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Citation

Grasseni, C. (2020). Context-specific notions and practices of 'solidarity' in food procurement networks in Lombardy (Italy) and Massachusetts (USA). In C. Kropp, I. Antoni-Komar, & C. Sage (Eds.), *Food system transformations: social movements, local economies, collaborative networks* (pp. 157-174). London: Routledge.
doi:10.4324/9781003131304

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3152403>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

9 Context-specific notions and practices of ‘solidarity’ in food procurement networks in Lombardy (Italy) and Massachusetts (USA)

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9.1 Introduction

This chapter describes context-specific notions and practices of solidarity in food procurement networks based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Lombardy (Italy) and Massachusetts (USA) – two roughly comparable sites by size, population and affluence. The concept and practice of ‘solidarity’ are used as a point of conceptual and moral reference in both field sites, among alternative food procurement networks which rethink the global food system and try to propose local solutions in practice. In Italy, solidarity economy networks establish direct consumer–producer transactions by networking with food producers. In the USA, solidarity economy networks practice different types of alternatives, even though they go under the same name as the Italian solidarity purchase groups. While the latter focus on short food chains as a way of increasing food sustainability, interpreting their activity as ‘co-production’, their American counterparts focus especially on the societal issue of food justice, for example denouncing the lack of access to affordable, fresh and healthy food for a large part of the US population.

By showing how ‘solidarity’ means different local solutions, I highlight the sociocultural dimensions of these different experiments in food procurement. Both types of alternative procurement aim at solving global problems locally by transforming food systems – as the title of this book proposes. However, they do it in radically diverse local and national contexts, from different perceptions of what is problematic about the global food system, and with different convictions about how local action can make a difference.

While there exists a vast literature on solidarity economies, few studies are grounded in first-hand prolonged observation of actual practices and contexts. Different definitions have been given to ‘new’ economies: some are advocated by activists (Alperovitz 2012); some scholars stress the power of social networks to create a critical mass for ‘sharing economies’ (Schor 2010); others see ‘civil’ economies arising from the efforts of responsible corporate capital (Bruni and Zamagni 2007). More radical activist-scholars promote grassroots ‘human’ and ‘community’ economies (Hart et al.

2010; Gibson-Graham 2013), including developing economies of ‘affect’ (Roelvink 2010).

Both case studies are built on personal involvement in alternative procurement networks in Lombardy (2009–2011) and Massachusetts (2012–2014), which I was able to conduct by way of living consecutively in both places. My methodological approach is based on ethnography in these two sites, followed by a comparative analysis of the fundamental conceptualization and practice of solidarity in two networks of food procurement that both call themselves ‘solidarity economy networks’. During fieldwork, I had in-depth and ongoing conversations with about 50 solidarity economy activists on each site, of which I formally interviewed and audio-recorded 16 in Massachusetts and 12 in Lombardy. The interviews are on average 1-hour-long conversations on alternative provisioning, cooperative development and alternative quality certification schemes.

Just as I was a member of solidarity purchase groups in Italy, in Massachusetts I joined several community-supported agriculture (CSA) schemes and regularly visited sites and events, as well as shopping through a locally sourced, pedal-delivered, cooperatively owned CSA scheme based in Western Massachusetts. Both in Italy and in the USA, I attended several closed-door meetings as well as public events. For example, I took part in the state-wide meet-up of the Solidarity and Green Economy Alliance (SAGE) in Worcester, MA, in November 2013, which gathered about 200 activists, where I presented my research on solidarity economies in Italy. A roughly equal number attended the solidarity purchase groups annual meeting in Parma in June 2014. I gathered about 5 hours of ethnographic footage, visiting cooperatively run CSA schemes, home-brewing sites and cooperative dairy sites in Massachusetts and Lombardy.

This multi-sited ethnography was not exhausted by simply conducting research at two locations, as the relevant methodological literature specifies (Marcus 1995), nor was it aimed at directly comparing specific traits in isomorphic models. The rationale of my research was to propose a conceptual comparison based on in-depth ethnographic understanding of a growing but diverse phenomenon in Europe and the USA: so-called solidarity economies, in particular grassroots networks that wish to organize direct forms of provisioning. The idea was to bring the different Italian and American contexts into relief, investigating the diversity of problems, language and actions used in different sites by a movement that, despite defining itself transnationally, sometimes drawing on a common set of literature (see for instance Holt-Giménez 2012; Lang 2012), and expressing national and regional representatives in a global network (RIPESS, *Réseau intercontinental de promotion de l'économie sociale solidaire*), eventually developed very specific and locally grounded practices and strategies.

