

**Title:** Doctor

**Name:** Giovanni Orlando

**E-Mail address:** giovanni.orlando@unito.it

**Link to webpage:** <https://independentresearcher.academia.edu/GiovanniOrlando>

**Date of doctorate:** 30 June 2011

**Most recent institution:** University of Turin, Turin, Italy

**Research field:** Anthropology

**Project title:** Consuming the Anthropocene: Food, Risk Practices, and Polluted Everyday Life

**Period of stay at FRIAS:** 1 September 2020 – 30 June 2021 (ten months)

**Reasons for choosing FRIAS:** I have decided to apply for a FCFP External Senior Fellowship for two main reasons: first, the Fellowship offers the perfect opportunity to complete a substantial piece of writing such as the one I am proposing, the lack of which represents a weakness in my curriculum; second, the FRIAS Fellowship Programme allows scholars to challenge themselves in an interdisciplinary environment where researchers from the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities work side by side. In effect, I see the Fellowship as a test of my scientific ability. I am applying as a senior fellow despite the break I was forced to take after receiving my PhD—a crucial stage in one’s career—to care for my father. Although I am not eligible for a Junior Fellowship under standard ERC rules, the negative impact this break had on my early path means that my career stage does not reflect my “academic age” (date of PhD). Since returning to academia, however, I have proven my potential with a mobile path built on positions of growing prestige. In 2015 I won a post-doc for talented young researchers at the University of Bergamo in Italy, where I worked as part of the international research team CORES – Consumption, Networks and Practices of Sustainable Economies (<https://coresnetwork.wordpress.com>), which includes scholars from Trento and Leiden. After working as a post-doc, I won a Marie S. Curie Fellowship for my project *The Value of Alternative Food Networks After the Crisis* (<https://altfoodcrisis.wordpress.com/>), which I led as Principal Investigator. Following these two research projects, which were largely centred on data *collection*, what I find particularly attractive about the FRIAS Fellowship Programme is that it allows the funding of projects of a completing nature, which involve the publication of already gathered results.

**Established contacts at Freiburg University:** The proposed project does not involve experimental work nor require laboratory facilities. A host department is therefore not required.

## RESEARCH PROPOSAL

**Research field:** Anthropology

**Title:** Consuming the Anthropocene: Food, Risk Practices, and Polluted Everyday Life

**Abstract:** A growing number of natural scientists believe that the Earth has entered a new epoch of uncertainty due to humanity's negative impact on most regions of the planet. To express this wide-ranging impact, they have termed the new epoch the "Anthropocene." Social scientists have noted how this turn of events implies that all Nature is now "social nature"—a hybrid construct of at least partial artificial origin. By taking the case of environmental contamination as an example of social nature, this project explores the consequences of the Anthropocene on culinary culture, particularly with regard to lay notions of pollution, nature, and the body. The project consists of two strands: 1) the analysis of qualitative data collected in Italy over several years of fieldwork, which will result in the publication of a book monograph; and 2) the organization of a series of research seminars and public talks on the topic of consumer society in the Anthropocene. Strand 1 constitutes the project's theoretical core and examines the case of organic foods in Italy, looking at its citizens' changing relationship to diet, body and nature as a result of socio-natural processes of pollution. The preliminary argument is that many Italians eat organic foods not only to avoid what they believe is polluted food, but also to offset perceived contamination from their immediate surroundings, thus hoping to reduce the total toxic burden of a "polluted everyday life." This pattern of behaviour does not rely solely on the instrumental and cognitive aspects of eating, however, but also on the embodied and culturally situated ones, signalling how eating organics is not so much an exercise of consumer reflexivity, but a "practice of risk."

