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Trade-off or convergence? The role of food security in the evolution of food discourse in Italy

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A B S T R A C T

In this paper we analyse the role that 'food security' has played in the evolution of the food discourse in Italy, a country with a strong and internationally recognized food culture. We identify three phases of this evolution: in the first phase, from the end of the Second World War to the end of the 1980s, the 'modernization' frame, with its emphasis on productivity and the industrial organization of production, dominates in a context populated mainly by agricultural actors. A second phase, characterised by the 'turn to quality', encourages the development of a 'Made in Italy food consensus'. In this phase, food security mainly concerns food safety and conservation of national food identity. The third phase is characterised by a response to the pressures generated by the 2006–2008 food crisis and the subsequent recession. In this phase food security becomes a key element of a new consensus frame, which links together pieces of discourse that often existed in separate fields of activity and policy. The analysis is carried out within a conceptual framework that focuses attention on the co-evolution between discourse and discursive coalitions in a progressive overlapping between 'public sphere' and 'market sphere'.

1. Introduction

"*For many Italians, their very sense of identity lies in the food, not just of the region in which they were born, but of the town, village, hamlet, even house. And they hold to the superiority of their local produce and dishes with passion. That is why eating your way round Italy is such a continual delight.*" (Fort, 2010).

Italians are recognized internationally as having a sophisticated culture of food. To Italians food security means much more than mere availability and affordability, as food is one of the principal ways for Italians to reassert their identity. This peculiarity has an important influence on the characteristics of the food industry. As Porter (1990) observed, sophisticated and demanding consumers can be a factor of competitiveness for a nation. In fact, food is one of the key competitive assets for the Italian economy, with 'Made in Italy' food being a high value global brand.

Given these characteristics, the Italian food system is particularly vulnerable. Problems relating to health, safety and taste create emotional reactions among consumers and consequently have the potential to destabilize the markets. Furthermore, a domestic crisis of trust can have repercussions on export markets. Building trust in the system is therefore a strategic priority for the Italian agri-food system. The way key Italian actors in the industry have decided to build up this trust is somewhat different from other countries. While important components of the European food industry advocate communication to build trust in technology (ETP Food For Life, 2007), in Italy "*constant reminders of the deep cultural value of Italian gastronomy and of regional peasant traditions as well as the regulation of the production of excellence is crucial to the way Italian consumers*, producers and regulators have responded … to issues of food policies in the ages of food scares and globalization" (Sassatelli and Scott, 2001, p. 224). Italian food culture has provided valuable rhetorical resources both for developing marketing strategies and for increasing trust in the system.

What does food security mean in this context? What contradictions does the concept of food security carry in an export-oriented national industry? What are the relations between food security and external competitiveness?

In this paper we will mainly concentrate on 'domestic' food security rather than on 'global food security'. We argue that in Italy food security cannot be separated from the broader discourse on quality. In other words, food security policies cannot avoid taking into consideration consumers' expectations and concerns about how food is produced and processed, where it comes from, and its impact on the environment and on society. Along with the recent history of the Italian food system, both 'quality' and 'food security' meanings have evolved, and a progressive integration of food security into

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a comprehensive concept of food quality has been built, through discursive coalitions that have reconciled positions initially very different from each other.

To develop this thesis we will proceed as follows: Section 2 will illustrate our conceptual framework. It is argued that the evolution of the food system and the power distribution within it are largely related to cognitive processes and linguistic games, which are played between the market sphere and the public sphere and are at the basis of the construction of discursive coalitions. Section 3 will illustrate how the framework has been applied to analyse the food security discourse in Italy. Sections 4–6 will illustrate respectively the three phases we have identified to illustrate the evolution of the Italian food security discourse. Section 6 will discuss the findings and draw some conclusions.

2. Food security and the turn to quality: a theoretical framework

Behind our theoretical framework lies the notion that, with the 'turn to quality' that characterised the food system in the late 1970s (Goodman, 2003; Busch and Bain, 2004), cognitive aspects – the link between how food is known and thought and how food is produced, consumed and distributed (Goodman and DuPuis, 2002) – have become crucial in the analysis of the food system. This has opened a new research agenda: How do people change their general attitude to food? Who is involved in these processes? What strategies and tools are used to influence consumer thinking?