Italy and the USA both host networks that make explicit reference and call themselves after the ‘social and solidarity economies’ inspired by Latin American models (Laville et al. 2006; Amin 2009; Kawano et al. 2010). The

US Solidarity Economy Network and the Italian *Tavolo RES* (translatable as “working group for a network of solidarity economy”) are both represented in RIPESS, the “intercontinental network for social and solidarity economy”. *Tavolo RES* showcases a broad array of initiatives, from the establishment of solidarity purchase groups in the 1990s, to local experimentations with participative guarantee systems (Tavolo RES 2013). In the USA, a CSA movement has developed business models for smallholders and targets local communities to establish short food chains (Lyson 2004; Friedland 2008; Stevenson et al. 2009). Naturally, these networks are embedded in localized histories and the expertise of different societal actors: in Italy these are predominantly critical consumers, scholars and activists; in the USA they are highly skilled and entrepreneurially oriented farmers.

In what follows, I dedicate one section to each site, then I propose a comparative analysis of the two. In particular I make use of the epistemological notion of “comparing by context” (Messina 2001), namely proceeding from the specific characteristics of each context to describe and contrast the actual meaning given to “solidarity economy” and the practices of food provisioning advocated by each network. The result is an analysis of the relevance of such meaning and practices to the respective regional, societal and economic context.

9.2 Solidarity economy networks in Massachusetts

I lived in Boston for three years, from the summer of 2011 to the summer of 2014. Coming from several years of acquaintance with alternative food networks in Italy I familiarized myself with relevant equivalents in Massachusetts: firstly several types of CSAs, then two more radical networks of activists – namely the Solidarity Economy Network of the United States (USSEN), and SAGE in Worcester, Massachusetts. In the “local food movement” in and around Boston (Loh and Flagg 2018) “sustainable” food systems were being variously defined and interpreted: from bulk-buying collectives (which may be mainly motivated by price) to food cooperatives (which may invest particularly on quality, for example organic food), to urban community gardens (oriented to both social inclusion and environmental impact) to CSA (mainly veggie box delivery or pick-up agreements, to support local farmers). Within this broad canvas, producer–consumer short food chains on the one hand and activist networks on the other were developing different practices of alternative provisioning. While CSAs were fine-tuning an already successful but rather orthodox business model for small-scale farmers, targeting a niche of affluent and discerning urbanites, USSEN and SAGE had a more critical approach, including campaigning against “green-washing” and seeking funding for local projects to develop landscape gardening, community gardens, but also house-weatherization. Their goal was not only to produce and distribute sustainable food and environmental services for the community, but also to create jobs for the

local youth and the unemployed in the small disenfranchised towns of Central and Western Massachusetts.

In these radical networks, local scholars and activists were exploring novel ways of creating wealth – both relational and economic – through various forms of associations, including workers’ cooperatives. I will return later to the very specific meaning of “coops” in this context. In 2012 I attended the first *Solidarity and Green Economy Alliance Conference* in Worcester, MA. Conversations with these often young solidarity economy entrepreneurs exposed a layer of American society that is skeptical of the global food system, and is intent on changing their role in it through subversive economic practice. On the other hand, CSA schemes were not challenging the economic predominance of large industrial farming in the USA. In fact as was pointed out to me by a cooperative of female farmers in Western MA, in Massachusetts:

there’s a lot of family farms too. It gets passed down from generation to generation so there’s a lot of multigenerational farms. And there’s a lot of – like – somebody has a house with a little back field, then one of the big farms in the area will lease that plot and then they have plots a couple acres here and there. “Stone soup” [a local farm] they have like four acres here but they lease land on the river from a historical society of some sort so they have another like seven acres but everybody is driving around to all their little places ... Like there’s times when “*oh I need to go pick up blueberries...*” when they’re picking the blueberries and you’re just waiting for them to literally being picked but it’s not where you had put up the farm ... It’s like “*oh up this road! Just pull over...*” So you’ll see people picking and.., “*that’s our blueberry*” ... Like it’s very random.¹

I recorded this conversation during a packing session I participated in together with four young women who had just set up their own farming cooperative, in the fall of 2013. They looked at cooperatives as important socio-economic models for workers’ solidarity,² in a country, the USA, where only 7% of employees are registered members of a trade union. In New England, however, successful consumer cooperatives and large producer cooperatives that have developed economies of scale, such as Cabot Dairy, focus on increasing their consumers’ buying power (against the interests of farmers) or defending their market control against Wal-Mart giants. Only in very occasional cases does the cooperative model seem capable of incubating *worker-owned* food producer cooperatives, while so-called multi-stakeholder coops often register both producers and consumers as members, but not their own employee workers.³

