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Ambivalent solidarities

Food governance reconfigurations in Croatia and Italy

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Across rural and urban settings, farmers and food activists are confronting the fiscally disabled governments of Italy and Croatia in moral terms (cf. Forno 2015; Horvat & Štiks 2015). Young Istrian winemakers in Croatia and urban food activists and rural smallholders in northern Italy, address the meaning and practice of 'solidarity' in these different but cognate contexts, where rampant neo-liberal governance transcends the post-socialist divide. Two juxtaposed ethnographic vignettes unravel the unintended consequences for food governance and networks of mutual support, respectively. Both groups engage in unique forms of 'solidarity' (Simonic 2019), and our cross-cultural comparison demonstrates how such 'solidarity' may lead to similar forms of inward-turning towards self-reliance.

Our ethnographic examples demonstrate how consumers and producers engage in solidarity networks to provide for the needs they feel their governments fail to adequately address. Production favours are relied upon by Istrian winemakers to support each other during economic crisis and in an institutional environment that favours some businesses over others in the allocation of subsidies and other financial support regimes. In the case of Italian 'GAS' (*Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale*, or Solidarity Purchase Groups), activists propose to form a 'solidarity economy network' with trusted producers, in order to protect smallholders from the high costs and the perceived arbitrariness of audit-based organic certification. Together, we analyze how an increased reliance among grass-roots socio-economic actors fuels a disengagement from participation in agri-food market governance institutions and regulatory regimes altogether. We do so by focusing on the politics of advice in 'co-production' relationships between solidarity economy activists and smallholders in Italy and on the intensified use of mutual support networks in production between Istrian winemakers as necessitated by political and economic pressures.

Solidarity may be understood not only as a crisis-induced collective practice to overcome hardship, but as a conscious strategy to contest mainstream economic and political institutions. For example, Ethan Miller of the Community Economies Collective (inspired by feminist geographers Gibson-Graham 2006) defines the solidarity economy as a virtuous circle of goods and services that are produced and exchanged outside 'capitalocentric' logics and which foster instead, 'commoning' and cooperation (Miller 2009). In recent anthropological scholarship, the political ambivalence of self- and mutual help has been exposed as lying at the heart of neo-liberalism (Hébert & Mincyte 2014; Mole 2010; Muelebach 2012; Rakopoulos 2018). Our observations about solidarity practices in key urban-rural relations shed light on the ongoing reconfiguration of solidarity and self-reliance. In a time of austerity and neo-liberalization, rural livelihoods are shaped by urban agendas no longer in the name of 'development' and 'improvement', but rather competition and efficiency, alongside solidarity and self-help.

Our vignettes illustrate how in Istria, informal networks of solidarity amongst farmers cross business and social worlds as a result of poorly functioning local governance institutions, highlighting the government's profound lack of interest in or ability to create a business environment that facilitates entrepreneurialism in this new market economy. In the Italian case, food activists endeavour to exercise solidarity with farmers, but risk preaching to the converted or unintentionally favouring institutionalized entrepreneurs such as social cooperatives.

Making ends meet in precarious times

Relying on social networks to facilitate everyday economic life is nothing new in Croatia, having been a daily necessity in Yugoslavia. Today, such practices are motivated by new conditions, while trust in the ability of formal institutions to resolve problems is low (Kornai 2003). Rather

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Fig. 1. *Harvest, Buje, Istria, 2013.*

than characterizing relations between state and society, self-reliance is a form of Istrian solidarity played out at a community level. Regional self-reliance was a feature of Istrian Yugoslavia thanks to Tito's pragmatic approach to minorities across the Yugoslav Federation which gave Istria great autonomy, not to mention the self-management ideology that Istrians now cite as evidence of how they excelled at local economic governance, both as a territory and community. Today, this marked distance between state and society is a function of an entirely different political-economic paradigm: the state's financial capacity to support the business sector's incorporation into European Union (EU) market and policy regimes, and its loyalty to its citizenry, are questioned in everyday conversations about how to make ends meet.

The neo-liberalization of industries would ostensibly devolve regulation to market actors, but here, this has economically and politically strengthened large corporations which have the capacity and connections to adapt to markets and EU policies. Smaller market actors are left without resources, vulnerable to market flux and the predatorial practices of these larger corporations. The result is increasing precarity within the small business sector. Meanwhile, the government's financial inability to support rural entrepreneurs, the bureaucratic complexity of EU programmes and national corruption scandals leave locals with little incentive to engage with formal institutions and increase local ambivalence towards government-related initiatives, however supportive they may claim to be, making local solidarity more valuable. However, disengaging from participating in governance institutions like farmers' associations restricts Istrian farmers from accessing government subsidies or support for collective projects that advance farmers' interests.

