

ABSTRACT

Applicant's name and degree: Giovanni Orlando, PhD Anthropology

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

Project acronym: CtA

Relevant research fields: 1) Anthropology 2) Sociology

Abstract: CtA is a three-year project that explores the consequences of the Anthropocene on food 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 almost a decade of fieldwork, resulting in the publication of a monograph and two articles; and 2) the organisation of fourteen seminars and public talks, resulting in a coedited volume. In addition to the HCAS, the project will be hosted at the Centre for Consumer Society Research (CCSR).

"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.^{1 2} Pollution, for example, is now so ubiquitous that it threatens nine measures of planetary "health",^{3 4} leading some scholars to argue that we are living in a "chemosphere."⁵

The global food system is both a cause and a victim of this pollution, as the EAT–Lancet Commission recently made clear.⁶ While welcome, the Commission's report did not address food contamination, despite the fact that this issue has become a major behavioural driver in high-consumption societies.^{7 8} By taking a different yet complementary approach, CtA aims to show that sociocultural processes play a key role in people's relationship to anthropogenic food contamination.

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 more embodied and culturally situated ones, signalling how eating organics is not so much an exercise of consumer reflexivity, but a "practice of Anthropocenic risk."

The outputs in strand 1 (monograph and articles) combine anthropological and sociological approaches, motivating my desire to work with the CCSR. Anthropological studies of the Anthropocene tend to focus on the effects of global environmental change (GEC) on communities in the global South.^{9 10 11 12 13} Inspired by a sociological approach, CtA breaks new ground by asking how people experience GEC in a high-consumption society of the North, developing the concepts of risk practice and polluted everyday life.

Strand 2 consists of a series of fourteen seminars and talks by thinkers from across the social sciences on *Consumer Society in the Anthropocene*, leading to the publication of a coedited volume. The series will be funded via the Fellowship's personal allowance and hosted at the HCAS and the CCSR.

Since it was first posited, the Anthropocene has drawn considerable public attention.¹⁴ Films such as Edward Burtynsky's *Anthropocene: the human epoch*, the Fridays for Future protests, and the disputes over glyphosate show that the Anthropocene is an idea whose time has come. Without wanting to diminish its import, though, it should also be noted that the idea risks becoming a new theory of everything¹⁵ due to its appeal as a post-natural, post-social, and post-political concept.^{16 17 18 19 20} Social scientists thus have a critical role to play in ensuring the idea retains the analytical strength that a focus on culture, social relations, power, and space has to offer.^{21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28} Strand 2 will harness this strength not just for the academe, but also for the public.

Number of characters: 3992

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RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Scientific Relevance

Production, distribution, and consumption of food have all changed dramatically since 1945,^{1 2 3} tracking the Anthropocene's "great acceleration"⁴ and resulting in major pollution, biodiversity loss, and non-communicable diseases.⁵ At the same time, eating now takes place in a world where artificial substances are virtually ubiquitous,⁶ showing up in mundane loci such as neighbourhoods, homes, people's food, blood, and urine.^{7 8 9 10} This situation has led to claims that we are living on a "synthetic planet."¹¹ 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.^{12 13 14 15 16 17 18} Organic food consumption in Italy is an excellent example of these phenomena.

Contrary to common stereotype, Italy suffers from widespread pollution^{19 20} and from a deep ambivalence towards its diet.^{21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32} Ethnographic data I have collected over almost a decade 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.^{33 34 35 36} CtA draws on this unexplored link to ground its argument about the effects of the environmental question on food culture. However, it also recognises that both the Anthropocene and the late modernity rubrics tend to overgeneralise social change and privilege abstract views of agency and reflexivity.^{37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44} My data 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.⁴⁵ Their engagement with organics is "intermittent"⁴⁶ 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,⁴⁷ or subjectively, as materials that go against religious precepts.⁴⁸ 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, CtA 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.^{49 50 51 52} 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.^{53 54 55 56 57 58 59} Overall, CtA shows food consumption as a "risk practice"⁶⁰: 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.^{61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70}

