

Envisioning  
Sustainabilities:

*Towards an Anthropology  
of Sustainability*

Edited by

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## CHAPTER THREE

### THE EMERGING SPHERES OF RESONANCE: “CLANDESTINELY GENUINE” FOOD NETWORKS AND THE CHALLENGES OF GOVERNING SUSTAINABILITY IN ITALY

ALEXANDER KOENSLER

#### The Power of Standardization

When K. arrives at the village, he stops at the old bridge. He then looks up to where “the castle” should be, but perceives only an apparent emptiness, darkness. He is overcome with the feeling that he is somehow lost. With reference to the apparent emptiness of power, Franz Kafka (2009) thus begins his book *The Castle*. The story remains, throughout the book, one of a search to penetrate into the unreachable, fugitive, abstract emptiness of a power-governance conundrum that remains ever present. Such glimmers of how power is experienced in the wake of the Habsburgerian bureaucracy by Kafka might also serve as a metaphor for the theme of how policy regulations, including those for sustainable food and agriculture, are experienced by many independent small-scale farmers. The evolution of food governance is increasingly characterized by a proliferation of apparently objective procedures of evaluation, standardization and certification, including those who demonstrate sustainable ways of production. K’s experiences of alienated, depersonalized power bring us into the heart of a debate over food sovereignty and the right to certify. Despite the growing sophistication of regulations for sustainable food and agriculture, the sense of lost control over the quality of food products has become a powerful symbol of the alienating aspects of globalisation.

This chapter aims to contribute to a more detailed understanding of these dynamics through a case study of a novel form of political mobilization in a rural context. Based on ongoing ethnographic fieldwork

in Umbria, Central Italy<sup>1</sup>, I started to document the rapid growth of the movement “Genuinely clandestine” (GC) out of a range of dispersed pre-existing consumer-producer groups (*Gruppi d'acquisto solidali*, GAS) and eco-anarchistic networks. Founded in 2012, GC contests the efficacy and practicality of the current regime of EU regulations for sustainable agriculture and hygienic food processing.<sup>2</sup> As an emerging network, it unites small-scale independent growers who oppose the EU-driven regulations of food certification, - considered to be driven by global agribusiness interests. In 2013, I started to follow systematically these developments in the peripheral region of Umbria, an area with a long history of rural activism which has traditionally attracted not only farmers who experiment with methods of advanced organic agriculture, but also eco-anarchic and permaculture communes, as well as eco-villages related to “bioregional” or “deep ecology”-movements. Throughout Italy, CG has recently succeeded to promote different types of so-called “participatory self-certifications” of “genuine” food products, direct marketing and public demonstrations. From this perspective, the attempt to guarantee sustainability through standardized policy approaches remains contested and subverted by those who actually would be expected to benefit from such policies. In contrast to the ethical consumerism of local food networks such as the Slow Food movement, this rapidly growing network acts provocatively in grey legal spaces. Why and how are some farmers drawn into the activities of the network? What potential does this movement have to cause the re-thinking of policies for sustainability standards?

### Sustainable Food Networks and Governance

Over the past decade, food studies have pursued new directions. A growing body of research examines practices of resistance against the global agribusiness, including the emergence of local food activism (Counihan and Siniscalchi 2014; Lykoe 2011; Nonini 2013).<sup>3</sup> A growing realm of ethnographic research highlights the array of farmers’ practices of resistance against certifications (Gladwin and Trueman 1989; Papa 2002).<sup>4</sup> Some authors have analysed the role of ethical food activism such as the Slow Food movement in lifestyle changes (Leitch 2013), creating a debate about important methodological issues in social anthropology regarding the understanding of community and networks (Parkins and Craig 2006; Pink 2008). This body of research is also beginning to make a major contribution to how global political issues are considered through food, in contrast to a more positivist strand that considers eating and culture as an

issue of research in itself. This is evident, for example, in *The Oxford Handbook of Food History* (Pitcher 2012), which focuses on an encyclopaedic approach attempting to list knowledge. A similar approach of rather limited analytic depth can be found in the extensive writing on specific foods in circumscribed local contexts (Munn 1992; Ohnuki-Tremey 1994; Albaladejo 2012). In addition, a body of anthropological research has begun to investigate challenges and contestations to the food system, treating them as struggles over global social justice (Counihan and Van Esterik 2013; Counihan and Siniscalchi 2014). However, the relation between food and political dynamics is often considered as an assemblage of localist practices (Nonini 2013: 267; Papa 2002), framed in terms of ethical consumerism (Guthman 2013; Lykoe 2011) or individual agency (Gladwin and Trueman 1989; Wu and Cheung 2002). In other words, a systematic understanding of practices of resistance against the standardization policies in the realm of food production is still missing.

