

Cover Page

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Scientific Panel: Socio-Economic Sciences

Title of proposal: The value of alternative food networks after the crisis: an Italian case study

Acronym of proposal: ALTFOODCRISIS

ABSTRACT

This project will examine how Piedmontese farmers, consumers and political actors who are involved in alternative food networks (AFNs) uphold livelihoods and practices inspired by moral values in the current climate of austerity. My working hypothesis is that AFNs represent an attempt to regulate the food economy of late-industrial societies in response to the challenges of rising inequality and environmental degradation. These initiatives try to re-embed economic action in society and nature by fostering what their proponents see as less harmful markets, broadly based on values of mutualism and ecological care. The project will therefore investigate how AFNs have been reshaped in Italy as a result of the 2008 crisis. For some people, austerity may represent an encouragement to pursue the moral renewal of economic action. For others, it may harden the socio-cultural, political, and economic constraints that AFNs usually face and are often overlooked. The project will explore these issues by looking both at the agency and values through which people try to modify food markets, and at the present structural conditions that risk making their efforts partial and contradictory. Italy offers the perfect place to observe the natural experiment of the crisis' impact on AFNs. My principal field site will be the city of Turin and its rural province, an area with rich culinary cultures and food activism, but also with a history of deindustrialisation and recent impoverishment. Through a detailed ethnographic study and the interdisciplinary use of anthropology, sociology and geography, the project will render fully the complex and multifaceted nature of the AFNs phenomenon in this day and age. By analysing this phenomenon, the project will contribute to contemporary debates on the possibility of integrating social justice, ecology and economy, and thus to the challenge of building a more sustainable European society.

KEYWORDS:

Alternative food networks, embeddedness, mutualism, ecological care, austerity, food policy, Piedmont

1(b) Match between the fellow's profile, the project and the host department (max ½ page)

I have considerable experience in conducting funded social science research, based on extensive training in data collection and analysis I received at the University of London. My doctoral fieldwork took place immediately before the crisis (2007) and centred on the study of ethical food movements in Western Sicily, particularly the fair trade and organic ones. It integrated the anthropological and historical literature on moral economy with that on social and ecological sustainability. My current postdoctoral research at the University of Bergamo (in collaboration with Dr. Forno and the CORES lab) looks at worker-recovered factories in Lombardy and their links to food-based solidarity economies, particularly in the context of the 2008 crisis. The research I am proposing for the fellowship draws on the knowledge and expertise I have developed through these two projects, combining them in an innovative and timely way. On the one hand, the research uses the theoretical insights of the moral economy literature to uncover the embeddedness of livelihoods, consumption and markets; on the other, it builds on recent work on grassroots resilience and the renewal of mutualistic solidarity as a response to the crisis.

The project will be part of the growing body of work on AFNs carried out in the Department of Cultures, Politics and Society at the University of Turin. This body can be divided into two main research areas: the social regulation of the food economy, to which my project belongs, and the territoriality of AFNs. The two areas have several points of contact, as shown by the University's

recent project “Alternative Food Networks: an Interdisciplinary Approach”. Prof. Barbera has led work on the social regulation of the food economy (Barbera & Audifredi 2012; Barbera et al. 2014), while Prof. Dansero that on the territoriality of AFNs (Dansero & Puttilli 2013; Dansero et al. 2013). My project links to both literatures, but particularly to the former one, sharing its basic premise that markets are socially constructed institutions embedded in particular cultural, political and historical contexts (please also refer to S&T and Implementation sections below). The project also shares the place-based approach of the territorial school, and the idea that territories are products of the intentional actions of those who inhabit them (Magnaghi 2010; Raffestin & Butler 2012). By focusing on the social and politico-economic impacts of the crisis, the project seeks to go beyond somewhat tamed portrayals of the “local” as a conflict-free zone built by actors’ unproblematic “relations”. Instead, it wants to uncover how the historical tension between market and society (Hann & Hart 2011) is currently being played out in Piedmont through the medium of AFNs, and the contradictions that this inevitably generates both at an individual and a collective level.

FORM B – SCIENTIFIC PROJECT PROPOSAL

Section 2: Scientific Project Proposal

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2(a) S&T Quality

(max 2 pages)

Context: Questions about the social and environmental sustainability of the European food sector have been raised since before the MacSharry reforms of 1992 (Goodman & Redclift 1991). For more than twenty years now, farmers have denounced the price squeeze of global supply chains (Heatherington 2011); consumers have censured the safety scares of untraceable foods; and experts have documented the environmental impacts of industrial agriculture (Sage 2012). These are the elements of a story told all over the world: growing and eating food, as we have known it after World War II, is no longer possible (IAASTD 2009). After the 2008 crisis, the insecurity that most European farmers and consumers have to cope with has increased, creating a further challenge to the sustainability of the EU food sector that urgently needs tackling (Marsden 2013).