Problem Statement

Anthropological studies of the Anthropocene exhibit three tendencies: 1) they focus on "place-based peoples,"⁷¹ i.e. communities in the global South who depend on their immediate natural environment; 2) they look at the social effects of GEC, rather than its causes; 3) they deal primarily with climate change and biodiversity loss, the two measures of planetary health most relevant to place-based peoples.^{72 73 74 75 76} Though important, this work leaves open many questions regarding the shape of the Anthropocene in the North. Following a sociological inclination, CtA innovates the debate with one of the first ethnographic accounts of the ways that

people experience pollution through food in a high-consumption society, where artificial infrastructures are dominant and most of the *causes* of GEC originate from.^{77 78 79} In doing so, it aims to place consumerism at the centre of analyses of the Anthropocene.^{80 81 82}

Research Design

In strand 1, CtA 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 20 to 70, often married and with children. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data was collected through snowball sampling and is thus not statistically representative. A qualitative methodology was deemed most appropriate to capture the ordinary nature of consumer engagement with the Anthropocene. Data will be used anonymously. Analysis will rely on grounded theory, i.e. the inductive coding of diary entries and interview transcripts to identify and connect thematic clusters in an iterative process.

Schedule

I have currently written drafts of three out of eight chapters and envisage that by the start of the Fellowship I will have written those of the remaining five. I will therefore use:

- 16 months to revise the whole manuscript (write final drafts);
- 6 months to write two articles;
- 4 months, divided in two 2-months periods, to visit international institutions;
- 10 months to work on the coedited volume (review chapters and write introduction).

Time will also be spent responding to reviews of the manuscript and organising 14 talks during years 1 and 2 (between Oct and May).

Year	Dates	Months	Activity
1	Aug 15, 2020 – Jun 15, 2021	10	Manuscript revision
1	Jun 15 – Aug 15, 2021	2	Visiting – Aarhus
2	Aug 15, 2021 – Feb 15, 2022	6	Manuscript revision and submission
2	Feb 15 – May 15, 2022	3	Writing article
2	May 15 – Jul 15, 2022	2	Visiting – Nottingham
3	Jul 15 – Oct 15, 2022	3	Writing article
3	Oct 15, 2022 – Aug 15, 2023	10	Work on coedited volume and submission

Interdisciplinary Potential

CtA 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.^{83 84 85 86 87 88 89} CtA speaks to this dialogue in strand 1 by putting the issue of pollution centre stage. Second, social scientists have shown that underlying some uses of the new concept is a “naturalist narrative”⁹⁰ that depicts humanity as a generic force, paying scant attention to issues of inequality, difference, and place.⁹¹
^{92 93 94 95 96 97} 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.

In strand 2, CtA will harness this interdisciplinary potential by organising a series of 14 monthly talks where scholars from anthropology, sociology, geography, political science, and history will be invited to reflect on the topic of *Consumer Society in the Anthropocene*. The series will thus contribute to a dialogue between the social sciences and humanities on one of the most vital topics of the 21st century.

To enhance the interdisciplinarity of my project, I also plan to visit two international research institutions: Aarhus University, where anthropologist Nils Bubandt is part of a large project on the Anthropocene (<http://anthropocene.au.dk/>), and the Institute for Science and Society, Nottingham University, where sociologist Dimitris Papadopoulos works on the politics of chemical pollution (<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/sociology/people/dimitris.papadopoulos>). These visits are integral to CtA, as they will offer the chance to network and share my work with other scholars, thus creating added value for the Fellowship.

Work Abroad

I plan to spend two 2-months periods away from HCAS, representing 11% of the Fellowship; I have scheduled these outside the academic year, as per instructions.

Publishing Plan

CtA will produce four publications: a monograph, two articles, and an edited volume. The former consists of an introduction, six substantive chapters, and a conclusion.

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 mediated food "scandals" over the course of a decade to examine technoscientific notions of food quality, focusing in particular on four anthropogenic agents of "pollution": recombinant DNA, glyphosate, dioxins, and radionuclides.

Ch. 2 analyses embodied notions of food quality using three kinds of data: consumers' experiences of illness and the lay aetiologies used to explain them; their sensorial appraisal of organic and conventional foods; and the senses' link to memories of Italy's post-war 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 mediated 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 evidence to debates about political consumerism.

The Conclusion summarises the book's argument and reflects on the role of the social sciences in understanding, and possibly changing, the Anthropocene epoch.

The planned articles will explore two important topics in relation to the Anthropocene: the role of class in alternative forms of consumption, and the moral economy of ethical food trade. I will submit these articles to *Journal of Consumer Culture* and *American Ethnologist*.

Finally, the second volume will be edited with CCSR members and include papers from the seminar series *Consumer Society in the Anthropocene*.

I will contact University of California Press and Bloomsbury as potential publishers.

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