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Direct food provisioning: collective food procurement

Cristina Grasseni

INTRODUCTION

Direct food provisioning is a term I use here to indicate any way of procuring food that does not conform to the 'Western' norm of individuals shopping in supermarkets. According to this form of food procurement, consumers sit at the receiving end of a long, complex, often global food chain. In fact, this 'norm' is not at all 'normal', namely it is neither long-established nor sustainable. Indeed, there are so many ways of practising direct food provisioning, including traditional subsistence farming all over the world, that we can consider direct food provisioning as the norm. In short, procuring food is a multifaceted social phenomenon that has accompanied the history of the human species and the differentiation of its cultures. It should be natural then to expect comparison between different types of direct food provisioning in diverse locations and at different scales. This chapter challenges the idea that direct food provisioning should be considered per se 'alternative' or 'radical'. In particular, I will show how *collective* food procurement allows reflection on the consequences of globalized food systems vis-à-vis direct food provisioning.

SUPERMARKETS VS. DIRECT FOOD PROVISIONING

The separation of food provisioning from food production and exchange has become the norm with the establishment of supermarket chains as worldwide models for food logistics. The disconnect between consumers and producers is the topic of widespread scholarship about and against 'big food' (Sage 2012). More traditional ways of producers meeting consumers have become increasingly seen as 'alternative' fringes in a global food system. These new 'reinventions' include farmers' markets, small independent retailers, and community gardens. In effect, they are 'transgressions' in the face of the ever-increasingly consolidated worldwide food capital of seed-to-table agribusiness. According to this latter model, a few companies concentrate resources and centralize purchasing; they also maximize profit, thus guaranteeing cheaper prices to the consumer than it might cost the smallholder to produce food. This race to the bottom is unsustainable for independent food producers, who then have to specialize in niche markets. The reason is that niche customers are prepared to pay a premium for their products, such as heritage foods, geographic denominations, or community supported agriculture schemes – and this 'premium' price is necessary to independent food producers for survival.

Access to markets for small producers is very difficult. Large distributors often impose precise quotas and dates of delivery, with fines for failing to deliver. Small and seasonal productions with their variations are unwelcome and unrewarded. On the other hand, where smallholders and local farming have disappeared, we find rural areas where accessing fresh and seasonal food from local farms has become impossible. Even when people want to buy local and organic food, if the economy of scale is too small and the cost of production is too high, farmers cannot sustain business in the long term. The economy of scale of monocultures, centralized purchasing, large distribution, and especially the price wars of the one-stop shop, are unbeatable for the individual producer.

This is why a number of solutions have cropped up all over the world (and not only recently) to provide a protected market for small and local producers: food consumer cooperatives and community supported agriculture for example. In consumer co-ops, members purchase food produce from farmers within the region.[1]

However, the 'supermarketization' of the global food chain is well under way, not only in

the northern and western hemisphere but in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Where they encroach, American-model malls shape the peri-urban environment with car-only accessible outlets comprising food chains, clothes outlets, toy outlets, fast foods and drive-in, in an all-too-familiar scenery which, to someone born 40 to 50 years ago, is perceivably different than how it looked just a couple of decades earlier. Supermarkets can have real power over local governments, influencing land-zoning policy, or lobbying against farmers' markets in city centres, or vice versa lobbying *for* farmers' markets outside their doorstep as a way of improving the decorum of the urban space surrounding them – and attracting clients anyhow. Certain supermarkets may well participate in Food Policy Councils, recruit local producers with franchise operations, make space on their shelves for local and organic produce, and actively participate in urban planning action to relieve the problem of food desertification in urban centres (Yung 2014). Even though on the whole large organized food distributers act callously in the market in a race to the bottom, driving competitors out of business, not every supermarket chain has the same policy or size, or strategy.

Ultimately a diversification of the ways in which people can get access to food is a question of resilience of both urban and rural livelihoods – which is why putting food provisioning on the agenda of local and regional governments is key. We can broadly distinguish two types of direct food provisioning practices, themselves highly diverse within each type: (1) foraging and self-growing, and (2) direct supply via short food chains.

