little more than verbal agreements, with which farmers bind themselves to providing a certain quantity of produce of a certain quality by the end of the season. GAS on their part often pledge to buy everything produced and negotiate a favourable price to the farmer, especially if they require organic standards or the use of local cultivars. In the case of participatory guarantee systems, the districts involved rely on networks of GAS groups to implement a more complex and demanding monitoring procedure. The negotiations and on-farm visits in this case involve peer-farmers, an agronomist, and a representative of the GAS consumers. The latter pledge to buy their produce from the farm if the negotiated production protocol is followed. For example, specific crops may be *de facto* organically grown on specific farms, but not certified as organic by a third party agency, as the costs and resources to obtain this kind of certification can be burdensome to most small family farms. In this case, both a premium and a protected market is offered to smallholders, sometimes also to agricultural cooperatives. This is an alternative strategy to attempting to increase the marketing value of specific foodstuffs, without questioning how they position themselves in a competitive, potentially global market. Here, localisation is consumer-controlled and custom-tailored to the needs and circumstances of the local farmers. Therefore, it serves the purpose of re-engineering a short supply chain, not just to market added-value local products.

In some specific cases, solidarity economy networks can mobilise to salvage family entrepreneurship, as in the case of Tomasoni, a family dairy rescued from bankruptcy in 2009 by a network of solidarity purchase groups. Tomasoni began serving

GAS groups in 2002, decided to specialise in organic cheese in 2004 and thus downsized in response to their preferences, but ran into financial trouble in 2008 as a result of the credit crunch. In 2009, the owner sent an email asking GAS customers for financial help. Faced with the threat of factory closure, *gasistas* raised an interest-free 18-month loan of about €150,000 within forty-five days, through an e-mail campaign. The fund was given as down-payment for future orders, and was facilitated by a worker-owned credit cooperative (Signori 2010).

Solidarity economy networks have also cross-fertilised with anti-mafia consumers associations and farming cooperatives in Sicily. *The Other side of the Orange* (De Musso 2012) is a collaborative documentary film that illustrates this process. The film maker, an anthropologist, followed the anti-mafia orange growers of RESSUD, the Solidarity Economy Network of the South, as they organised and carried out farmers markets of “mafia-free oranges” in eight Italian cities. Such orange landings (*sbarchi in piazza*) served the purpose of disseminating knowledge about the mafia infiltration in national and international food systems and the systematic exploitation of migrant workers in the citrus fruit industry. Based on six months of participant observation, the documentary covers the interactions between GAS activists and Sicilian growers as they set up their mafia-free market squares in Lombardy, Tuscany, Abruzzi, and Liguria. De Musso identifies risk management and organic certification as a “politics of nature” that casts the consumer as a deskilled end-user. In contrast, provisioning activists embody both knowledge and political engagement through “fatigue”, i.e. bodily exposure to contamination, exhaustion, or police intervention, as they appropriate public space for informal economic practices that create “social attrite”. Consistently with this, solidarity economy activists use the language of co-production *vis-à-vis* mainstream food policy and logistics. In fact, GAS activists define themselves as co-producers (which is something radically different than “prosumers”; co-production is an expression coined within circles of provisioning activism (Tavolo RES 2013)).¹³ While prosumers are involved in end-user evaluation and design of some products, the co-producer’s role is not that of taking an active role in farming. It is one of enabling the role of farming by maintaining one’s role as consumers, but empowering oneself as such in a direct collaboration with producers. This is, of course, also valid for *any* producer, not just farmers. In the Tomasoni case, a grassroots food re-localisation strategy not only safeguarded the continuity of the dairy’s production, but also “re-embedded its value” in the social network of its consumers. In the case of anti-mafia oranges, GAS consumption included an important element of self-education about a very real issue (i.e. the mafia’s stakes in large organised distribution) and initiated alternative partnerships that empowered both consumers and producers.

However, co-production does not happen without re-prescribing the reciprocal roles of producer and consumer, and their cultural performances. Within provisioning activist networks, it is precisely this relationship between producer and consumer that is reconsidered as one of essential alliance rather than competition (one trying to sell at the highest price, the other trying to buy at the lowest). Food activists address mistrust in the

¹³ I described the practice of co-production among GAS food activists ethnographically in Grasseni (2013).

food system, whether on grounds of its lack of quality or because of the lack of transparency of the commercial and labour transactions. In lieu of delegation, they use proximity as a measure of transparency. This often entails moments of orchestrated transparency, which however easily borders on self-exhibition, as I will have the chance to elaborate on in the next section. On-site farm visits, demonstrations of traditional skills, linguistic performances engendering trust (notably, the use of dialect), volunteered photographic or historical documentation about the rootedness of the farming or cheese-making practice, are all ostentative (sometimes ostentatious) techniques that have an important impact on the expectations of urban customers. The latter, in fact, expect not only agronomic competence, but also a social performance. This can be viewed positively but can put some strain on the transaction: something that is increasingly cast as a relationship and an experience, but has important and fundamental economic significance for the producers.