Since Smith's first visit in 2005 and through doctoral fieldwork from 2012-2014, it has become increasingly apparent that the professionalization of winemaking has rapidly raised the production costs for small-scale family wineries, from agricultural land to cellar technologies. The cost of entry for young people continuing the Istrian winemaking tradition is high. Meanwhile, their competitors – wineries established in the 1990s which have been able to incrementally invest in new technologies and vineyards for the past two decades – have the professional capacity, knowledge and networks to apply for government and EU subsidies to further reinforce their leading market position. The young, so-called second-generation winemakers are thus paradoxically more eager to engage in association-like institutions that echo socialist-era farmers' organizations than their older compatriots who remember Yugoslav self-management (and early collective farming efforts) in practice. These younger winemakers demonstrate how they may resourcefully engage with social networks to provide for daily needs that the state is simply unable or unwilling to address, e.g. through subsidies targeting young entrepreneurs in farming, or rehabilitating inefficient or defective institutions. The rising debt amongst farmers compounds such an inward focus, as they intensify helping relationships to become self-reliant.

This vignette unpacks how a group of young Istrian winemakers reacts to systemic institutional problems through coordinating production in a way that mimics past forms of farmers' organization, but is reflective of contemporary governance shortcomings. Farmers' associations were established by Croatian municipalities to bureaucratically connect state and society so as to distribute and keep track of government funding for agricultural development initiatives and subsidies for seedlings and replanting. However, poor oversight led to the misallocation of funds to non-farmers, who acquired farmland and quickly rezoned it for lucrative real estate projects. As association directors were volunteers rather than government employees, enforcing payment by such debtor 'members' was impossible. This left municipality associations with blocked accounts and large debts to the state, stymying farmers' efforts to grow into effective professional groups with autonomous initiatives.

In one such case in Istria, rather than pursuing legal action, a group of five second-generation winemakers, who had become friends through their municipality's association, left the association altogether. They disengaged, like other farmers in the area, in favour of devolving wine production and promotion to their self-organized group. Reluctant to risk formally establishing an association, despite its financial benefits, Ivan, Marko, Milo, Victor and Gino began informally coordinating some aspects of vineyard cultivation and winemaking. The costs of equipment for the wine quality they each need to produce to be locally competitive are prohibitively high. Thus, they collectively use Ivan's expensive grape press, coordinate the harvesting of one another's vineyards, and use one another's tractors and combined family labour. They rotate harvesting on their vineyards and process grapes in batches. The pressed juice is pumped into cooling tanks in Ivan's cellar and later into 1,000-litre plastic box tanks in Marko's van for delivery to their respective cellars. They work day and night during harvest time, coordinating with one another so that grapes are not left in the sun. This way, everyone benefits from high-quality juice extracted without having to each invest over €15,000 for their own presses.

In spring, Marko drives Gino's small bottle-filling unit and Ivan's corking machine between their cellars for quick bottling in small quantities, again avoiding each person having to buy seasonal equipment. They share costly tractor mounts, and sometimes plough one another's adjacent fields to save time. Milo has a degree in agronomy and advises on pesticide use; Victor has one in oenology, so advises on cellar practices and Ivan one in mechanical engineering, so he fixes broken tractors and other machinery.

All are under 30 years old and have never experienced production in a socialist collective, or *zadruga*, only hearing stories from family members about how such institutions took root in early post-war Yugoslavia. Marko, reflecting on the group's value, explained in his cellar that '*zadruga* is a word that gets in your blood and under your skin. To me, it means "*društvena zajednica*", or "*za zajednicu*" – like "*za prijatelje*"'. In other words, Marko took this noun and broke it up into the two words *za* (for) and *drug* (a less common word for friend) to make new, but related meanings of, respectively, 'social community', 'for the community', or 'for friends'. Indeed, early Yugoslav *zadruga* failed and were abandoned in favour of reforms that led to limited (by law, but in practice extensive) private farming and the self-management industrial organization ideology that ultimately characterized the rest of the Yugoslav era.