Foraging includes the practices of gathering fruit and vegetables, mushrooms and herbs, berries and nuts from open access grounds such as woods, fallow fields, or trees located on public grounds such as parks, avenues, reserves, etc. (see Chapter 22 by Morrow in this volume). Self-growing includes hands-on production for self-consumption in back gardens or allotments, community gardens and communal allotments. In both cases production and collection lead to the need to share, barter, can, pickle or preserve large quantities of the same crop when they become available all at the same time. This can be done within an extended family, neighbourhood or group. The novelty of the last decade or so is that groups increasingly organize themselves through Facebook or other apps and social networks. For example, the German network 'Mundraub' uses Facebook and Google Maps to locate and signal to others the availability of crops in specific locations, and calls for harvesting days all over the country. This is quite common also among so called 'gleaners' or 'freegans' or 'dumpster divers'. These, instead of harvesting crops, recuperate discarded foods after food markets or from shops' backyards. Far from being necessarily a lonely and forlorn condition, dumpster-diving can be planned quite efficiently in teams – for example knowing in advance which days certain types of foods are put out by supermarkets because they are out of date.

This too usually leads to redistribution through a network, festive cooking or gifting (Edwards and Mercier 2012).

Direct supply from producers via short food chains tends to be monetary-based (though barter cannot be excluded in principle). Direct supply can be informal (namely based on personal connections with specific producers, such as the habit of paying a visit on-farm, which may then lead to provisioning for eggs, cheese, milk, vegetable crops, fruit, etc.). In any case one speaks about the 'informal economy' when provisioning is paid for in cash and goes unregistered for tax purposes. It may or may not be illegal depending on circumstances and regulations. For example procuring raw milk from dairy farmers can be a thoroughly illegal or a thoroughly legal practice depending on the national legislation (Myncite 2014). Short food chains can also be organized in formalized transactions, either in person at farmers' markets or through 'food hubs' facilitating direct supply from farmers (whether online or not). The model of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) in particular developed independently in the USA (White 2013), Japan (Kondoh 2015) and France (in the form of Associations pour le Maintien d'une Agriculture Paysanne: Lamine 2005). These are mostly farmer-driven business models that target pools of consumers by selling crops in advance through a system of seasonal or yearly 'shares' (see Chapter 23 by White in this volume). This commits consumers to buying from local smallholders and provides the producers with the necessary guarantee (and advance payment) that their crops will be sold, regardless of quality, quantity and day of ripening. From a consumer's point of view, the limitation of CSA models is that they tend to be pricier than supermarket chains and thus tend to target discerning, educated and relatively affluent consumers – thus having relatively little impact on widespread issues such as food deserts in inner cities, or the malnourishment and undernourishment of the poor. The solutions carried out so far to take CSA out of this niche include accepting food stamps on CSA schemes (and also at some farmers' markets), and introducing 'sliding shares' and 'sponsored shares' in

some CSA schemes at the farmers' initiative. From a producer's point of view the limitation of CSA is that it cannot address the gaping hiatus between 'million-dollar farms' and smallholders barely breaking even – the latter need to be innovative, competitive and creative, and rely on marketing niches to maintain access to the market and thus a sustainable business.
This brief introduction to direct food provisioning covers what have been described in the literature as 'alternative food networks' (Goodman et al. 2012), 'food activism' (Counihan and Siniscalchi 2014) or 'ethical consumption' (Carrier and Luetchford 2012). They are all variously considered as subtly subversive economic practices, in the name of 'civil economies', 'human economy' or 'diverse economies' by economists (Bruni and Zamagni 2007), anthropologists (Hart et al. 2010) and geographers (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013). In the remainder of this chapter I turn to a less examined form of direct food provisioning, which I define as 'collective food procurement' namely the collective effort of groups of people in the production or distribution of the food they consume. To give an example of the latter, in the following section I describe in-depth the practice of Solidarity Purchase Groups in Italy.

