



Food consumption as social practice: Solidarity Purchasing Groups in Rome, Italy[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Sustainable consumption
Practice of food consumption
Local food
Alternative food networks
Solidarity Purchasing Groups
Rome (Italy)

In Italy the *Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale* (GAS) are groups of households that cooperate in purchasing food and other goods directly from producers on the basis of ethical and environmental criteria and considerations of solidarity. They present themselves as a movement with a shared critique of the dominant model of consumption, a movement whose aim is to build a more sustainable economy by changing the way they buy their food and other goods. These specificities make GAS an ideal case study for analysis of how a new practice of enhanced sustainable food consumption can emerge and develop.

In this paper we examine the discourses and practices of GAS operating in Rome (Italy). We look specifically at the social and demographic characteristics of GAS members, the way their belief in sustainability and the motivation to support it can change food buying habits and how personal and collective motivations interconnect with normative, social and material factors in the generation and reproduction of a new practice.

Transcending dichotomous perspectives of sustainable consumption as a matter of changing individual behaviour patterns or as something that is constrained by material and normative considerations, we employ concepts derived from theories of practice and sustainable consumption to analyse the social construction of a new food buying routine, allowing the interconnections between agency, cultural and social norms and material/functional structures to emerge in a continuous dialectical process of routinisation and reflexivity.

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1. Introduction: sustainable consumption and alternative food practices

The global food system is represented today as being in profound crisis. The crisis arises both from the limits of the system itself – negative externalities contributing to a deep ecological crisis; the incapacity to ensure that all people on the planet enjoy the right to food – and from the recent evolution of the 'landscape' (Geels and Schot, 2007), i.e. variables and factors exogenous to the food system, such as the global energy crisis, climate change and the finite character of resources. Transforming the food system into a sustainable model is a great challenge that calls for a radical overhaul of the socio-technical regime (Spaargaren et al., 2012).

[☆] The research on which this paper is based is funded by the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) PRIN-2008 project, protocol n. 2008LY7BJ_004, with the title: Local agriculture and sustainable consumption in alternative food networks.

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In the transition to an enhanced sustainable food regime, many authors highlight the importance of consumption (Goodman, 2003; Goodman et al., 2012; Lockie and Kitto, 2000; Holloway and Kneafsey, 2004; Maye et al., 2007; Fonte, 2008, 2010; Schermer et al., 2011). Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) go beyond the concept of a 'consumption society' and posit a capitalism that is entering an age of 'prosumption', where production and consumption are reciprocally constituted (also see Schermer et al., 2011).

The literature on alternative food networks (AFNs) raises questions as to whether individual consumer behaviour may be at the heart of the transition towards more sustainable food systems and whether AFNs might be regarded as the expression of a prefigurative politics aimed at constructing a more democratic and just food consumption model (Hinrichs, 2000, 2003; Allen et al., 2003; Ilbery and Maye, 2005; Kirwan, 2004; Allen and Guthman, 2006; Kloppenborg and Hassanein, 2006; Holloway et al., 2007; Goodman et al., 2012). For the critics of AFNs, critical consumption is yet another by-product of the dominant neoliberal political regime, which seeks to devolve to motivated citizens the responsibilities for changing the economy and society through market behaviour. Such critics also see AFNs as defensive communities,

intrinsically non-egalitarian and discouraging different points of view and participatory deliberation (Goodman et al., 2012).

A good starting point for resolving this disagreement is perhaps the work of Seyfang (2006, 2009) on sustainable consumption. She identifies a multitude of factors that make sustainable consumption the driving force for a new, humanist economy, one of them – and not the least important – being collective action. The transition to sustainable consumption requires not only changes in market behaviour and social norms but also the construction of a collective agency and a new provisioning infrastructure. Accordingly, in order to analyse sustainable consumption, Seyfang (2009) elaborates a theoretical framework based on five dimensions: localisation, reducing the ecological footprint, community building, collective action and building new infrastructures of provisioning.¹

Thanks to its multi-dimensionality, the Seyfang framework avoids falling into ‘the local trap’ (Born and Purcell, 2006) and may be used as a guide for exploring new practices of food consumption, where reducing the ecological footprint and strengthening local economies are just some of the elements in a more complex process of changing market structure and infrastructure, re-embedding food in social relations (Hinrichs, 2000) and re-building places and local communities (DeLind, 2011).

While I agree with Seyfang’s theorisation of sustainable consumption, I find that the ‘five dimensions’ pertain to different frameworks of reference: some express values, beliefs and motivations (self-reliant local economies, respecting the environment and reducing the inequity of current consumption patterns, building inclusive communities); others have to do with the construction of social agency (acting collectively), and building new material infrastructures of food provision. Adopting the ‘vocabularies’ (Reckwitz, 2002) of practice theory, we can read Seyfang’s five dimensions as the elements of a new practice of food consumption. The transition to an enhanced sustainable food system on the grounds of environmental and social justice may then be seen as a challenge to the dominant routinised food practices and the foreshadowing of a new practice, based on new norms and understandings, a new material infrastructure and a new agency (Halkier, 2010; Warde, 2005).