Janelle Cornwell’s work on the workers’ coops of the Pioneer Valley in Central Massachusetts, previous to my research, describes how no more than seven workers’ cooperatives, each of the size of four to ten workers, united in

the Valley Alliance of Workers Cooperatives (VAWC) in the late 1990s and began recruiting new cooperatives (Cornwell 2012). She comments on how workers' governance creates novel spaces for democracy and resistance at the shop-floor level. My own interviews with representatives of Valley Green Feast, one of the founding cooperatives of VAWC, register their enthusiasm and passion, as well as the sense of novelty and liberty experienced by the four young women involved in this rare worker-owned CSA cooperative.⁴ While still not making enough return to pay themselves a full-time (farming wage) salary, they noted how the flexibility of working as peers allowed one of them to go on (unpaid) maternity leave but *not lose her employment* – a very real scenario for working-class women who often have to choose between having a baby and keeping their job, in a country where paid parental leave is not a worker's right and is offered only by enlightened employers (and often only as a benefit to tenured workers).

The struggle to generate a part-time salary for four, *and* being able in principle to accommodate for maternity leave, reminds us of how bleak the current employment scenario is for American farmworkers. Their *own* food insecurity is common, even in places blessed with year-round crops and further “enhanced” by intensive agriculture, as in California (Minkoff-Zern 2014). This is true of both low-paid seasonal (often migrant) workforce and farm-owners catering for elite urban markets (Paxson 2013), for example in the farmers' markets and CSA schemes of the Boston region. During a webinar for beginning farmers interested in setting up a CSA, the moderator explained:

I grew up on a small family farm in South-Western Pennsylvania and have a technology background, but also have a farming background, helped run a CSA, for about 10 years now. ... I think one of the really interesting points in CSA is, there's just more competition for a CSA dollar, and you just have more options than ever to get high quality food. Even our local grocery store ... so we're in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, our just regular local grocery stores have great produce now. And there's delivery services, and there's co-ops, there's so many options for people to get really high quality food, so there's more competition for that eating dollar..⁵

The US solidarity economy network was embracing the model of cooperatives in order to rethink the role of workers in American society:

This Prezi is really meant to show the solidarity economy as a system, so if we look at all these different sections of the economy, it's meant to show that there are practices that we would consider aligned with the solidarity economy and all other sectors of the economy – whether of finance, production, distribution and exchange, or consumption. So looking at production there are so many examples: there is a syndicate, there is a co-op, what we call permaculture, DIY [do it yourself], cleaning,

there are so many different things – maybe not perfectly but to a certain extent aligned with the principle of solidarity economy.⁶

American solidarity economy activists nurtured admiration for the Italian cooperatives of the Emilia-Romagna region (see Hancock 2007; Luvienne et al. 2010), and liaised with representatives of Mondragon's originally Basque and now international network of cooperatives. Without delving into the history of cooperative development, which differs greatly country by country (see for example Borzaga and Defourny 2004), the workers'-owned model of cooperative entrepreneurship was taken as a winning model that could solve the issues of workers' dispossession under corporate capital regime. The degree of understanding of the complexity and diversity of the cooperative movement worldwide was limited, though. For example, when I had an in-depth interview with the founder of a workers' cooperative that produced and distributed food according to a CSA model, I tried to explain how "cooperatives" in Italy can mean anything, from the largest supermarket chain of the country to workers' owned cooperatives, to entrepreneurial cooperatives employing staff for a salary (thus not workers'-owned). My impression was that the only models known in the circle of the solidarity economy and in the circle of the workers'-owned cooperatives in MA were:

Yes I mean I know Emilia Romagna and Mondragon, and why we're doing what we're doing out here. We're following you know in their footsteps. They want development and education. Like my dream. [What you say] makes me think of difference between food coops and workers' coops, like exactly it's like, it's kind of, there it is, there it's better ... but it's still missing important parts of the movement.⁷

There were some discrepancies as to whether "cooperatives" meant "solidarity economy" at all: while the USSEN representative quoted above would list cooperatives as part of a multifaceted "movement" of solidarity economy, not all cooperative workers would see themselves as such:

interesting because I know that's a thing, and that it's so closely related to what I am doing, but I would never say like "I am part of the solidarity economy". I don't know why – well I do know what it all comes back to: education and exposure ... And I know that it's so like close but I just I guess there's not much here to say that I would define what I am doing as part of that.⁸