In light of these events, food regimes scholars have been discussing how the post-WWII regime of productivism and mass consumption is breaking up, paving the way for a new one of as yet unclear nature (Campbell 2009). In the EU, the breakup of the old regime has been caused by the gradual adoption of a more disembedded model of economy, in which land and labour are increasingly subject to self-regulating markets (Polanyi 2001[1944]). One of the trends of the new food regime, then, is likely to be increased corporate control, or what Ploeg (2008) calls “food empires”. However, the post-WWII regime has also been undermined by its negative effects on people and nature, and by the uncertainty and lack of social legitimacy this has caused. Numerous initiatives have thus developed over time to deal with such effects, including AFNs (community-supported agriculture, farm shops, veg box schemes, new urban allotments, farmer’s markets, purchase groups, new consumer coops; Goodman et al. 2012). As commodification increases, this counter-movement is likely to be the second major trend in the new food regime (McMichael 2009).

Theoretical issues: AFNs can be interpreted as trying to change the (re)production of value in a rapidly disembedding food economy (Pratt & Luetchford 2014). Food studies have been preoccupied with the question of value lately (Paxson 2012; Weiss 2012), while recent work in the socio-anthropology of economy has highlighted the importance of grassroots actions in the constitution and dissolution of regimes of value (Graeber 2001; Narotzky & Besnier 2014). By actually “doing food” differently (Carolan 2011), AFNs can (re)produce a set of relations that partially “transgress” the politico-economic and cultural boundaries of commodified food (Goodman & Sage 2014). Specifically, these initiatives address three key factors of value creation that have historically led to the disembedding of food markets: the social distance between farmers and consumers, the durability of industrially produced commodities, and the cultural construction of food (Friedmann 1993). By favouring transactions with fewer intermediaries, from face-to-face to spatially extended ones, AFNs try to re-embed food in society (Marsden et al. 2000). By promoting organic/seasonal/regional production, they seek to re-embed food in nature (Kneafsey et al. 2008). By unveiling the negative consequences of the modern world’s obsession with cheapness and convenience, they attempt to change the representation of food (Carolan 2014).

But what are the effects of the current European juncture of neoliberal austerity on AFNs? On the one hand, austerity may open the possibility for the rediscovery of economy as a moral project based on non-instrumental values of mutualism and ecological care. Relations of distance and durability are tied to instrumental values of price, convenience, and technoscientific quality. Markets and retail spaces are the sites in which these values and relations are both generated and put in practice. However, the uncertainty and delegitimation that increasingly characterise the economy for many farmers and consumers makes it harder for instrumental values alone to regulate exchange (Boltanski & Thévenot 2006; Lamine 2005). Here AFNs may find leverage to transform the “food-from-nowhere” economy into a “food-from-somewhere” one (McMichael 2002).

On the other hand, the fall in living standards that has affected most European countries, especially southern ones (OECD 2014), may pose a threat to AFNs both in terms of retrenchment and appeal. From an institutional economics perspective (Harvey et al. 2007), these networks try to regulate the economy not through central redistribution, but through a combination of market exchange and symmetrical reciprocity (Friedmann & McNair 2008). While reciprocity inspires exchange, this still relies on the medium of money and the setting of prices. Because cheaper options are always available in the conventional economy, the boundaries of AFNs are constantly in question. At present, many consumers fear their purchasing power is eroding, which potentially undermines the middle class discourse of consumer citizenship on which most AFNs are based (Johnston & Baumann 2010). Farmers are faced with this changing consumer landscape, and with the rising cost of the factors of production and the pressure from retailers (Brunori et al. 2013). Austerity may also hamper efforts to widen the appeal of AFNs. Such efforts have usually relied on political institutions to lower instrumental costs (through allotments, food policy councils, green public procurement, electronic benefit transfers at farmer’s markets, etc.). But in an age in which public spending is being severely cut back, the chances of solving the problem of elitism through the enlisting of redistribution, alongside reciprocity and exchange, seem more uncertain than ever.

