



Cooperatives and alternative food networks in Italy. The long road towards a social economy in agriculture



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ABSTRACT

In the context of a special issue of the Journal of Rural Studies on more-than-economic motivations for farmers' cooperation, this article aims to analyse the tensions and contending views of the cooperative movement in Italy with special attention to the agricultural sector and to the emergence of the new model of social cooperatives in the last decades of the 20th century. We interpret this emergence and its codification in law as the decoupling of more-than-economic motivations of cooperation from the mainstream Italian cooperative sector and their reinstatement in a new, but separate model of social cooperation more closely linked to community- and solidarity-oriented initiatives.

The presence of institutional tensions and frictions hints at the fact that cooperatives have a multi-faceted nature expressed in the not always easy co-existence of a cooperative economy and a cooperative movement. After the II World War, as Italian cooperatives in general and particularly agricultural cooperatives moved towards a productivist model and a 'competitive market' paradigm, the more-than-economic aspects have continued to inspire movements for social and community economies. In the 1990s the social economy project was appropriated but somehow 'sanitized' by the cooperative movement through the legally sanctioned establishment of social cooperatives and their confinement to specific sections within national cooperative federations. Later on, while the emergence of social cooperatives and federations, the reinstatement of a social function for agriculture has taken place at the much more fluid interface between social cooperation, on the one hand, and civic agriculture movements rooted in alternative food networks and community-oriented initiatives, on the other. It is only recently that the cooperative movement has tried catch up with the new paradigms of alternative agriculture and rural development through the experimentation at regional level of the cooperative di comunità (community cooperatives), that operate to re-affirm the role of multifunctional and multi-stakeholder cooperatives in rural/territorial development.

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1. Introduction

In a workshop in Berlin on 'open co-operativism'¹ John Restakis, the former executive director of the BC Co-operative Association in Vancouver, argued that in many countries the cooperative movement is at a crossroads. The lack of a powerful common vision holds

the movement in check and provokes a polarisation between smaller social solidarity cooperatives and the large, well-established ones. While big cooperatives are themselves threatened by a process of growing demutualisation, innovative multi-stakeholder cooperatives are expanding in many countries (Bollier and Conaty, 2014: 6). This prompts the question of whether there is a possibility of re-creating a political and social context for a flourishing new cooperative economy, which may liberate new synergies and offer new integrative solutions to the current environmental, social and economic crisis.

Throughout the long history of the cooperative movement, two main contending views have emerged on the aims, strategies and objectives of cooperatives. One sees them as self-help groups that

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¹ Promoted by P2P Foundation, 'open cooperativism' refers to a new model of cooperativism that aims to combine the commons-oriented open peer production model with the common ownership and governance model of the traditional cooperative movement (Bauwens and Kostakis, 2014).

should be primarily concerned with their members' interests and, by doing so, contribute to the overall social and economic welfare of the communities in which they operate. The second considers cooperatives as a radically alternative economic project with explicit societal and community-level objectives and implications, part of the economic diversity that attempts to re-politicise the economy and overturn a capital-centric discourse associated with the resurgence of neo-liberalism (Gibson-Graham, 2003). The presence of contending views and interpretations of whose interests cooperatives should ultimately serve and which aims they should pursue underlies institutional frictions over material and ideal interests (Mooney, 2004).

In the case of agricultural cooperatives, such tensions have been seen to operate across class lines between different groups of members involved in anti-mafia fight in Sicily (Rakopoulos, 2014a; 2014b), as well as at the level of farmers' subjectification in the UK, where the ideals of farmers' independence and individualism coexist uneasily with community-oriented values (Emery, 2015; Stock et al., 2014). Tensions and conflicts can intensify and take on new dimensions when cooperatives depart from a sectoral approach to open themselves up to heterogeneous multi-stakeholder collaborations as part of their diversification strategies or in the pursuit of wider territorial, societal or environmental aims. Tensions between different groups of producer members, as well as between producers and non-producers, can in this case emerge from the lack of shared fundamental values or from the greater organizational complexity entailed in multi-stakeholder collaborations (Jaklin et al., 2015; Fazzi, 2011; Franks and Mc Gloin, 2007; Ortiz-Miranda et al., 2010). Cooperative know-how, intended as a value-based mind-set constituting a specific form of social capital distinct from inter-personal skills and harmonious community relationships, seems however able to mitigate the negative effects of such tensions (Tregear and Cooper, 2016). Research on Dutch Environmental Cooperatives (EC), local organisations of farmers and non-farmers working in close collaboration with each other and with government agencies to integrate nature management into farming practices in a regional perspective, has similarly shown that farmers and non-farmers, although not always sharing common goals, can effectively exploit the potential of their cooperation to muster institutional support for joint environmental projects (Franks and Mc Gloin, 2007).