Other groups were acting in the name of SAGE, and clearly understood cooperative work as part of a new circular economy: solidarity- and sustainability-driven. This is the explanation of how this link works, in the words of the organizer of a "Coop power energy retrofit workshop" held on June 30 2013 in Worcester:

Co-op Academy is normally a ten-week program, three hours, each week, of really intense information on everything you would need to know to start up or continue running a co-op. Co-op Power is a renewable energy efficiency company that is owned by its members. ... the mission is to provide renewable energy that's affordable and accessible to people across all race and socioeconomic income levels, and it also is creating a just and sustainable energy future. And we're looking to empower people to develop locally owned energy resources, and also to develop businesses that help us conserve energy. So we've got a number of energy efficient buildings that we've developed, we're helping to develop one here in Worcester, and we've got one in Boston, two in Hayfield, and we also work with community action programs to help lower income folks get their homes upgraded as well. And the key to our growth and our success is to organize locally, and get local people to participate as members and owners in these assets. So that's the local organizing council.⁹

These activities do take the global food system into consideration and aim to act at local level, not through focusing on the food chain *only*, but rather, by intercepting a circular economy that includes the food cycle (such as oil waste from restaurants) while addressing issues such as unemployment and high energy costs for heating cheap and often badly maintained social housing. Another connected issue is the soil pollution from lead paint – again, a cheap maintenance solution that was only recently outlawed. Lead-based paint deteriorates over time and lead scales pollute both indoor and outdoor living environments, making for example urban gardening and backyard vegetable patches a highly hazardous practice for one's health:

So Worcester's projects are ... 13 years ago there was a non-profit that started around environmental justice issues, specifically lead pollution in soil in Worcester. And several years after, people started meeting around the project Toxic Soil Busters. It was born as a cooperative youth/adult venture to deal with this problem in a way that was empowering instead of you know ... To solve problems. And then Youth In Charge was a version, was a spin-off of Toxic Soil Busters that had a geographic implication. It was focussing on a specific low income predominantly Latino neighbourhood of Worcester and a housing development.¹⁰

In many dilapidated post-industrial towns of Central and Eastern Massachusetts, cultivating food in low-income neighbourhoods means facing the issue of lead pollution in the urban soil, due to widespread use of lead-based paint to cover cheap, wooden houses with long-standing impermeable protection. Thus the issues of cheap housing, of weatherization and of toxic soils are intrinsically enmeshed. Setting up a small cooperative that addresses all these issues at once means trying to solve a global problem at local level, by redefining it not as a food problem but as a problem of social justice.

Some of the activists in these networks were scholars affiliated with the Community Economy Collective inspired by the works of J. K. Gibson-Graham (2013). Potlucks were a recurrent moment of our monthly meetings, and through this symbolic but also very practical form of food exchange, we would initiate relaxed but committed forms of conversations about novel forms of relational and economic wealth, inspired by a reading or each other's work.

It was a noticeable part of my ethnographic experience that some of these diverse (and often very small) groups sometimes connected and engaged with each other, despite substantial differences in approach. For example, I liaised with the Boston Faith and Justice Network thanks to a newsletter received from my then current CSA provider, Farmer D. As a Young Adult Presbyterian, A. was then engaging in an "economic discipleship" path that included rethinking the role of the global economy in his everyday consumption practice – particularly focusing on food:

And I've focussed on energy and environment, and at the very end I took some classes on food, and I just thought that that just tied everything together. And it does, because everybody eats food and it affects the environment, it affects our energy, because all these problems are one, and close to being solved if we re-do how we do the food system. All four of us volunteers here are doing issues on food justice. The program through the church kind of made some rules... We had to eat all of our meals together and we had to do a local food diet the first five months, and now the second half we're on food stamp benefits, because we qualify for that. So yeah, it's just kind of ... The National Volunteer Program is structured around the school year, so it goes from September until August, which isn't really the most easy thing for local food. They tried to change that but they couldn't really, so, um ... But we got a lot of stuff in September and October, and even November there was stuff at Farmers' Market, so we canned and froze a lot, and we've still got some in the freezer we're still eating on in March. I had done it once in a farm internship, but our site coordinator M. did one day of canning with us in September. Our very first week we made some jam and canned peaches and canned tomatoes. Just kind of like, we spent all day, we went to the "pick your own apple farm", got the apples and some second rate peaches, so they were a little cheaper cause they had bad spots on them. And so we just took them all back to the Church in Somerville, which is where that kitchen is actually. That group you're talking about that picks all the fruit trees has used that kitchen for canning and stuff. Yeah, the League of Urban Canners, that's what they call themselves. Yeah, that's what she told us about them, canning more stuff ... So we just kind of learned.. There was, one of our neighbours in Watertown had a deep freezer that she's letting us use, based there, to hold all our fruit and stuff. And she showed us how to can and donated a canning kit. Or she showed us how to freeze things. So we