Field site: Italy offers the perfect opportunity to observe the impact of austerity policies and economic recession (ISTAT 2015) on a wealth of AFNs (Tavolo RES 2010). Italian AFNs draw on the rich food cultures of a recent peasant past and their substantive links to rural places and memory (Parrot et al. 2002). Piedmont, for example, is renowned for giving birth to the Slow Food movement (Leitch 2009). This has perhaps obscured the numerous other AFNs present in the region. Preliminary studies have found the most widespread ones to be direct sales, farmer’s markets, and solidarity purchase groups (SPGs) (Dansero & Puttilli 2013). Piedmontese institutions have been active in supporting AFNs (IRES 2010). The region has provided funding for farmer’s markets and SPGs. In Turin, the province has subsidised SPGs for less affluent citizens and taken part in the EU RurUrbAI project, while the municipality has developed an extensive network of allotments. The city, which has a bustling food scene (Black 2012), is also currently establishing a food policy council (Città Metropolitana di Torino 2015). Piedmont, therefore, is an ideal place to carry out research on AFNs, but also to observe the effects of Italy’s prolonged recession (IRES 2014). The region has struggled for years to adapt an economy largely dependent on the automotive industry to the current post-Fordist era. Considerable public investment led to a positive hiatus between 2000 and 2006. Since then, however, there have been signs of renewed decline (Giaccaria et al. 2013). Unemployment and precarity have hit hardest two key demographic groups for AFNs: women and young-adults. Small-business closures and house evictions have reached record levels, contributing to phenomena of social unrest like the “pitchfork revolt” (Revelli 2013). The project will study how these conditions influence the decisions of actors in local AFNs.

Research objectives: Four overarching themes will be explored: mutualism, ecology, marketness (Hinrichs 2000) and politics. These are intended only as initial keywords for data collection.

1) Mutualism: Why do Piedmontese farmers and consumers connect through AFNs *today*? Have these networks become stronger or weaker as a result of the crisis? Has this happened for need, idealism, or opportunism? How have experiences and senses of injustice changed? What sorts of tensions emerge between diversely situated groups of people? How are “just prices” worked out?

2) Ecology: Why do farmers and consumers *currently* grow and eat organic/seasonal/regional foods through AFNs? Have their reasons for doing so become more or less personal? What effect has the increased uncertainty in their lives had on concerns for environmental risks? How is trust produced between the two groups, given often diverging concepts of food quality and “nature”?

3) Marketness: What dilemmas do Piedmontese actors *currently* face in reconciling the instrumental values typical of a market society—like profit, competition, efficiency and convenience—with the non-instrumental ones that define AFNs? How has austerity changed their views about consumer citizenship? Is market-driven social change still an ideal or a problem now?

4) Politics: How have the spending cuts of successive Italian governments since 2011 affected the work done by state institutions with AFNs in Piedmont? What has happened to projects funded in the past? Do new and/or ongoing projects respond to the same priorities as previous ones, or has austerity reconfigured the contours of what is politically acceptable in this civic arena?

Expected results: Current references to “the crisis” can become a theoretical black box, both in scientific and public discourse (Kosmatopoulos 2014). The same is true of buzzwords like “sustainability” (Hornborg 2003). This project will create a detailed study of how the current societal landscape makes sustainable food economies (im)possible, answering the latest calls in the literature to go beyond AFNs (Grasseni 2013).

2(b) Implementation

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Methodology: This project will use in-depth ethnographic methods informed by anthropology and sociology to capture the complexities of the above topics. The term “network” in AFNs reflects a phenomenon that is strongly characterised by fluidity, possibility and constraint. These aspects require a methodology that is able to make sense of the processes and relations taking place between actors. Furthermore, the abstract labels that are often used to describe AFNs (e.g. alternative, solidarity, community, etc.) call for a set of methods that can investigate the substantively specific values underpinning these initiatives in particular places. Research work will be organised around three dimensions: 1) the livelihood practices and shopping routines of Piedmontese farmers and consumers participating in AFNs; 2) their value systems, particularly in relation to regional, national, and international moral and political discourses; 3) the links between grassroots initiatives and state institutions and other bureaucratic instruments. By empirically grounding research in ethnography, this project will uncover the interaction between agency, meaning and structure as an integral part of people’s efforts to build a more sustainable food economy in specific settings.

Primary qualitative data will be integrated with secondary one, including quantitative data, at all levels of analysis, in the knowledge that people’s contexts and wider socio-economic trends cannot be captured through in-depth ethnography alone. Reconstructing past and present socio-economic tendencies will allow comparison with primary perceptions of the different contexts—regional, national and international—situating them better. Critical geography’s understanding of scale will play an important role here. The project views the multiple, often contradictory social forces operating at different scales as contributing to the generation and contestation of those regimes of value in which the actions of farmers and consumers take place. Three main scale frames will be explored: experiential, politico-economic, institutional. The project will document ethnographically the particular dynamics that result from the interaction of these frames on the ground.