Reciprocal performativity and political ambivalence

Increasingly, networks of local producers can more easily meet the demands of networks of alternative, short-chain consumers. In the Bergamo area of Italy, *Agrimagna* is one of a few successful projects that have emerged in recent years, organising and marketing a concerted offer from local smallholders to meet an increasing demand for local foods by a largely urban or suburban population. One of the farmers in the network, an orchard owner, was among the first to respond to a call for producers in 2010, when a nascent network of about thirty GAS groups in the Bergamo province initiated the operations of a working group for ‘Mapping and Liaising with Producers’. I was a member of the working group, and our minutes of April 19, 2010 record that contact with the orchard was made through a member of a GAS group, a social worker employed in the local municipality, after which an onsite visit was carried out by two members of the Mapping Group (belonging to two other GAS). Despite the fact that their apples were not organic, the family-run scale of the business reassured the visitors of their genuine attempts to reduce pesticide use (through the method of ‘integrated pest control’ against fungi, insects and moss). The beauty of the orchard was highly appreciated – and so were the apple juice, jam, and puree offered to the visitors. Group orders began to include increasing quantities of apricots, plums, and seasonal vegetables. Operations regarded only one GAS group initially, then an increasing number of GAS, thanks to the mediation conducted by individual GAS members and the occasional network-wide order of apples.

As it transpires from this brief example, these are laborious and time-intensive networking efforts, which are often unsuccessful without the charismatic intervention of a leader, whether a local administrator or a senior activist. In the case of producers, time and trust are two fundamental factors. In the case of *Agrimagna*, the networking effort among different producers was carried out upon the initiative of a local ex-priest, now social worker and vice-mayor. A network of producers was initiated thanks to a valley-wide strategic planning exercise launched by the municipal administration of one of *Valle Imagna* mountain villages, a locality of scarcely one thousand inhabitants. As the network initiator recounts in a recent interview, this network, comprising ten smallholders and cooperative producers of honey, cheese, fruit and vegetables, was largely the result of

obtaining material support from the local Chamber of Commerce in the form of 30 hours of free administrative and legal assistance from the small-business incubator office. This help, coupled with consistent demand from GAS as a network of patrons prepared to pay slightly higher prices than those of large distribution suppliers, made the difference. Supportive but not patronising, this network formula also seems to leave producers the space for taking the initiative of calling out for help to finish off crop leftovers, or to invite “U-Pick” operations in high harvesting season. Vice versa, the GAS network appointed a small but motivated group of volunteers (at the last meeting of the Mapping Group that I attended in July 2013 there were only six people present including myself as an auditor), who liaise with producers, offer support and advice, and make sure that the network responds with orders and cash when needed.

Reciprocal performativity, however, does play a part when small producers such as family farms increasingly market themselves directly to farmers markets or local networks of alternative provisioning. For example, photographic evidence is used keenly by the farmers, who volunteer family shots or documentation of the on-site activities (e.g. potato harvesting or apple picking) by circulating them to the customers’ mailing lists or by posting them on their web sites, to advertise their produce in a dedicated way to the consumers’ network. If we compare this self-casting photographic marketing with more scaled-up operations, we can find telling analogies and distinctions. One example is a provider of organic meat for the Whole Foods supermarket chain in the USA: this is still defined as a ‘family farm’ located in Missouri, but distributes beef, poultry and pork to 15 states in the US according to its web site.¹⁴ The web visual imagery underlines the natural surroundings and the family participation, though the professional family portraits are obviously carefully staged. Professional web sites contain a carefully orchestrated balance of visual evidence, logo power, and definition of the benefits and distinction of grass-fed beef (open pasture, no confinement, no antibiotics, no hormones, AWA-certified for high animal welfare, AGA-certified grass fed). In comparison, photographic self-casting seems more *impromptu* in the case of the potato- and apple-growing family farms that participate in Agrimagna with a much more local, practically insignificant distribution. Likewise, the emails sent by local farmers to GAS networks usually contain brief matter-of-fact information about what produce is available, in which quantities and at what prices, how to collect it at the farm or order it, and an email address and sometimes cellphone number. These are tactic explorations of a mode of communication that is new to both the producers and consumers involved. Both tap into a shared bucolic and conservative imaginary of the countryside idyll that is disseminated world-wide and daily fed by ubiquitous advertisements, while being specifically relevant to more up-market and up-scale operations (cf. Grasseni 2003 on the visual packaging of mountain cheese).