COLLECTIVE FOOD PROCUREMENT: THE EXAMPLE OF ITALY'S SOLIDARITY PURCHASE GROUPS

Italy's Solidarity Economy Networks consist of Solidarity Purchase Groups (or GAS, the acronym of the Italian *Gruppo di Acquisto Solidale*: Grasseni 2013). The GAS members I studied in Lombardy can organize direct food provisioning from as far as Sicilian orange growers about 1300 kilometres away. In this case, the orange producers are organized in small cooperatives and may cultivate lands that the state has confiscated and reallocated from convicted mafia criminals (see Chapter 8 by Jerne in this volume). This is part of a widespread consumer's mobilization against mafia trade circuits in Sicily (see Forno and Gunnarson 2010).
GAS members welcome the trucks driving their orange provisions from Sicily to Lombardy and help unload them. Each group of about 20 to 40 families will send a representative to pick up and redistribute the oranges. Practicalities and logistics are worked out at fortnightly meetings, in local parish churches, community libraries, sports clubs or each other's homes.
GAS members' own conceptualization of what they are doing is that they want to practice 'solidarity' with each other, with the producers and with nature, through the manner in which they choose to buy, for example, oranges. These are not just orange consumers. They do not just 'directly provision' oranges either. This is a complex, self-conscious and collective practice of direct food provisioning: namely collective food procurement.
The logic of these groups is to act as networks. So, for example, more than one GAS group has joined together to organize this orange trip. On other occasions, GAS groups networked in the middle of the credit crunch crisis in 2009, when banks stopped giving credit to small entrepreneurs. One particular dairy that was providing cheese for several GAS groups reached out for help to its GAS customers lest they had to close for lack of a cash float. As a response, around 200 GAS groups volunteered enough money to keep the dairy afloat, on the basis of a very ad hoc kind of system: there were donations as small as 50 euros per GAS group, but also GAS that facilitated negotiations with a local credit union for a zero per cent loan. The dairy – Tomasoni – is well known in the solidarity economy movement. As a result of their popularity after the event, they completely switched to organic cheese making and only supply Solidarity Purchase Groups (Signori and Forno 2016).
Another example of how these groups network and facilitate access of small producers to the market has been to set up their own types of farmers' market, called 'citizenship markets', where the sellers' stands are reserved only for producers that supply GAS groups. In other words it is a market by invitation only. This challenges the common sense idea that the market is a neutral space where demand meets supply or the other way around. The point is that the food market is a very competitive (global and virtual) space, and even the marketplace is a very competitive (local and concrete) space. Farmers need to find the right spot, go to the right event, and especially need to have enough staff to send to run the stands – often at weekends. For family and small producers this is very difficult to leverage. GAS members are aware of the fact that their own purchasing power is not enough to change this. From a collaborative survey carried out with GAS groups, it emerged that GAS in Lombardy spent 13 per cent of their family food budget through a Solidarity Purchase Group, but they would still go to the supermarket for a relatively large portion of their food provisioning (Forno et al. 2013; Grasseni et al. 2015). However, GAS try to exploit the critical mass of their own network to attract new customers by providing a protected space in the market square for their own providers. To attract more people they organize events such as book presentations and 'street