Work plan

1. **Months 1-6:** Literature review; preliminary writing for publications; semi-structured qualitative interviews with key informants. These activities will situate the AFNs phenomenon in Piedmont and Turin, and provide an initial map of initiatives from which to draw individual cases for in-depth study. Key informants will be selected from farmers’ associations that promote forms of direct selling (e.g. Coldiretti), state bodies working with AFNs, non-governmental organisations and other relevant groups (e.g. Slow Food), and the local SPGs association (Gastorino).
2. **Months 7-16:** “Snowball” sampling from the initial map (calls for participation will also be sent via mailing lists and social network sites, and left at fair trade shops and NGOs’ headquarters); participant observation of farmers’ and consumers’ households; interviews with institutional actors.

An emphasis on household activities, rather than solely on the opinions of individuals, will be crucial in understanding the nuances of austerity’s impact. Snowballing will be useful in creating rapport with informants (however, care will be taken to diversify the sample as much as possible through purposive means). In the case of farmers, participant observation will take

advantage (if necessary) of the accommodation that is often offered on small multifunctional farms, such as agritourism or WWOOF (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms). These arrangements will allow studying livelihood practices such as food growing and selling, but also other income-generating activities, in addition to conducting semi-structured qualitative interviews. In the case of consumers, the project will rely on household research methods that situate food in real-life, as opposed to reflecting only opinions about it. These will include: observation of food shopping trips (at farmer's markets, shops, supermarkets) and of meal preparation, guided tours of food-related house spaces, consumption inventories, in addition to focus groups and interviews with family members about food more generally.

Looking at households will avoid the risk of focusing exclusively on "alternative" practices, allowing also the inclusion of conventional ones. This will be vital in uncovering the tensions and dilemmas that actors face under austerity, and the possible changes in their engagement with the poles of morality and instrumentality. In the same vein, looking at farmers and consumers simultaneously will allow eliciting differences of perspective regarding the impacts of austerity on AFNs and the perceived role of these initiatives. Interviews and focus groups will be used to understand patterns of continuity and change in the temporal trajectory of initiatives, and their long- and short-term significance. If deemed useful, those no longer involved will be contacted (where possible) and interviews conducted with them, to provide further insights into the dynamics that have taken place since 2008. Local and regional institutional actors that currently support AFNs, or did so in the past, will be interviewed, to understand the significance of state power in this phenomenon. Questions will focus on the issue of spending cuts and the public acceptability of these initiatives under austerity.

3. **Months 17-24:** Data analysis and write-up. A field diary will be kept throughout the period of research to systematically record fieldwork experiences and events. It will be analysed in this phase. Digitally recorded interviews will be transcribed verbatim with the help of a hired research assistant. A coding framework will then be developed between the research questions and the collected data. Textual analysis of any written documents (e.g. promotional materials, grey literature, manifestoes, etc.) will also be performed. Publications initiated in phase 1 will be completed.

Project management: The project will be managed through the creation of a Personal Career Development Plan in conjunction with the Scientific Supervisor. This will be used to coordinate the different phases and tasks of the project, and monitor its progress through short- and long-term goals. In addition to the data collection activities outlined in the work plan, the career plan will also include the preparation of research outputs. Two articles will be initiated during phase 1 and completed in phase 3. One will be submitted to a top anthropological journal (American Ethnologist or American Anthropologist), the other to a sociological one (Sociologia Ruralis or Journal of Rural Studies). These journals have been selected for their history of publications on the proposed topics. The plan will also set goals for dissemination activities, in particular the organisation of two workshops at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association and the European Society for Rural Sociology. I will present drafts of the above articles at these events. Should the scheme's contribution to research costs allow it, in phase 3 I will also organise a conference at the University of Turin on the contemporary significance of AFNs in the European Union.

Risk assessment: This project poses no significant risks to the researcher or the participants.

Relevant research group: The project will build on and complement work on the social regulation of the food economy currently being carried out at the Department of Cultures, Politics and Society by Professor Barbera (e.g. Barbera & Audifredi 2012; Barbera et al. 2014), with whom I have been in contact during the preparation of this proposal. This work looks at economic processes as embedded in institutional contexts, and at quality conventions as coordination mechanisms for markets characterised by uncertainty (Ponte & Gibbon 2005). In the food studies field, convention theory has been applied to AFNs (Goodman 2009), new production initiatives (Murdoch & Miele 1999), the wine market (Ponte 2009), and geographical indications of origin (Barham 2003).