**Aims:** Anthropological studies of the Anthropocene usually exhibit three tendencies: 1) they focus on "place-based peoples",<sup>1</sup> i.e. communities in the global South who depend on their immediate physical environment; 2) they look at the effects of global environmental change (GEC), rather than its causes; and 3) they deal primarily with climate change and biodiversity loss, the two measures of GEC most relevant to place-based peoples.<sup>2 3 4</sup> Though important, this work leaves open many questions regarding the shape of the Anthropocene in the North. Inspired by a sociological inclination, the proposed project breaks new ground by offering one of the first ethnographic accounts of the ways that people are experiencing pollution through food in a high-energy, high-consumption society where artificial infrastructures are dominant and most of the *causes* of GEC originate from. In doing so, the project will innovate the scientific debate by developing the concepts of polluted everyday life and risk practice, and by placing consumerism at the center of analyses of the Anthropocene.<sup>5 6 7</sup>

**Theoretical framework:** "Anthropocene" is the name given to a new epoch of unpredictable environmental change that is replacing the Holocene, the largely stable period which saw complex societies emerge and flourish over the past 10,000 years. The new epoch's name

has been chosen to highlight the dominant role humans now play on Earth, modifying the planet to such an extent that their imprint will remain visible far into the future.<sup>8</sup> Pollution, for example, is currently so ubiquitous that it threatens nine measures of planetary “health” (or “boundaries”).<sup>9</sup> The global food system is both a cause and a victim of this pollution, as the EAT–*Lancet* Commission recently made clear.<sup>10</sup> While welcome, the Commission’s report did not address food contamination, despite the fact that this issue has become a major behavioral driver in high-consumption societies.<sup>11</sup>

Production, distribution, and consumption of food have all changed dramatically since 1945,<sup>12</sup> tracking the Anthropocene’s “great acceleration” and resulting in major environmental contamination, biodiversity loss, and non-communicable diseases.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, eating now takes place in a world where artificial substances are virtually ubiquitous, showing up in mundane loci such as neighborhoods, homes, people’s food, blood, and urine.<sup>14</sup> This situation has led to claims that we are living in a “chemosphere.”<sup>15</sup> Though seemingly inevitable, the effect of these substances on human health is still poorly understood, a condition of uncertainty that reinforces individualistic, often commodified, attempts at risk reduction.<sup>16 17 18</sup> The proposed project aims to show that sociocultural processes play a key role in people’s relationship to anthropogenic food contamination. Organic food consumption in Italy is an excellent example of these phenomena.

Contrary to common stereotype, Italy suffers from widespread pollution and from a deep ambivalence towards its diet.<sup>19 20</sup> Qualitative data I have collected over almost ten years shows that many Italians consume organics to cope not just with the anxiety of eating what they fear is polluted food, but also of living in a polluted environment—a situation I call “polluted everyday life.” As edible material, food is the principal and apparently most easily accessible medium between a person’s outside—the environment—and their inside—the body. For some people, then, eating organics becomes a way (or a hope) of reducing and offsetting their overall embodied toxicity, making life in the Anthropocene more manageable. From a social science perspective, therefore, the Anthropocene seems to entail the same condition of risk, uncertainty, and ambivalence that has long been identified as constitutive of late modernity.<sup>21 22</sup> The proposed project draws on this unexplored link to ground its argument about the effects of the environmental question on food culture. However, it also recognizes that both the Anthropocene and the late modernity rubrics tend to overgeneralize social change and privilege abstract views of agency and reflexivity.<sup>23 24 25</sup> Data for the project highlights the inadequacy of this tendency by showing how Italians are not *constantly* thinking about anthropogenic contamination, nor do they trust only cognitive knowledge and technoscientific notions of food quality. Their engagement with organics is intermittent and reliant also on embodied and cultural-historical notions of edible value. This second aspect is evident in their views of pollution.

Pollution is usually defined in one of two ways: objectively, as materials that are scientifically proven to be harmful above certain thresholds, or subjectively, as materials that go against religious precepts. Some Italians see pollution differently—as a combination of the objective and the subjective. They believe food to be contaminated when it contains harmful substances *regardless* of thresholds (or substances whose safety is still debated); when it gives them bodily discomfort on a regular basis; or when it is produced in ways that violate deep-seated cultural preferences of a non-religious nature.