just kind of learn really quickly. You know, we get home from work about five, and then start cooking and have dinner ready by seven. We got a lot better at it in December.. And we were doing everything, like rolling out our own paste, from scratch. We're going to do some stuff with planting seeds and I'm trying to see if Farmer D. can help us get a little garden plot started at the church, so we might have just kids playing in the dirt, planting seeds.¹¹

Consistent with American interdisciplinary literature on “food justice” (Gottlieb and Anupama 2010; Alkon and Agyeman 2011), A.’s faith-based commitment to consuming local food helped him hone in on how “everything is connected” in the food system: not only seasonality and quality of food, but access to healthy, affordable and fresh food is in fact a topic of social concern and of political contestation in the USA. The League of Urban Cannors mentioned in his interview rescued backyard fruit from ripening trees in Cambridge, Somerville and Boston, by contacting the owners and offering free pruning services in exchange for access.¹² In addition the organizers developed “harvest toolkits” sharing and setting up bike trailers as “complete urban harvesting kits”. The associated tasks included mending and re-using bike-trailers as a radical way to keep urban harvesting sustainable (namely not requiring the use of a car). The urban forager I interviewed in Boston worked with a colleague and activist-scholar engaged in the Community Economy Collective,¹³ to start food-provisioning initiatives as “community-based cooperatives” (Cornwell and Graham 2009).

The (food) activists I talked to appropriated the concept of “solidarity” based on their diversely positioned awareness of the interplay of multiple issues and social actors at stake, including social and environmental justice. USSEN, for instance, was committed to spearheading initiatives for “green-and-just” jobs creation. During my stay in Massachusetts, the US solidarity economy network inaugurated the Wellspring Collaborative, a community-driven initiative to create jobs in Springfield, an impoverished town in Western Massachusetts, in collaboration with local “anchor institutions” such as hospitals (Bay State Health), colleges (Springfield Technology Community College) and local entrepreneurs. The inauguration took place in an upholstery workshop, including a celebratory speech of how this was established by skilled Italian emigrants who set up a joint business in 1939 – now turned into a design development centre with a social mission.

SAGE, on the other hand, based in Worcester in Central Massachusetts, clustered a number of small-scale initiatives, including the Toxic Soil Busters mentioned above, a youth empowerment project funded through the Regional Environmental Council (REC) to reduce youth unemployment, drug use and petty criminality. Since 2010, SAGE convenes a yearly conference to find “solidarity-and-green” solutions to such issues, including anti-foreclosure action, anti-racist community activism and the establishment of worker-owned cooperatives in accessible professions: from bicycle repair sheds to

urban community gardens.¹⁴ I will now contrast and compare these initiatives with those of solidarity economy networks in Italy, which I will first briefly introduce.

9.3 Solidarity economy networks in Italy

In Italy, so-called “solidarity purchase groups” establish direct consumer–producer food networks with local farmers. Participants in these alternative food networks call themselves *GASista*, from GAS, an acronym for the Italian *Gruppi di acquisto solidale* (solidarity purchase groups). I have published extensively on GAS (Grasseni 2013, 2014a, 2014c, 2017, 2018) and I refer to this scholarship for details, limiting myself here to remarks that can help a comparative and analytical reading of the American case study.

As the name says, solidarity purchase groups are groups of people who *purchase* food based on solidarity principles, establishing a direct transaction with producers, knowing that especially for smallholders one of the most important hurdles is access to the market. Specific cases may include solidarity with orange growers who cultivate lands expropriated from criminal organizations. Mafias thrive on agribusiness, notably through the exploitation of undocumented migrant labour, as I will detail below, and especially via the monopoly of the distribution of fruits and vegetables, such as citrus. Enabling a direct connection from judicious producers to consumers is thus an act of solidarity, based on principle rather than price/quality calculus. Notably, *direct* transactions may include *long-distance* food chains. In the case of orange growers, about 1,300 kilometres separate consumers in Northern Italy from the Sicilian “mafia-free” cooperatives they choose to buy from: in the cases I observed, orange growers actually drove their lorry from Sicily to Lombardy for a group delivery. This is also something more than a direct *transaction*, described by activists as a form of “co-production”. While *gasistas* do not aim to produce food themselves, they want to enable producers to deliver the food they want (for example, organic, or mafia-free).