In the context of the special issue of the *Journal of Rural Studies* on more-than-economic motivations for farmers' cooperation, this article aims to analyse the tensions and contending views of the cooperative movement in Italy, with a focus on the agricultural sector, from its foundation in the 19th century to the emergence of the new model of social cooperatives in the last decades of the 20th century. We interpret the emergence of the social cooperative model and its codification in law as the decoupling of more-than-economic motivations from the mainstream Italian cooperative economy, leading to their reinstatement in a new, but separate cooperation model that today has a closer linkage with community- and solidarity-oriented initiatives. We then examine the interaction, cross-fertilization and institutional recombination of the legacy of the traditional Italian cooperative sector with the practices of the new social movements that emerged both in the Fordist and post-Fordist era and express an alternative vision of the economy.

Since the 1960s, social movements in Italy as well as all over Europe and in other countries, have brought to the fore not only themes of workers' rights, but also social justice, equality of opportunity for the two sexes and respect for the environment. The rights of disadvantaged people have also been at the centre of a mobilization that strongly impacted from below on the organization of the Italian cooperative movement in the 1970s and 1980s. Later, in the 1990s, food movements labelled as 'alternative' have

started to contest the conventional capitalist food system, which is regarded as environmentally unsustainable, socially unjust and economically over-centralized to the detriment of family farms and other small farms. An alternative system of food provision has been prefigured in initiatives that aim to reconcile production with nature and reconnect farmers to consumers. Such new born bottom-up initiatives, often labelled in the literature Alternative Food Networks (AFNs), are proposed and conceived of as niches of social innovation able to enhance food quality, re-embed food systems in regional and local food culture, shorten the supply chain while strengthening food democracy and sustainability (Feenstra, 1997; Renting et al., 2003; Hinrichs, 2000; Fonte, 2008, 2013b). AFNs are also called civic food networks when attention is drawn to the involvement of non-traditional, civic actors (i.e. civil society actors, as different from the State and private enterprises) in the definition of the desirable characteristics of the food system (Renting et al., 2012). In Italy AFNs² have taken various, more or less institutionalized forms, including organic agriculture, Farmers' Markets, Slow Food and Solidarity Purchasing Groups (Fonte and Cucco, 2015).

The historical analysis presented in this paper offers a dynamic political economy reading of the dialectic between Italian cooperative organizations and social movements in different periods, noting how changes in the historical context influence the strength and direction of the various objectives and goals of the cooperative movement, in this way altering the balance between economic and more-than-economic motivations. The presence of institutional tensions and frictions hints at the fact that cooperation has a multi-faceted nature manifested in the not always easy co-existence of an economic enterprise and a social movement on one side, and in its dialectical relation with the State on the other. The tendency of cooperative enterprises and of their representative bodies to behave and operate like global corporations fully imbued with the logic of the market is, in different historical contingencies, in open contradiction with the instances and visions coming from the mobilization of a cooperative social movement reclaiming coherence with the original values of solidarity and justice. At the same time, the relation of cooperative organizations with the State alternates between oppositional and symbiotic strategies (Wright, 2010), whose respective aim is to highlight social instances and to consolidate the economic position of cooperatives themselves.

Our analysis indicates that, whereas in the 1990s the tension between social motivations and economic activities led to a process of re-composition and re-organization inside the cooperative movement itself, in the twenty-first century the innovative push towards a social food economy seems to be operating in a centrifugal direction, finding expression in a network of initiatives that are very heterogeneous in their organizational forms and often lie outside the traditional perimeter of cooperative associations and federations. Today cooperative organizations in the Italian agricultural sector seem to be driven by economic strategies of consolidation and competition in the national and global markets. A firmer adherence to the themes of social and environmental sustainability brought ahead by the new food movements could instead favour a new upsurge of the cooperative movement and the strengthening of its ideological basis and social motivations. At the same time, new social movements could learn from the long-standing history of the cooperative movement how to combine interstitial and symbiotic strategies to more effectively engage different levels of the State in the pursuing of their objectives. While not devoid of obstacles, this process of alliances and convergences between the cooperative movement and new food

² For the sake of simplicity, in this paper we will use Alternative Food Networks and Civic Food Networks as synonyms.

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