The notion of practice represents action as an ongoing embodied and situated social process. In the words of Reckwitz (2002, p. 249):

A ‘practice’ (Praktik) is a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge.

Practice is defined as a routinised behaviour and a nexus of inter-related elements, practical activities and their representations (doings and sayings), linked in terms of 1) understandings of what to say and to do, 2) rules, principles, precepts and instructions and 3) a ‘teleoffective’ structure embracing ends, projects, tasks, beliefs,

emotions and moods (Schatzki, 1996, p. 89 in Warde, 2005: 134). Schatzki (1996) differentiates between ‘dispersed’ practices, which cover only one type of action – such as describing, following rules, explaining, imagining – and ‘integrative’ practices, of which they usually form a part. Integrative practices are sets of different activities grounded in some particular domain of social life – such as cooking practices, teaching practices, transportation practices, etc. (Schatzki, 1996, p. 98). Within this perspective food consumption may be perceived as a situated integrative practice, in which social agency is both enabled to act in accordance with subjective ends and also institutionally conditioned by the configuration of the economic and social structures.

Consumption, and in particular the consumption of food, has recently become a field for application of practice theory (Halkier, 2009, 2010; Bauler et al., 2011; Domaneschi, 2012). All the previously mentioned authors show how the application of practice theory makes it possible for analysis of food consumption (and AFNs) to overcome the dichotomy between a subjectivist and a structuralist representation.

Domaneschi (2012) utilises the perspective of social practice theory to investigate the process of food ‘qualification’ in commercial cooking in Italy. Bauler et al. (2011) have been comparing the conventional ‘regime’ and *food-team* consumption practices in Belgium through an original application of a three-tier framework, involving agency (the attitudes, values and motivational agreements behind food purchases and the way it is organised to ensure reproduction of the practice), material–functional structure (the actions, changes of physical activities, things, technologies) and socio-cultural/immaterial structure (understandings of things and their use, of what to say and do, norms, beliefs, social roles, cultural customs).² One important element in the study is its analysis of how participation in the *food-team* can change ‘normal’ understandings of such concepts as ‘convenience’ in the buying routine and how a perspective of consumer activities as an integrated consumption practice can suggest new forms of intervention to policy makers.

Using Warde’s (2005) translation of practice theory into sociology of consumption, Halkier (2009, 2010) discusses different cases where consumption may be seen as an aspect of other practices and cases where environmentalised food consumption may be analysed as practice in itself.

From an operational point of view, both Halkier (2009, 2010) and Bauler et al. (2011) regard food consumption as a complex practice that may usefully be separated into different sub-routines. Bauler et al. distinguish between three of them 1) ordering and selecting food products; 2) organisation of the delivery and purchase; 3) cooking and eating routines within the household.

Despite its focus on routines, the practice-theoretical perspective may have its uses in understanding change. While many studies have been designed to illustrate how specific practices are organised, questions about the emergence, transformation, stabilisation and decline of practices in different cultural contexts have also been investigated³ (Warde, 2005; Shove et al., 2012). In this

¹ Localisation is seen as a way of progressing towards more self-reliant local economies (i.e. reducing the length of supply chains; buying local; establishing local economies, increasing the local economic multiplier). Reducing ecological footprints means shifting consumption to reduce its social and environmental impact; cutting resource use; reducing demand and adopting voluntary simplicity; choosing less carbon-intensive goods and services. Community building is exemplified by the growing networks of support and social capital; building solidarity with other members of the group; encouraging participation and sharing of experiences and ideas; valuing the free exchange of work and skills as a means of fostering inclusive communities. Collective action is the factor that enables people to make effective decisions about their lives and communities, changing the wider social context and institutionalising new norms. Finally, building new infrastructures of provision is necessary for establishment of new forms of exchange between people and communities, on the basis of new values of wealth, work, progress, and ecological citizenship.

² The elements of the three-tier framework identified by Bauler et al. (2011) are very similar to the three elements of a practice as identified by Shove et al. (2012): materials, competences and meaning.

³ Warde (2005) points to some critical dimensions for analysing the persistence and change in practices: differences in the ways individuals and groups engage in the same practice; recruitment and defection of practitioners; processes of diversification and multiplication of practices which may undermine or modify established practices; socioeconomic and demographic composition of participants which may have consequences for the trajectory of the practice. Shove et al. (2012) point to the breaking and recomposing of links among the elements of a practice, the arrival of new elements or the demise of the old ones, the overturn of established ways of thinking and working, or paradigm shifts.

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