Convention theory focuses on the social construction of qualities and the ambiguous ways in which these are ascribed, stabilised, and/or rearranged (Callon et al. 2002). It reveals how these processes function to diminish uncertainty when this cannot be done through contractual

arrangements, and agreements about non-economic worth are therefore required (Stark 2009). Different orders of worth can be identified, which define “the good, the just and the fair” (Barbera & Audifredi 2012:313) in market transactions, revealing how every economy is partly a moral economy. Two orders are of special relevance to this project: the domestic one, which is established through trust and long-term relationships between actors, and the civic one, which is the result of collective commitments to social and environmental wellbeing.

The project will draw on several of this literature’s insights, while also trying to overcome some of its shortcomings. In particular, it will seek to bypass the conceptual strictures of “quality” by looking at the notion of value. References to quality risk confusing uses of the term made by market actors and the values held by non-market ones. While artisanal cheese and wine may be quality productions, for example, humbler, everyday foods have also quality (value) for the people who take part in AFNs. Furthermore, quality productions have existed for a long time during the era of straightforward cheap food. With the end of this era, it is more meaningful to look at what values currently shape the representation of food than to look at quality as such.

2(c) Impact

(max 1 page)

Career development: Throughout my academic career I have been extremely mobile, in the belief that being exposed to different disciplinary contexts is crucial to the development of one’s research potential. After graduating in Classics with a specialisation in Ethnology in Italy, I moved to the UK to pursue my interests in anthropological sciences. In London I studied first environmental anthropology at UCL, then economic anthropology at Goldsmiths. After obtaining my PhD, I worked at the University of Palermo in the Department of History, Anthropology and Geography, and more recently at the University of Bergamo, in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences. I am therefore applying to the Train2Move scheme out of this strong conviction in the role of mobility for excellent science.

Conducting the proposed project will enable me to strengthen and develop further my expertise in the interdisciplinary field of food studies. The two publications I have planned will elevate the profile of my curriculum substantially, considering the prestige of the journals targeted. Exposure to the work being carried out by sociologists and geographers in the Department of Cultures, Politics and Society will broaden my knowledge base and intellectual horizons. It will also considerably increase my employability across a variety of social science disciplines. Finally, the management of a project funded through the celebrated Marie Skłodowska Curie programme will enhance not only my professional maturity, but also my international standing in the academic job market. At the same time, the soft skills training offered by the Train2Move scheme will enhance my transferability to the public and private sectors, should I decide to pursue this route (given my research topics and expertise, this could be an actual possibility).

My current appointment in Bergamo ends on 30/11/2015. The scheme will therefore allow me to secure two further years of employment as a fellow, with a view to obtaining a more permanent post in 2018. After being forced to take a career break for family reasons immediately after I received my doctorate—a crucial stage in one’s career—I see the Train2Move fellowship as an opportunity to consolidate my present path. The research project, outputs, and dissemination activities I am proposing will all have a considerable impact in developing my career towards the attainment of a longer-term position.

Contribution to European research excellence: This project will enrich the European food studies tradition by understanding one of the key challenges that humanity faces in the 21st century: how to achieve a more sustainable food economy. The Universal Exposition currently taking place in Milan testifies the global relevance of this challenge. In Europe, the Commission has made sustainable economic growth one of the three top priorities of the *2020 Strategy* (CEC 2010), while the Barca report (2009) has set out a place-based approach as key to achieving the Union’s development goals. My project firmly fits into both frameworks, stemming from the belief that EU-funded research should seek to gain a greater understanding of the changes and the societal challenges affecting the Union. The project will study the links between the impacts of austerity, and mutualism and ecological care, both as intellectual notions and in their concrete expressions. In doing so, it will gauge the conditions for individual and collective acts that follow

these values in the food economy, and explore to what extent the crisis has changed people's willingness to live them out in their daily lives.

By looking at the AFNs phenomenon, the project aims to develop cutting-edge, interdisciplinary knowledge on the strategies and governance structures that can help Europe address its sources of crisis and uncertainty, as argued for example in the EURO call of the 2014-2015 Work Programme for Societal Challenge 6 of the Horizon 2020 Programme (CEC 2014). Furthermore, the project will contribute to research on the development of innovative social initiatives and policies that are based on the engagement of citizens, civil society organisations, enterprises and institutional actors. This goal is of particular relevance to the sustainability problem. As Leach argues in the Worldwatch Institute's *State of the World Report 2013*: "The challenge is ... to open up understanding and action around sustainability to reveal and empower alternative pathways that might currently be hidden, including those that emerge from the experiences, knowledge, and creativity of ... citizens ... in particular places" (2013:236). My project takes up this challenge by pursuing an understanding of AFNs' sustainable possibilities in an age of austerity. It is an ambitious and timely piece of research, and I am the right person to lead it.

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