To make sense of this data, the project draws on theories of practice, everyday life, and ordinary consumption to reveal how household shopping helps people accommodate distant structural forces in their intimate, cultural, and historical worlds.<sup>26 27 28</sup> Because nature is fully part of these structural forces, the environmental question now shapes consumer society in profound ways, even though our awareness of this remains discontinuous.<sup>29 30 31 32</sup> Overall, the project shows food consumption as a “risk practice”: a combination of conscious acts and routines based on personal constructs of pollution that blend scientific, cognized information with lay, tacit knowledge of bodies and lived environments.

**Methodology:** The proposed project uses data gathered in Italy over almost 10 years, initially in Sicily, then also in Piedmont, through recurrent spells of participant observation. These lasted between 1 and 18 months and took the form of work at organic food stores and organic farms, visits of people’s homes, participation in their meal preparation and shopping trips, and attendance of relevant civil society networks and public events. These activities generated qualitative data of an observational and verbal nature, which was recorded in written form in a field diary. 57 semi-structured interviews were also carried out, mostly with women aged between 20 and 70, often married and with children. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data was collected through snowball sampling and is therefore not statistically representative. A qualitative methodology was deemed most appropriate to capture the ordinary nature of consumer engagement with the Anthropocene. Data analysis will rely primarily on grounded theory, i.e. the inductive coding of diary entries and interview transcripts to identify and connect thematic clusters in an iterative process.

**Work plan:** In strand 1, the proposed project will produce a book monograph consisting of an introduction, six substantive chapters, and a conclusion. I have currently written three out of eight chapters (Chs. 1, 2, 3) and envisage that by the start of the Fellowship I will have written drafts of the remaining five. I will thus use the Fellowship (10 months) to revise these five drafts, completing the manuscript. I am allocating 2 months per chapter for revisions, an amount of time I consider as accurate as possible at present. The current TOC is as follows: The Introduction starts with the book’s topic and theoretical approach. It then discusses the development of Italy’s modern food system, its organic food sector, and the country’s environmental problems since 1945, the conventional start date of the “great acceleration.”

Ch. 1 draws on organic consumers' discussions of mediatized food "scandals" over the course of a decade to examine technoscientific notions of food quality, focusing in particular on four anthropogenic agents of "pollution": GMOs, glyphosate, dioxins, and radionuclides. Ch. 2 analyses embodied notions of food quality using three kinds of data: consumers' experiences of illness and the lay etiologies used to explain them; the sensorial appraisal of organic vs. conventional foods; the senses' link to memories of the postwar food transition. Ch. 3 uses data about organic consumers' *conventional* food purchases in rural settings thought to be less contaminated to explore cultural notions of food quality linked to Italy's recent peasant past, and the potential clash they entail with technoscientific notions. Ch. 4 draws on consumers' views of their lived environment, especially its air, water, and mediatized locales, to show how eating organic food is also seen as a way of offsetting contaminants thought to be absorbed by living in a polluted area. Ch. 5 examines the gendered context of household reproduction through which food fears have to be negotiated, especially in terms of the demands placed on women by family members to accommodate distance, choice, cost, and time in grocery shopping. Ch. 6 looks at evidence that organic food consumption represents also a strategy to protect the environment from humans—rather than protect humans from the environment—linking this to debates about political consumerism. The Conclusion recaps the book's argument and offers some reflections on the role of the social sciences in understanding, and possibly changing, the Anthropocene.

In strand 2, the proposed project involves the organization of a series of research seminars and public talks, to be funded using the Fellowship's €4500 research budget ( $€450 \times 10$  months). The current plan is to hold seven events at monthly intervals (October, November, January, February, March, April and May). A combination of national and international speakers will be invited, with a top budget of €642 per speaker ( $€4500 \div 7$ ).

**Innovative potential:** The proposed project builds on the interdisciplinary potential that the social sciences exhibit towards the Anthropocene, as manifested in the similar way these disciplines have responded to the concept. Specifically, the project draws on two complementary aspects of this potential. First, social scientists have welcomed the view that nature and society are mutually constitutive and thus no longer separable, which lies at the heart of the Anthropocene concept. This view can avoid the empirical pitfalls that an exclusively social epistemology has historically incurred, such as disregarding the environmental question.<sup>33 34 35</sup> The project speaks to this dialogue in strand 1 by putting the issue of pollution center stage. Second, social scientists have shown that underlying some uses of the new concept is a naturalist narrative that depicts humanity as a generic force, paying scant attention to issues of inequality, difference, and place.<sup>36 37 38</sup> In this vein, the concept risks replacing a dualism—nature vs. society—with a new absolute category—generic nature-society—which may itself lead to empirical blind spots. The project draws on

this criticism by recognizing the analytical significance of unequal gender relations, and that of situated constructs of the “natural” and the “cultural” as *separate* domains of life.