Marko's interpretation of the word *zadruga*, although based on an inaccurate translation, gave it a positive meaning that described the impetus behind working together with his friends and also helped him to conceptualize how his family had organized winemaking and farming in Yugoslavia, creating a continuity of tradition in his winemaking narrative. In interesting juxtaposition, Marko's group of friends simultaneously engage with EU wine regimes like *terroir*, based on the very different history of French wine associations where families collaborated with one another to create mini-monopolies in order to establish a branded identity for villages and regions, protect against fraudulent wines and encourage market stability for their own wines.

Fig. 2. *Pressing grapes, Brtonigla, Istria, 2012.*
Fig. 3. *The view from Brtonigla towards Santa Lucia vineyards under the town Buje, Istria, 2013.*
Fig. 4. *Harvest, Momjan, Istria, 2013.*

Having watched how established winemakers are benefiting from EU opportunities, particularly certifications that recognize the quality or names of grapes from specific microzones, Marko's group has begun to appreciate the unique history of their vineyards. Their vineyards are located in the microzone Saint Cosma, named after the chapel now a few kilometres away. In researching Saint Cosma's history, they learned that in the 1960s, managers of the then socialist agricultural firm, PIK Umag, destroyed the chapel to plant the vineyards, moving the ruins. Retracing their microzone's history by consulting residents and archives, they determined the chapel's original location and plan to mark it with a stone shrine. They know from experience that Saint Cosma vineyards produce high-quality grapes, so they use as much of them as possible for their bottled wine, while selling the rest to other winemakers due to cellar space constraints, as construction conforming to EU regulations is prohibitively expensive. However, they have learned through conversations with former PIK employees that Saint Cosma grapes were used to make PIK Umag's flagship wine, The Tears of Santa Lucia, which has been later confirmed through Smith's interviews with PIK oenologists.

Santa Lucia are the nearby hills surrounding the town of Buje. Former PIK cellar managers explain that 'only PIK's best grapes were used for this wine', and that contrary to popular belief, 'not only grapes from Buje were used'. The wine was exported throughout Yugoslavia under its Italian name, Lacrima di Santa Lucia. Although made by a state winery, people recall that its name was unproblematic – a nod to the multicultural inclusiveness of Tito's Yugoslavia, they say. It was known throughout Yugoslavia as the best Istrian wine. Today, tourists from former Yugoslav republics visit Istria asking for Lacrima di Santa Lucia, although PIK ceased production nearly two decades ago.

The young winemakers' research has inspired an interest in establishing an EU-recognized Grand Cru for Saint Cosma. The idea is that those buying Saint Cosma grapes, some of whom own vineyards on the Santa Lucia hills and use Santa Lucia imagery on their labels, would then acknowledge Saint Cosma on their labels, promoting consumer knowledge of the microzone. These other winemakers are at once their clients, competitors and friends. Although establishing a Grand Cru is complex, the group of winemakers has begun incorporating this history into their marketing, linking their vineyards to the region's illustrious winemaking history and drawing on nostalgia for its healthy farming sector. Simultaneously, they have also challenged this history by inserting themselves into a story which was once the domain of Buje's winemakers.

Their story demonstrates how winemakers can creatively confront what has been called 'brutal capitalism' (Horvat & Štiks 2015) in the region and develop cooperative projects, with unanticipated consequences. Through devolving their institutional engagement from the municipality's association to friendship networks, they create new avenues of business development, engage with EU wine concepts and position themselves in local wine history narratives. Additionally, self-reliance through sharing expensive equipment allows them to avoid bank loans otherwise encouraged by the deregulation of a financial sector that promotes an economic growth model based on debt, something Western Europe has pushed in this region for decades (Unkovski-Korica 2015), demonstrating the ideological motivations undergirding local processes.

Solidarity and proximity in alternative food procurement

In Italy, a growing food activism movement synergizes with cultural and political preferences for local foods. Despite the intensive farming economy of northern Italy, solidarity

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economy networks pledge to reconnect with marginalized farmers, purposefully engaging in alternative procurement in ways that the state and market are deemed unable or unwilling to support: food activists pledge to care for producers, nature and each other while sourcing their food collectively from 'proximity' producers (Grasseni 2013). GAS (*Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale* or Solidarity Purchase Groups) do not self-produce, but rather seek out farmers in the name of 'co-production' to build a collaborative relationship with them that hopefully goes beyond a market transaction.