The primary objective of solidarity economy activists in Italy is not to create new jobs where capital has failed society, as is the case among the American solidarity economy activists of Central and Eastern Massachusetts. On the contrary, they wish to bypass capital-driven markets (of goods, services and jobs) by setting up localized, direct transactions “in solidarity” with farmers. For example, one of the debated issues in recent years is how citrus fruit trade is infiltrated by mafia-led distribution chains, and how orange picking (but also tomato harvesting) is largely done by very poorly paid undocumented migrant labourers. These often get recruited through local networks of mafia-organized “*caporali*” (literally “caporal”, to indicate a boss who organizes accommodation, maintenance and pay on a day-to-day basis to field workers). These “bosses” are often petty criminals who practically detain their employees under threat of reporting them to the police or even actively organize human trafficking across borders (and especially at

sea) to feed the request for non-unionized workers in rural seasonal jobs (Ben-Yehoyada 2011, 2012; Perrotta 2014).

In response to this civil rights emergency, solidarity purchase groups *buy-cott* (i.e. buy preferentially) “mafia-free” oranges, namely directly from smallholders and growers’ cooperatives who pledge their non-committal to the unsustainably low prices of large distribution channels. It is these low prices that motivate agricultural entrepreneurs to pay their seasonal workers less and less, and mafia-driven organizations exploit this conjuncture with violence. In other words, here as well as in the USA, the concerted exploitation of rural (migrant) labour and the unsustainability of food systems are two intrinsically connected aspects: only by exploiting labour can a “race to the bottom” in prices be implemented. In response to this, in Sicily the self-organization of citizen-consumers began as a grassroots form of local consumers’ support for anti-racket campaigns, in the wake of violent migrant labourers’ riots in the countryside of Southern Italy in 2010 (Perrotta 2014). This developed into a nation-wide media celebration of direct producer–consumer agreements to by-pass the mafias’ system of *caporalato*.¹⁵

Usually GAS groups include 20–40 families. Each member contributes to the group’s decisions to buy one or more items of daily groceries for all the other members (and their families). The meetings are crucial to deliberate together how to choose, whom to contact, with which principles and criteria (organic food? certified organic? ecological detergents? recycled items? and so on). Part of the exercise is the active scouting of producers through personal contacts, on the internet or by word of mouth. “Proximity” producers – as they are called – are usually favoured because of the conviction that cutting “food miles” is important, but also in relation to the anti-globalization movement (from which GAS derive: see Grasseni 2013).

Re-localizing food also goes hand in hand with preference for seasonal products but also with an Italian cultural preference for “local” and “typical” products (see Grasseni 2014, 2014b, 2017). Thus “proximity” might not mean just cutting miles, but a like-minded attitude to nature, the economy and labour. This requires actually getting to know one’s territory, getting an idea of which kinds of food are produced, when and by whom, but also connecting further, using for example social media to educate oneself about the global food system. GAS membership thus entails getting to know the politics of food but also building networks in a very concrete way, taking responsibility for participating in the food chain and paying upfront, collecting orders on behalf of others, organizing collection points, alerting absent-minded members. Free riders don’t last long.

These groups are diverse in their dietary choices but relentless in their deliberations about how to consistently pursue (each) their consensual interpretation of what “solidarity” means. For example, GAS groups are not necessarily all vegetarian. But they may well go to some lengths to “adopt” cows that will be transparently fed (preferably on organic fodder). Animals should be humanely slaughtered (for example, a dairy cow at the end of her

production), butchered possibly in an artisanal environment and their meat distributed in the group in a consequent way: *not everyone will get steak!* People will eat liver, tongue, boiling and roasting cuts, and families will team up to acquire and freeze up to half a cow together.

Deliberation, discussion and the exchange of information are key to this form of self-organization. For example, if members of a GAS group actually know various olive oil producers, what would be the criterion they want to prioritize, in their choice of committing to a producer? Is it taste? price? Is it the fact that it is organic or not? that it is close by or not? that it is a small producer rather than a big one? that it is a cooperative rather than a private enterprise? Each group finds their own criteria, by meeting and deliberating and coming to a solution that works for them, on their own grounds. The movement as a whole knows no hierarchy and no mandatory prescription of how to interpret the basic chart of GAS to answer these questions (see Graziano and Forno 2012; Forno and Graziano 2014; Forno et al. 2015). There is no protocol to follow beyond a manifesto on solidarity economy and an active website, retegas.org, which updates anyone about best practices, conferences, annual meetings, etc. As a result anyone can set up a GAS, and many more groups existed nationwide than the about 1,000 groups which had registered on this list by the year 2000, as capillary research in the regions of Lombardy and Lazio established (Fonte 2013; Forno et al. 2013).