Although offering a welcome contribution to the existing literature on local food chains, the bulk of the literature on local food networks often celebrates ethical activism and individual agency, overshadowing more political dynamics related to governance and food policies. Following Bourdieu’s (2015) analysis of resistance as an instrument to understand the evolution of contemporary governance, I attempt to investigate the issues around sustainable and organic certifications as an analytical prism for the positive and productive aspects of power (Foucault in: Dreyfus, Rabinow and Foucault 1983: 209). In this sense, the rise of farmer’s activism that attempts to re-invent food certifications in democratic and participatory terms offers a catalyst for the understanding of changing social relations within the evolution of contemporary governance. In a world where power relations are hidden behind objective procedures of unquestionable standardization, resistance and activism, food certification has become a prism through which to understand power relations, “locate their position, find out their points of applications and the methods used” (Foucault 1982: 209).

Ethnographic studies of government policies such as certification are part of a broader shift of anthropological knowledge towards an interest in the functioning of institutions in complex societies (Marcus 1999; Fischer 1999; Rabinow 2008). In their seminal work on the anthropology of policy, Shore and Wright (1997) demonstrate how “policy” has become an important instrument in the organisation of contemporary societies. This interest has been developed in line with ethnographies of the ways in which political power is played out in specific contexts, a cornerstone of political anthropology (Wolf 2001; Paley 2001; Lewellen 2003).<sup>5</sup> Some

studies of the anthropology of policy have also shifted attention to how policies are productive, performative and contested (Müller 2011; Zinn 2011). In other words, through this anthropological “eye” cast on the way in which policies are implemented allows one to examine otherwise hidden social relations and realities.

This body of research can offer a new perspective on the ways food safety policies are implemented into the dynamics of contemporary food governance. For example, in the so-called “horse-meat scandal” in 2013, foods advertised as containing beef were found to contain undeclared or improperly declared horse meat - as much as 100 per cent of the meat content in some cases.<sup>6</sup> A first report by the House of Commons Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on the incident was not critical of UK or Irish producers.<sup>7</sup> Only afterwards did the UK government call for an “independent” and “objective” investigation on the website of the Food Standards Authority.<sup>8</sup> The report outlines how instrumentalised relations in food production also leads to some curious, if not fascinating issues. A ‘stand-alone’ cold-store (e.g. on an industrial estate) will be subject to checks by the local authority. Such cold-stores are assumed to be lower risk than manufacturing or processing plants for inspection purposes, and so may be subject to infrequent inspections. Inspections that do take place also present practical difficulties when attempting to detect fraud: they may be announced, and are not usually fraud-aware. Both local authorities and so-called “private sector audits” are generally more concerned with food hygiene and safety than with fraud. However, the report concludes, “fortunately, consumers in the UK have access to perhaps the safest food in the world. Major scientific advancements are being made to help minimise risks to the food chain.” What might be true for “safety,” in the strict sense of the term, might not be true for food quality and its sustainability. Thus, by defining and reframing public concerns in terms of “safety” rather than “quality”, policy committees shape the way reality is perceived, presenting subjective political choices as rational and objective. In short, the value of an anthropological perspective on policy lies in its ability to unmask how policies create an apparently neutral world of meaning and are a “type of power and embodiment of instrumental reason” (Wedel, Shore, Feldman and Lahop 2005: 37).

### The Limits of Governing Sustainability

Alternative food exchange networks are widely associated with “ethical consumerism”, niche markets which are situated outside the sphere of

dominant relations. At first glance, they seem to offer a solution to what are perceived as the limits, dangers and damage of the industrial agribusiness. However, as ethical niche markets, mainstream food activism does not engage actively with structures of governance and policy. The rather unique case of the emerging network “Clandestinely Genuine” (*Genuino Clandestino*, in Italian) in Italy indicates a different approach. The movement was originally created in 2010 as an ironic “anti-logo” to commercialised organic food labels in organic markets in Bologna. On one occasion, problems arose when not all independent small-scale farmers who participated in the market could prove they adhered to standards for official organic and hygienic certifications. The farmers in question, however, claimed to adhere to higher standards than the current labels for organic food and were forced to produce their products “clandestinely”, in legally grey or informal spaces. The common opinion understood that current hygienic standards and the complicated and expensive rules for organic certifications intentionally favoured large industrial producers. In a similar vein, the procedures to obtain organic labels were considered incorrect due to the high fee that had to be paid to third-party certifying bodies as a sufficient condition to obtain organic labels. The broad consensus of this opinion transformed rapidly into a campaign for the “grassroots-certification” practices of small farmers.