There are at least 450 GAS groups in Lombardy alone and about 7,000 families involved (Forno et al. 2013). GAS members convene periodically (usually once a month) in community centres or other available spaces (such as parish churches, sports clubs or private houses) to share information about available producers, collect orders and organize payments for bulk buying. Food providers may be preferably, but not exclusively, certified organic. Most contacts are gathered from local smallholders for vegetables and fruit, but also from retailers or farming cooperatives for meat, milk and cheese. When possible,

Fig. 5. *Reviewing the fields of a 'participatory guarantee' farm, Lombardy, Italy, July 2013.*
Fig. 6. *A courgette plant and the inspecting party in the background.*
Fig. 7. *Reusing recuperated building irons to support plant growth.*

special care is taken to buy locally, in an effort to keep the ecological footprint low.

GAS advise smallholders to convert to organic farming, offering support by paying higher prices and buying collectively to offset the costs. They also aim to provide advice and support against bureaucratic costs – typically those incurred by organic certification through a third-party audit. As one alternative, they offer participatory guarantee systems; namely, a peer-certification system supported by a solidarity economy network. For example, a network of GAS started the participatory guarantee scheme 'For a Pedagogy of the Land' in Lombardy in 2012, a grass-roots scheme for food quality certification working in direct partnership with local farmers (Contessi & Grasseni 2019).

The project was ideated to concretely take solidarity one step further: if consumers are to practice solidarity with producers, they should not request organic certification as a prerequisite, knowing that this procedure is beset by costs, added paperwork and sometimes allegations of corruption. (Allegations of experts turning a blind eye or just minding their paperwork, or, on the other hand, of auditors being awkward for the sake of making life difficult, were reported by both producers and wholesale buyers.)

Participatory guarantee schemes are viewed as a tool to combine the skill and expertise of food producers with the different competencies of consumers, to weave each other's knowledge and networks together. Key to this are the field visits that consumers organize in collaboration with farmers to gather data for the evaluation of a guarantee committee. The idea is to self-certify that the standards required by a European organic agriculture certification (according to regulation CE 834/2007) can be upheld without recourse to a third party, but rather through the observation of trustworthy peers.

The principle of proximity is paramount to this approach, and opposite to that of dispassionate certification. In fact, the assumption is that a close look by an interested stakeholder will deliver a more thorough result than a paid-for audit by a third party (who might pocket a bribe for certification; both farmers and consumers suggested that third-party certification was a question of 'just paying' to get 'a piece of paper'). Interested stakeholders in this case are not only the consumers, who are represented in the inspection and in the guarantee committee, but also the producers, who are being evaluated by a peer – someone who knows well what kind of hurdles they face in their daily work.

The Lombard project is ambitious, but takes place in a fragile context, targeting a dwindling population of independent smallholders. In fact, in 2015, it enrolled a total of 16 farms. In the documentation provided by one of the farms involved in one of the field visits, the signee of the production protocol and of the declaration of intent was *not* a farmer: he was the mandatary of a social cooperative which, we were told during the visit, employs persons with limited access to the labour market who come under the care of the national health service. The latter sponsors the farm work of the cooperative. If anything then, the signee can be defined as a 'neo-rural'; namely, a farmer neither by inheritance nor by trade, who has come to the land via multi-activity projects such as a social service cooperative (as in this case) or an agro-tourism business, a didactic farm or more radical projects of co-housing and homesteading. While engaging with these social actors does not per se mean that others are missing out, it is a symptom of the fact that the 'co-producer' relationship is more complex than one might anticipate. In this case, GAS co-produce (and help peer-certify) an agricultural activity that is only auxiliary to the core business of the social cooperative – namely, providing therapeutic and supervised

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engagement with the land for assisted patients, at a fee to the national health service. It thus does not serve the purpose of keeping smallholders in business or of practising 'solidarity' with professional farmers.

However, GAS and neo-rural farms share an aspirational discourse of environmental and social learning. Critical of efficiency and productivity principles, the ethical consumers that self-organize in solidarity economy networks consider that food growing should be based on personal knowledge rather than impersonal efficiency. Conversely, in audits and HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points) protocols for industrial food production, anodyne representations of the production system tend to visualize, formalize and parcel out the process, reducing certification work to paperwork (Shore & Wright 2015). Against the grain of the institutionalization of expertise, the field visits have the objective of building a relationship rather than box-ticking.

Grasseni witnessed one of the key moments of this procedure in July 2013, when after an extensive on-site visit to a candidate farm, the visiting committee and the farmer signed the visit's report together. After being involved in a year-long trial in the participatory guarantee scheme, the farmer (and his child) welcomed the 'inspectors': namely, an agronomist who was also a participant member in a GAS (with her child), a peer-farmer and a peer-consumer from another GAS. The children's presence made this less formal and more personal: it was the weekend, and both the inspectors and the inspected had children in tow. Perhaps they both assumed that it would be an educational experience, possibly wishing to make the inspection more sociable. The presence of the children was, however, a reminder that the visit involved 'volunteered time' that had been chipped away from family time. On the other hand, it was time spent in order to make their families' lives better, and to benefit other families. The paperwork made the moment formal again, and certainly *personal* – the visit's protocol bore the signature of both inspected farmer and inspecting party.