Broadly speaking, quality refers to the capacity of a product to meet consumer expectations. The Fordist regime, having ensured the availability and affordability of food in the West after a period of profound insecurity, managed to keep consumer expectations clear and limited in scope. In the transition from Fordism to the new regime, a 'competition on quantity' has been countered by a 'competition on quality'. With the evolution of consumers' expectations, the meaning of quality has extended its scope and has become a contested field (Morris and Young, 2000). Not only have the intrinsic and functional differences of food become objects of competition (taste, nutrition, health, status), but also the characteristics external to individual utility, such as public health, environmental issues, ethics, and social justice have been increasingly involved in defining the quality of food. When food scares, outbreaks of disease or controversial new technologies populate the public debate, concerns are translated into modified consumer attitudes and identities.

As a consequence, competition regarding quality involves a higher degree of communication complexity: it focuses more on images and symbols than on technology and organization. Each competitor plays a hegemonic game to attach consumers to his networks (and related frames) and to detach them from competitors (Callon et al., 2002). Commercial communication is increasingly fed with non-commercial issues, values and images. At the same time, to keep in tune with consumers' worldviews and concerns, corporations increasingly participate in the public sphere.

Movements become a key player in the new competitive model (Friedmann, 2005). Aware of the growing link between consumption and identities, food movements address issues that are at the core of societal – and consequently, of media – concerns, including health, environment, quality of life (Goodman, 1999) as well as social justice, thus creating normative pressure on the regime (Elzen et al., 2010). One of the particular features of food movements is that they have extended their activity to the market place, identifying in consumer citizenship the transformative potential that turns consumption behaviour into political action (Goodman and DuPuis, 2002). They thus blur the distinction between public sphere and private sphere (Tormey, 2007). This produces a change both in the markets and in policies. Alternative food networks (Renting et al., 2003; Goodman and Goodman, 2008; Goodman et al., 2011) capitalize on consumer needs for consistency between motivation and behaviour by experimenting with innovative production, distribution and consumption practices that provide concrete alternatives while at the same time questioning the legitimacy of the dominant system.

One of the effects of the turn to quality is that most corporations have progressively dismissed a confrontational communication strategy – such as the one used by McDonald's in the famous McLibel[1] case, which resulted in a bad image for the multinational – and have started to interact with civil society, thus giving rise to hybrid forums (Callon et al., 2002), ethical food standards (with reference to labour conditions, environmental impacts, fair trade and animal welfare) (Fulponi, 2006; Busch and Bain, 2004), and corporate social responsibility strategies (Jenkins, 2005; Maloni and Brown, 2006). Friedberg (2004) contends that the UK's top retailers' need to keep a high brand profile has given non-profit advocacy groups power over them, thus creating what she calls an ethical food complex.

In the study of these processes, a number of scholars have stressed the importance of framing processes (Friedmann, 2005; Mooney and Hunt, 2009; Bagdonis et al., 2009; Wilkinson, 2011). Frames are mental structures that help people to make sense of the external world. They operate by giving people rules to filter information and by creating hierarchies of relevance. As frames select information, they also operate as mechanisms of social inclusion and exclusion (Wilkinson, 2011).

Frames develop through communication practices. As individuals belong to multiple spheres of interaction, there is a reciprocal influence between collective frames – shared within a specific sphere of interaction – and individual frames. Market and public spheres are of particular relevance in this context. The market sphere is the space where individuals make judgements regarding commodities. According to Calıskan and Callon (2009), economic institutions recommended by neoclassical economists are designed to help individuals to facilitate their behaviour as rational maximizers. In other words, they frame consumers by shaping their identity and behaviour, isolating the market sphere from other spheres of interaction.

The public sphere, according to Fraser (1990, p. 57; see also Calhoun, 1992), is "*the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, hence, an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction*" (Fraser, 1990, p. 57). In the original concept of Habermas (Habermas et al., 1989), the public sphere encouraged people to freely discuss the common good. But its role has changed with the emergence of the mass media, which has become the instrument of control and the manipulator of public opinion. However, domination generates resistance. Consequently, the public sphere can also be seen as a battlefield where hegemonic struggles occur. It is thus possible that 'subaltern counterpublics' (Fraser, 1990) emerge, which are alternative frames to the dominant master frames. Fraser gives the example of the late-twentieth century U.S. feminist movement "*…with its variegated array of journals, bookstores, publishing companies, film and video distribution networks, lecture series, research centres, academic programs, conferences, conventions, festivals, and local meeting places*" (Fraser, 1990, p. 67).

[1] "*McDonald's Corporation v Steel & Morris [1997] EWHC QB 366, known as "the McLibel case" was an English lawsuit filed by McDonald's Corporation against environmental activists Helen Steel and David Morris (often referred to as "The McLibel Two") over a pamphlet critical of the company. The original case lasted ten years, making it the longest-running libel case in English history*" (from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/McLibel_Case#cite_note-0).