9.4 Discussion

A comparative research agenda studying emerging forms of collaborative networks in Europe and the USA has established that the “solidarity economy” is a relevant area of redefinition of the economic and political significance of food procurement (Forno et al. 2015; Grasseni et al. 2015). Comprehending the motivation and conceptual framework of the two movements required ethnographic fieldwork, becoming a member of the relevant networks and learning about concrete campaigns, objective hurdles and actual concerns through participant observation and lived experience. We have seen how different movements that call themselves “solidarity economy networks” on the two sides of the Atlantic actually interpret and practice “solidarity” in different ways, adopting diverse models of economic practice with sometimes divergent socio-economic targets. In this concluding discussion I contrast the Italian and American examples of solidarity economy networks and explain how they look differently at the international model of cooperativism, develop distinct skills and generate diverse socio-economic dynamics.

In my American case study, I reported the development of small workers’ cooperatives as a locally perceived solution for building economically, socially and environmentally sustainable food systems, for example to create green jobs for marginalized youth in Massachusetts’ post-industrial wastelands (see also Rose 2014). Conversely, in Italy the solidarity purchase groups set themselves clearly aside from the cooperative model. On the one hand they do not

exclude a priori the possibility of setting up workers'-owned or producers' cooperatives (for instance, to take care of the logistics of organics delivery, similarly to what Valley Green Feast, mentioned above, did). On the other hand, provisioning activists see themselves as working to re-appropriate economic agency *as an alternative to big cooperatives*, which grassroots activists accuse of a monopolizing attitude because, similarly to other market actors, they ruthlessly pursue economies of scales to ensure their market share. In Italy, the cooperative sector is thriving, for instance in the public procurement of food for school canteens, or of services and assistance to the elderly or the mentally ill. The allegation is that, despite their legal status as cooperatives, businesses may employ low-qualified and forcibly flexible employees – often on a part-time or “zero-hours” basis, sometimes in exchange for costly membership fees – hardly an exercise in solidarity.

Another significant point of divergence between American and Italian solidarity economy networks regards their fund-raising capacities (and consequent grant dependency). While it is expected of American solidarity economy initiatives that they are backed up by grants, aimed at creating jobs, and managed at least part-time by professional coordinators, Italian solidarity economy activists are mostly volunteers who work in their spare time. In my experience they are often suspicious of social economy businesses that might benefit from a “solidarity” label. Finally, in Massachusetts solidarity economy activists are concerned with alleviating chronic unemployment and underemployment through locally devised solutions that are at once “green” and participative. This is a fundamental point of divergence in both the discourse and practice of solidarity economy across the Atlantic. It is a divergence in focus that emerges directly from the diversity of the socio-economic contexts, particularly the widely differing degrees of protection of labourers and the differently perceived issue of poverty conditions in the two countries.

In the USA, “solidarity economy networks” practise different types of alternatives than “solidarity economy networks” in Italy, because they interpret “solidarity” differently and target their actions to radically different socio-economic contexts. The former focus especially on social deprivation and food justice. Their alternative food procurement activities may range from eating locally as part of “economic discipleship” (including dumpster diving and communal housing) to setting up workers' cooperatives. Some “cooperative” initiatives are then not formalized, but rather designate informal and often ephemeral informal associations, facilitated by the use of social media such as Facebook pages. In all cases observed, collective forms of food procurement included a substantial amount of reflection over one's purpose and goals, with some commentators interpreting community gardens and urban foraging as “subversive and interstitial food spaces” (Galt et al. 2014; McLain et al. 2014). Consistently with these radical roots, access to resources in a broader sense than food (including energy) as well as economic and environmental justice issues are more in focus among American solidarity economy circles than the Italian ones.

The Massachusetts networks look at the workers'-owned cooperative model, including the Italian cooperatives in Emilia Romagna, and they take Mondragon to be an internationally successful model. Conversely, the Italian solidarity economy activists are highly critical of this model, because they see how the cooperative model once grown to scale can behave exactly like any multinational corporate actor and be co-opted in neoliberal dynamics – collaborating in the withdrawal of welfare services in exchange for externalization to contract work. While the American movement looks especially at Italy and Spain for successful models of workers'-owned cooperatives, the Italian movement distinguishes solidarity economy (largely consumer-driven) from the “social” or cooperative economy (which is equated to one of the orthodox actors in the global economy and the global food system).