Critical consumers wish to practise solidarity not only with each other but with producers. The motivation for producers should be both immaterial and material – namely, the support received through networks of peers and of consumers who are willing to share information and pay higher prices than wholesale buyers. Such is the philosophy of GAS, but also of Slow Food, the well-known worldwide association of discerning consumers who purport to do food politics by safeguarding 'clean, just and good' food, and in particular, heritage foods, produced by local smallholders. Significantly, GAS usually like to distinguish themselves from Slow Food in that they see themselves as more radically committed to facilitating 'economies of proximity', and not necessarily niche foods that may be seen as elitist. Yet, it is telling how both types of food activist – however different they are from each other in terms of income availability and the degree of radicalness of their stance – end up dealing with the same interlocutors; namely, either 'neo-rurals' or self-selected entrepreneurs who know how to navigate their 'politics of advice' in order to gain added value for their agricultural produce and practice.

Grasseni has defined the politics of agricultural advice as the sum of formal and informal nudges towards forms of 'development' that heavily influence the transitions currently affecting smallholders in Southern Europe (2009). For example, in mountain communities of the Italian Alps, agricultural trade union advisors and consultants from professional associations have played a form of influential but subtle local politics through networks of personal advice, political alliances, preferential access to funding and legal information or relationships of apprenticeship. The politics of advice involves certain agricultural technicians, consultants or advisors being more attentive than others, as a result of which, certain farmers and breeders get into the inner circle, get funding, 'improve' their herds, are regularly pointed out to researchers and press as 'exemplary practices', become known and get support from non-governmental organizations and eventually become 'benchmarks' for other practitioners.

Nowadays, the politics of advice comes to include formal and informal relationships with food activist networks, because self-advancement for small-scale producers is intrinsically connected to the role that local entrepreneurs, ethical consumers and food activists such as Slow Food can play. These competitively networked rural entrepreneurs are best positioned to become hailed as 'saviours' of heritage foods, quality and local traditions, with regular mention on local, national and even international media (Grasseni 2017).

Either way, producer-consumer relations may be influenced by these power relations and take them further from the institutional loci of normative decision-making. By this, we mean that the degree of informality and discretion, or simply serendipity, of crucial aspects of 'co-production', such as the exchange of information, mutual support, price negotiation and access to further market and professional networks, may be dependent on these power relations. Both Slow Food and GAS profess non-partisanship in party politics, which is sometimes expressed by their membership as being or perceiving themselves as acting 'a-politically', but both their ambitions and the practice of their networking operations actually are political, in the beneficial sense of aiming to change the world according to stated objectives, and in the de facto sense of benefiting those who first and more proximally can be reached by these operations and objectives.

Conclusion

Our vignettes represent self-reliant ways of organizing mutual support networks that challenge top-down regulatory governance of food systems. In Italy, GAS members see this as an explicitly non-party political intervention around the morality of food procurement. However, their kind of solidarity does not always represent the interests of the smallholders with whom they propose to be 'co-producing'. In this case, the ambivalence of solidarity is revealed through the 'politics of advice' of largely middle-class consumers who wish to consume ethically while acting in solidarity with producers, the environment and fellow consumers, but end up creating self-contained procedures that redouble existing legal requirements (as in the case of organic self-certification) at great cost in terms of time and effort for themselves and their farming partners. The unintended consequence of this strategy is that their best-suited partners are social cooperatives rather than smallholders.

In Croatia, farmers rely on local networks of self-help to make ends meet while engaging with EU regimes rather than Croatian ones. Simultaneously, they increasingly disengage from institutions like state-led associations which should otherwise provide access to agricultural finance and state support. Solidarity networks cross business and social worlds, thanks to poorly functioning institutions and the lack of a business environment that can enable entrepreneurs to engage fully in the market. Such estrangement from the governance of food systems has unintended consequences, as disengagement from an already distant central state unintentionally compounds rural economic precarity and poor governance in Croatia. Likewise, in Italy, the convinced 'a-political' commitment of GAS members to reform economic practice in self-reliant ways may encourage further distrust in certification and regulation. ●

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