**Relevance:** Since it was first posited, the Anthropocene has drawn considerable public attention. Films such as Edward Burtynsky’s *Anthropocene: the human epoch*, the Fridays for Future protests, and the controversies about glyphosate and disposable plastic show that the Anthropocene is an idea whose time has come. Without wanting to diminish its significance, though, it should also be noted that the idea risks becoming a new theory of everything due to its appeal as a post-natural, post-social, and post-political concept.<sup>39</sup> Social scientists therefore have a critical role to play in ensuring that the idea retains all the analytical strength that a focus on culture, social relations, power, and space has to offer.<sup>40</sup>

**Added value:** Along with completing a substantial piece of writing and benefiting from FRIAS’ interdisciplinary research environment, I believe the added value of conducting my project at the University of Freiburg will be twofold. First, the Fellowship will allow me to connect with two research clusters that carry out work relevant to my project and wider scientific interests. These are the *Circulus* group (<https://www.circulus-project.de/>) and the Freiburg Sustainability Center (<https://www.leistungszentrum-nachhaltigkeit.de/en/>). The *Circulus* group studies the socio-economic consequences of implementing the circular economy concept. Its work links to mine in several respects. First, the constructivist epistemology that guides the group is close to the anthropological one in that both see socio-ecological systems as dependent on collective—cultural and historical—processes of knowing. Second, the group’s case studies relate to some of my longest-standing research interests, such as urban agriculture and sustainability practices in cities. During the Fellowship, I also plan to connect with the Freiburg Sustainability Center, whose work on ecological and societal transformation offers the prospect of further fruitful engagements. My research will benefit particularly from the Center’s work on two foci: Global Dimensions of Sustainability, and Politics and Sustainability. The second way that my project will create added value locally is through the organization of a series of seminars and talks on the topic of *Consumer Society in the Anthropocene*. The series will host thinkers from across the social sciences and use, ideally, the FRIAS and the Sustainability Center as alternating venues, to maximize the events’ impact. This strand of the project aims to benefit both the local research community—by setting up a forum of interdisciplinary discussion—and the wider public in Freiburg—by addressing one of the most timely topics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Ethical issues:** The monograph will use pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of informants.

<sup>1</sup> Crate, S. 2011. Climate and culture: anthropology in the era of contemporary climate change. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40: 175–94.

<sup>2</sup> Brightman, M. & Lewis, J. eds. 2017. *The Anthropology of Sustainability*. London: Palgrave.