dinners', convivial events where GAS members can order and consume a full cooked meal on tables set out in the market square. These are usually very successful events that attract the curiosity of more people and re-socialize them around the idea of local food.
There are also other ways in which solidarity has been interpreted, appropriated and applied by Solidarity Purchase Groups, for example in response to the series of earthquakes that have hit Italy in the last 10 years (beginning with L'Aquila followed by one in the region of Emilia Romagna and then again in central Italy). In the cheese-making region of Modena and Reggio many damaged wheels of Parmigiano Reggiano and Grana Padano had to be sold off instead of matured to full age (and price). In solidarity with a buying campaign spearheaded by the farmers' unions, GAS groups set up mailing lists and offered to buy the cheese at a favourable price for the producers. In 2011, two years from the L'Aquila earthquake that destroyed the town, the GAS network held their national assembly there, under tents and in accommodation scattered around the area, to bring their presence and solidarity to local farmers and to the local economy. For example, the delegates came back with local providers' contacts and set up forms of collective food procurement from those farms.
All of these interventions took the market as their start and end point, but tried to manage it with humane principles and through personal contacts and face-to-face connections. Without having enough financial impact to take on 'big food' then, this type of collective food procurement is nevertheless a type of economic practice that has some consequences in terms of lifestyle changes. From the CORES research on GAS groups in Lombardy (Forno et al. 2013) it emerges that about 80 per cent of GAS members reported that they had increased their consumption of organic food and local food and about 70 per cent had increased their conception of seasonal food, while 68 per cent had decreased their shopping in supermarkets. Ethnographic experience also shows that in some cases, becoming part of a GAS did not mean a decrease in patronizing a supermarket, simply because this was already limited to supply that could not be procured elsewhere. In sum, an in-depth thick description of Solidarity Purchase Groups combined with a survey of GAS practice in Lombardy showed how while GAS do not achieve independence from large food distribution, it provides a collective experience of self-education, getting to know about the reality of food production, and learning skills that are not necessarily just about food (Forno et al. 2015). For example, the most interesting result regarded the GAS members' self-perception about the difference it made to meet fortnightly with other people to deliberate about how to procure their oranges or cheese, rather than shopping individually. About 40 per cent felt they were more able to cooperate with people in general, namely to discuss, decide and act collectively rather than to act on an individual basis.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have proposed collective food procurement as a specific type of direct provisioning which, in addition to direct food provisioning, through collective action, carries out practices of self-determination through food procurement.
Diverse forms of collective food procurement have not yet been analysed comparatively, nor have they been conceptualized in their implications for our understanding of food transitions. Collective food procurement is a timely topic of investigation because through it, specific groups and networks may articulate and practice specific cultural styles of civic participation and social mobilization. To grasp the variety and multiplicity of such networks and styles is important for our capacity to envision and transform the economy. In other words, investigating collective food procurement shows how economies are always embedded in sociality, despite the fact that in policymaking literature and institutions, sustainable energy and food transitions are being envisaged as largely a question of finding a technology fix, namely a creative adaptation of existing food systems to the challenges of climate change, soil desertification, and the stark coexistence of malnourishment and obesity, surplus production and waste. Policy imaginaries of global food systems are also peculiarly homogeneous: they posit a seed-to-table consolidated and integrated chain 'serving' individual 'consumers'. Once again these are imagined as solipsistic unities, more or less responsibly deliberating and 'choosing' among commodities, with little notice of the relevance of culture to provisioning, and of the diversity of cultures of procurement. Transitions do not work for everyone everywhere indifferently. Relevant cultures of participation enable certain ways of innovating food procurement – and not others – in specific socio-cultural arrangements.
Examples such as that of Italy's Solidarity Purchase Groups show how food procurement mediates relations and creates a space of experimentation within relevant social networks. In other words, eaters are not just consumers but social actors who are engaged in meaning

making. This does not only mean that *some* groups eat 'traditionally', for example due to religious prescriptions as is the case of kosher or halal. Food cultures and practices of food provisioning impact lives in dramatic ways, and this becomes particularly visible when they are subject to change. Food procurement is not only a question of macro-political analysis and policy (regarding how institutions and corporations should work or how they could be lobbied or educated), nor of individual deliberations alone (such as the habituated 'choice' reflexes attributed to consumers by 'nudging' marketers, public advertising or supermarket shelf displays). An ethnographic understanding of direct food provisioning adds a 'middle' level of socio-cultural analysis to the previous two, analysing social practice in its dynamic and collective aspects.

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NOTE

1. See for example the documentary film on the history of consumers' food cooperatives in the United States: http:// foodforchange .coop/ category/ film/ sinterviews/ (accessed 20 March 2019). Cooperatives are a chapter in and of themselves. There are producers' cooperatives, large-scale and small-scale cooperatives, worker-owned cooperatives and cooperatives that operate like industrial businesses. See Gibson-Graham (2003). See also Kasmir (1996) for an anthropological critique of the 'Myth of Mondragón' by an ethnographer who carried out long-term, first-hand observation of it.

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