While Italian solidarity purchase groups focus on “co-production” as a form of producer–consumer collaboration, US solidarity economy activists prefer to set up worker-owned cooperatives, for example in urban agriculture and food distribution, but also building and repair work and the weatherization of low-budget houses. In general, however, the word “cooperative” is also used in everyday language to mean any collective endeavour that requires collaboration, including co-housing, buying clubs, etc. Both types of network require engagement and significant investment of time and resources from their members, but different sets of skills are developed within each country: while the Italian activists develop mostly consumer-driven, volunteer-run collective provisioning schemes, the American activists become project developers for social and economic enterprises in the green and cooperative sector, often depending on grants and start-up funds.

To conclude, practices, language and shared international literature define solidarity economy as an emergent and transnational movement, but this is nevertheless appropriated locally in very distinct ways. This is significant considering the existence of international networks which specifically aim at uniting and exchanging best practices among solidarity economy networks across the globe. Both USSEN and the GAS movement are in fact represented in RIPESS (the “Intercontinental network for the promotion of social solidarity economy”) and URGENCI (the “International network for community supported agriculture”). In both cases, though, activists address food sovereignty (and not only food *safety*) for their local communities (a topic discussed, for example, at the GAS national assembly in 2011 in a working group I participated in), as well as issues of systematic marginalization (for example, in Eastern and Central Massachusetts, but also in Boston, where lack of access to fresh food despite the many farmers' markets and CSAs is due to lack of public transportation and too high prices). But the perceived relevance of food systems in the two societies puts more emphasis on unequal access to decent food in the American case and more on “co-production” as a form of cooperation and support for smallholders in the Italian case. In neither case is provisioning activism simply a mechanical reaction to inequality (in the USA) or austerity (in Italy). The American activists I encountered

are thus more radical than the Italian ones in their understanding of social inequalities and are prepared to take action well beyond the food systems *per se* to address issues of “food justice” and “food access”.

Acknowledgements

This chapter presents the results of a one-year project in Massachusetts funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (post-Ph.D. grant 8643 2013/2014): *Seeds of Trust. A Comparative Analysis of Solidarity Economy Networks in Lombardy (Italy) and Massachusetts (USA)* and a two-year visiting scholarship (2012/2014) at Harvard Anthropology Department. Further insights derive from my current project *Food Citizens? The project Food Citizens? Collective Food Procurement in European Cities: Solidarity and Diversity, Skills and Scale* has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement no. 724151).

Notes

- 1 Audiorecorded working session (packing community-supported agriculture delivery boxes) with members of a farming cooperative, Valley Green Feast, on 31 January 2014 in Hadley, MA.
- 2 See for example the documentary film on the history of consumers’ food cooperatives in the United States: <http://foodforchange.coop/category/film/sinterviews/>.
- 3 From conversations with local, national and international representatives of UFCWU, United Food and Commercial Workers Union.
- 4 www.valleygreenfeast.com
- 5 Online webinar, 6 March 2014.
- 6 Emily Kawano, second conference of the Solidarity and Green Economy Alliance, Worcester, MA, November 2013. Commenting on a presentation available online at: <https://ussen.org/portfolio/economics-for-the-rest-of-us/>
- 7 Interview with founding member of a farming workers’ cooperative, 16 November 2013.
- 8 Interview with founding member of a farming workers’ cooperative, 16 November 2013.
- 9 Source: audiorecording of public presentation, “Co-op Power Open House. Deep Energy Retrofit Demo”. Sunday, 23 March 2014 at Stone Soup, Worcester, MA.
- 10 Interview with leaders of SAGE, invited to speak to my Boston University gastronomy masters’ students on 7 October 2013.
- 11 Audiorecorded interview, 15 March 2014, with a Young Adult Presbyterian disciple.
- 12 <http://leagueofurbancanners.org/>; www.facebook.com/LeagueOfUrbanCanners/; <https://sites.google.com/site/cambervillebiket trailersshare/>
- 13 www.communityeconomies.org
- 14 SAGE keeps an online open-access archive of all conferences: www.worcestersagealliance.org/

- 15 The Orange Landings of 2012 are documented in Federico DeMusso's documentary "The other side of the orange" <http://vimeo.com/federicodemusso>.

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