One can ask whether family producers’ performativity becomes self-exploiting in striving to meet alternative consumers’ expectation of a new “sociality” around food. Considering the ubiquitous social performance of family-based collective tasks, such as berry- or apple-picking, the regular participation in farmers markets, the group visits on site, the expected participation with family stands at local music and folklore festivals, etc., the amount of time

¹⁴ Compare for example <http://www.agrimagna.it/> in northern Italy and <http://www.raincrowranch.com/>.

and resources involved becomes evident. Despite the visual rhetoric of hand-crafted foods as intrinsically benign, in some instances at least it seems that even new and “fair” economic circuits do little to undo exploitative timescapes and frameworks of labour-division and gender roles within the farming family. Co-production also engenders ambivalent and tentative relationships between producers and consumers. Besides the obvious self-folklorisation, the visual and linguistic exchanges between producers and consumers reveal ambiguities as it is often cast in the language of place-based foods, which easily becomes localist *tout court*. The language used for locally sourced in fact may be: *Tipico* (representative of an anthropic landscape understood as *terroir*), *Genuino* (genuine, sincere, unadulterated) or *Nostrano* (autochthonous and our own in a spirit of cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 1997), but also of potential or outright xenophobia as registered by Rachel Black in her Turin ethnography (2012).

There are sometimes misunderstandings and embarrassment in the reciprocal re-positioning from that of a formal transaction to one of relationship, intimacy, even complicity: during my ethnography, a producer tried to sell their products to *gasistas* for cash, as a way of avoiding tax. Little did he know that most *gasistas* consider price and fiscal transparency to be their most important criteria. Some others exhibit family traditions or the small-scale of their operations to claim quality: *tutta roba genuina* (all genuine stuff), but some are unable to tell what is in their cow fodder: ‘Is this soy flour? Is it GM or not?’ Some producers could not tell as they were not trained to think about these implications. While discerning customers are prepared to do a lot more work than average for their food provisioning, they do require a more comprehensive understanding of the food system from their producers, and coach them about it. Hence the moral outrage of some GAS organisers when they say that the producers do not shop through a solidarity purchase group, but go to the supermarket. By doing so, they betray the moral alliance of co-producers, by acting like a producer vested in GAS, performing the underdog, only to go and enjoy the privileges of “consumer choice” in a supermarket. This is the very embodiment of the so-called free market that marginalises them in the first place. Food activists usually know that it is subsidised agriculture and intensively grown crops that allow to “dump” food at unbeatable prices. This is what makes food cheap in Western supermarkets but it is also part and parcel of the global food system that strangles artisanal foods, local farming, and smallholders. However, these very implications are not often shared with the producers themselves who may well participate in the system as end-consumers themselves.

Finally, the re-localisation of provisioning stirs political sentiments as the common sense appropriations of place-based foods as typical and our own allow unexpected synergies. The widespread understanding of local foods as part of a local identity is deeply engrained across a wide spectrum of social and economic actors. It is not uncommon, for example, to find the discourse of locality effortlessly exploited by localist xenophobic rhetoric at gastronomic events such as the many *sagre* (popular festivals) that feature “typical foods” in practically every rural locality in northern Italy on the occasion of religious festivities or seasonal fairs.¹⁵ For example, I was given green

¹⁵ See, for instance, Rachel Black on the use of the term *nostrano*, literally ‘our own’ for local foods in Turin’s market, to set them aside from immigrants’ food stands (2012).

Northern League balloons by party activists as a bystander at a culinary gazebo at a mushroom fair (*Sagra del Fungo*) that I attended in 2010. The left-wing municipality had organised the *Sagra* and were distributing free *risotto* to families and children. They had nothing to do with the Northern League party presence, and in fact their marquee had been allowed to stand at a fair distance from the culinary gazebos. However, neither was their presence decried as intrusive or out of place, or apparently resented by the public of what was after all just a local food festival.