<sup>3</sup> Chua, L. & Fair, H. 2019. Anthropocene. In F. Stein, et al. Eds. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, pp. 1–19. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- <sup>4</sup> Moore, A. 2019. *Destination Anthropocene*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- <sup>5</sup> Hornborg, A. 2011. *Global Ecology and Unequal Exchange*. London: Routledge.
- <sup>6</sup> Meneley, A. 2018. Consumerism. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 47: 117–32.
- <sup>7</sup> Wilk, R. 2016. Is a sustainable consumer culture possible? In S. Crate & M. Nuttall eds. *Anthropology and Climate Change*, pp. 301–318. London: Routledge.
- <sup>8</sup> Zalasiewicz, J. et al. 2014. The technofossil record of humans. *The Anthropocene Review* 1 (1): 34–43.
- <sup>9</sup> Landrigan, P. et al. 2017. The *Lancet* Commission on pollution and health. *Lancet* 391: 462
- <sup>10</sup> Willet, W. et al. 2019. Food in the Anthropocene. *Lancet* 393: 447–492.
- <sup>11</sup> Eurobarometer 2019. *Special Eurobarometer 91.3: Food Safety in the EU*. Parma: EFSA.
- <sup>12</sup> Wilk, R. ed. 2006. *Fast Food/Slow Food*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- <sup>13</sup> McNeill, J. & Engelke, P. 2014. *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene Since 1945*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.
- <sup>14</sup> Schell, L. & Denham, M. 2003. Environmental pollution in urban environments and human biology. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 32: 111–134.
- <sup>15</sup> Shapiro, N. 2015. Attuning to the chemosphere: domestic formaldehyde, bodily reasoning, and the chemical sublime. *Cultural Anthropology* 30 (3): 368–393.
- <sup>16</sup> Auyero, J. & Swistun, D. 2009. *Flammable: Environmental Suffering in an Argentine Shantytown*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- <sup>17</sup> Szasz, A. 2007. *Shopping Our Way to Safety*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- <sup>18</sup> Wilk, R. 2006. Bottled water: the pure commodity in the age of branding. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 6 (3): 303–325.
- <sup>19</sup> Corona, G. 2017. *A Short Environmental History of Italy*. Winwick: The White Horse Press.
- <sup>20</sup> Sibilio, R. & Falzarano, A. 2011. *Il rischio nel piatto* [Risk on the Plate]. Franco Angeli.
- <sup>21</sup> Beck, U. 1992. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage.
- <sup>22</sup> Douglas, M. & Wildavsky 1982. *Risk and Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- <sup>23</sup> Boholm, A. 2003. The cultural nature of risk: can there be an anthropology of uncertainty? *Ethnos* 68 (2): 159–178.
- <sup>24</sup> Caplan, P. ed. 2000. *Risk Revisited*. London: Pluto Press.
- <sup>25</sup> Reno, J. 2011. Beyond risk: emplacement and the production of environmental evidence. *American Ethnologist* 38 (3): 516–530.
- <sup>26</sup> Gronow, J. and Warde, A. Eds. 2001. *Ordinary Consumption*. London: Routledge.
- <sup>27</sup> Shove, Trentmann & Wilk eds. 2009. *Time, Consumption and Everyday Life*. Oxford: Berg.
- <sup>28</sup> Warde, A. 2016. *The Practice of Eating*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- <sup>29</sup> Halkier, B. 2010. *Consumption Challenged: Food in Medialised Everyday Life*. Routledge.
- <sup>30</sup> Vine, M. 2018. Learning to feel at home in the Anthropocene: from state of emergency to everyday experiments in California's historic drought. *American Ethnologist* 45 (3): 405–416.
- <sup>31</sup> Jackson, P. 2015. *Anxious Appetites: Food and Consumer Culture*. London: Bloomsbury.
- <sup>32</sup> Rosenberger, N. 2016. Japanese organic farmers: strategies of uncertainty after the Fukushima disaster. *Ethnos* 81 (1): 1–24.
- <sup>33</sup> Hamilton, C., Bonneuil, C. & Gemenne, F. Eds. 2015. *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch*. London: Routledge.
- <sup>34</sup> Haraway D et al. 2016. Anthropologists are talking about the Anthropocene. *Ethnos* 81 (3).
- <sup>35</sup> Tsing, Mathews, & Bubandt 2019. Patchy Anthropocene: landscape structure, multispecies history, and the retooling of anthropology. *Current Anthropology*, early online view.
- <sup>36</sup> Hann, C. 2017. The Anthropocene and anthropology: micro and macro perspectives. *European Journal of Social Theory* 20 (1): 183–196.
- <sup>37</sup> Palsson, G. et al. 2013 Reconceptualizing the 'Anthropos' in the Anthropocene. *Environmental Science & Policy* 28: 3–13.
- <sup>38</sup> Sayre 2012. The politics of the anthropogenic. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41: 57–70.
- <sup>39</sup> Löwbrand E et al. 2015. Who speaks for the future of Earth? How critical social science can extend the conversation on the Anthropocene. *Global Environmental Change* 32: 211–218.
- <sup>40</sup> Brondizio, E. et al. (2016). Re-conceptualizing the Anthropocene: a call for collaboration. *Global Environmental Change* 39: 318–327.