The Northern League logo depicted on the balloon pays tribute to Alberto da Giussano, the battling Lombard champion who faced the wrath of the German Emperor Friedrich I, from whose Sacred Roman Germanic Empire the Commons of Lombardy were seceding in 1176. The unexpected combination of this imagery with that of the 19th annual *sagra del fungo* of Monte Marengo (a competitive mushroom fair judged by professional mycologists praising the rarest and best *fungi* specimen on display), however uninvited by the fair organisers, exemplifies the kaleidoscopic but deep-seated cross-fertilisation among a spatio-temporal imaginary of local foods as “invariant” and contemporary localist discourse and political practice.¹⁶ While solidarity economy activists place much emphasis on shortening supply chains as a means of democratic empowerment, convinced that to achieve food sovereignty over one’s provisioning practices has economic and political implications for both consumers and producers, nostrano food is celebrated even in xenophobic rhetoric: for example Northern League posters extolling the virtues of polenta over couscous appeared both in online and along main roads in Lombardy in the early 2010s, in support of several local administrations who limited licensing to “ethnic” food stands such as döner kebab kiosks.¹⁷

Conclusion

Provisioning activists often attempt to go beyond the locally sourced imaginary and increasingly use co-production to problematise the division of producer and consumer roles. However, there is currently no single master narrative for how alternative provisioning should work. Food relocalisation processes strike a subtle balance and often borrow from each other’s repertoires, sometimes embracing substantial ambiguities about the meaning of what is ‘local’ and about performativity in economic transactions.

I have given a definition of provisioning activism and provided three examples from Italy and the United States, firstly taking into consideration alternative urban provisioning and secondly solidarity economy networks. I have dwelt on the latter to critically analyse their discourse and practices of coproduction from the point of view of

¹⁶ The Northern League, long-term partner in government with Berlusconi until November 2011, has a vocal anti-immigration stance. Despite its public depiction as buffoon-like, it holds a powerful political position in northern Italy (currently the three Regional Governments of Lombardy, Piedmont, and Veneto are all Northern-League held, over a population of about 20 million, i.e. one third of Italy). For an astute ethnographic and theoretical investigation of Northern League activism, see Dematteo 2011.

¹⁷ The phenomenon has been covered on the Italian American digital magazine *i-Italy.org*. See Grasso (2010) available (with pictures of the Northern League posters) at <http://www.i-italy.org/13883/polenta-vs-cous-cous-legally-banning-ethnic-food-northern-italy> last accessed May 25, 2014.

the producers. On the one hand, for example, the discourse of coproduction is still largely designed and decided by activist-consumers. On the other, the laborious collaboration that is expected from farmers by ethical consumers often generates justified criticisms among smallholders and family farmers, who simply do not have infinite cultural and human resources to spend on food activists. The latter are often perceived as pedantic and excessively discerning, as a time-consuming burden (to whom one must show a friendly face). If they do not buy entire crops or if they organise farmers' markets that do not generate sufficient income to be worth the investment, provisioning activists are sometimes even considered untrustworthy urban faddists. These are reflections that I derive both from personal observations (Grasseni 2014) and from supervising relevant Ph.D. fieldwork in this sector, notably the relationship between public administrations and innovative family farmers in Lecco (Biffi 2014) and the introduction of participatory guarantee systems in networks of solidarity economy in Lombardy (Contessi forthcoming).

Food activism currently stimulates the convergence between an increasing demand for healthier, seasonal, and locally sourced foods and a still tentative and experimental endeavour to increase local capacities to revitalise regional economies. Alternative provisioning activists readily use the master narratives of solidarity economy and food sovereignty, but sometimes they do not see through the performativity of self-folklorising smallholders. Nevertheless, despite the wide variety of motivations underlying (different types of) food activism, often their discourses and practices overlap. Localism for example provides a framework readily at hand, and keeps the reciprocal performativity of producers and provisioners in tension. I have shown how localised interventions address that void, specifically the lack of trust in industrial food systems, by reintegrating proximity and transparency in creative ways, while striking a subtle and ambivalent balance on substantial ambiguities about localism and performativity.

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Povzetek

Tako ruralna sociologija kot antropologija sta razvili precejšnje znanje o 'alternativnih prehranskih mrežah', ki vrednotijo krajše oskrbovalne verige. Kljub temu je za male in družinske kmetije še vedno nejasno, kakšne so omejitve in potenciali vključevanja v tovrstne alternativne prehranske mreže. V pričujočem članku razkrivam različne oblike sodelovanja, ki so vzniknile med 'preskrbovalnimi aktivisti' in lokalnimi kmetovalci, in sicer v kompleksnem in razdrobljenem kontekstu lokaliziranih posegov. Članek se osredotoča na diskurze in prakse prehranske re-lokalizacije, ki vključujejo številne, raznolike 'pridelovalce' in 'so-pridelovalce' hrane.

Ključne besede: prehranski aktivizem, solidarnostna ekonomija, alternativna preskrba, okraji, družinsko kmetovanje, Italija

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