For members of the “Clandestinely Genuine” (CG) network, participatory self-certification follows a set of rules and conventions that are democratically and locally set in consumer-producer assemblies. For example, they involve visits of consumers to farms or production units, the drafting of documents that represent the product, and the final approval in consumer-producer relations. As an open challenge to bureaucratic regulations in 2014, CG expanded to a national and international network present throughout central and northern Italy—with separate local markets, food cooperatives and political events. In contrast to past forms of individual forms of resistance or ethical activism, the innovative potential of CG derives from its ability to drastically rethink the way we exchange food, to re-appropriate the right to certify and to set quality standards. Thus, CG engages actively with the power structures of governance rather than eluding or silently subverting them. Importantly, the GC network also distinguishes itself from elite-driven local food networks that target the upper classes, a point frequently criticized by research into the subject (Nolini 2013). Independent small-scale farmers who sell their products can offer low prices since they skip intermediate steps. Interestingly, this engagement can assume different political stances. In some regions, local groups of CG intersect and overlap with other farmer-movements, such as

the reformist movement “Small-scale Farmer’s Agriculture” (*Agricoltura Contadina*, in Italian). This movement proposes a reformulation of current legislation in favour of local, small-scale productions that valorise the environment and create non-market relations. Rather than “clandestine”, activists believe that legislative reform could change power dynamics in their favour. However, CG activists are more sceptical and believe that the interests of the agrifood lobby, or generally of capitalist structures, would prevent such a reformist approach.

In my fieldwork, I have chosen to work with farmers who live in the mountains and hills of Umbria in Central Italy, because this is a region that traditionally has attracted alternative farming experiments. Its remote hillsides and valleys have long been considered as ideal places for alternative farming by activists of Eco and communal movements. Here, the idea of “participatory self-certifications” spread in 2012-13 from the more organised branches of the network in Northern Italy, such as Emilia Romagna. In Umbria, the first small-scale independent food producers who took up the ideas of “Clandestinely Genuine” have been those who are part of movements of urban citizens who moved into the countryside in order to become self-sufficient alternative farmers in the eighties. However, some of these are afraid to join the movement due to the provocative legal challenges. They prefer not to participate in “illegal” activities and to risk the confiscation of their self-certified, “clandestine” cheese or bread. These experiences illustrate the role of ethnography as an instrument to unearth unexpected elements or, as William James is quoted as stating in Willis and Trondman’s (2010: 395) *Manifesto for Ethnography*, “experience, as we know, has ways of boiling over, and making us correct our present formulas”. The richness, ambiguity and even contradictory nature of social reality constitutes a heuristic resource to understand what is at stake. In a wider sense, this form of relational thinking as a scientific practice is also central to Pierre Bourdieu’s (1990, 1991) sociology and theory of practice, which constantly criticises the “realism” or “substantialism” of knowledge and calls for an attempt to go beyond ordinary, first-hand experiences.

### Tony

In this methodological attempt to follow relations around activism- rather than studying activism in itself and to transcend the obvious experiences of mobilization- a certain complex “ambiguity” of activism emerges towards the political goals of the national GC network. There is, for instance, Tony.<sup>9</sup> His story exemplifies the shifting and sometimes

contradictory aspects of political engagements considered within GC’s wider web of social relations. Tony is a man who made the most of his wealth in the eighties- in the city of Perugia, running a popular pub with three terraces, as he proudly notes. When the profits decreased and he became more inclined towards a more relaxed life, he bought an abandoned farm in the mountains. On his Facebook page, he calls this “Free Collelunisco”, an allusion to a semi-independent entity in which state authority has little space. One of his preferred products is a wine called “Red Clandestine,” which he sells at markets and political events. With his wife, he also bakes traditional cakes (*crostate*), with organic wheat and marmalade provided by their neighbours. On his Facebook page, he uploads regular pictures taken during the production of his products. At markets and festivals, he likes to celebrate, talk and dance- despite his age. In interviews, he demonstrates attachment to the idea of a “market place,” conceived as a place of social exchange beyond profit and instrumental relations.

In GC markets, ordinary consumers are considered as co-producers who are invited to participate in the production process, and to share food, knowledge and some local products. Tony’s talkative, even festive approach to the markets remains at the forefront here. “Participating in markets”, he claims, “gives me a sense of my work”. However, things are not always so peaceful. At one of the markets that I attended regularly, producers and co-producers would share their lunch – and Tony contributed with his wine. On one occasion, towards the end of the lunch, conversation turned to one participant who had temporary financial difficulties and some participants considered possibilities to help him out, either with money or labour. When someone mentioned that the year prior, Tony was helped out after some difficulties, a discussion started on whether this was a similar or a different situation. Tony became increasingly angry at this and he interrupted the discussion vehemently. This event illustrates the role of deep personal involvement in this space- far beyond instrumentalised market-relations. It also indicates the complex role of such political engagements, which shift between material constraints, solidarity and the wider political goals of CG.

### Angela

Another enlightening example of the centrality of human relations over profit from my ethnographic research is provided by the story of Angela. When she lost her job two years ago, she recovered the uncultivated land belonging to her father up in the mountains, about a two-hour drive from

her home. From her savings, she bought a used tractor and some equipment and started producing wheat and lentils and some sheep milk. In the first year, she invested a great effort in obtaining certifications for her products. She paid 1600 Euros per year just for permission to sell her lentils, and had to take them to an officially recognised cleaning facility situated a three-hour drive away from her fields. During the second year she met with other farmers and started to sell her milk to a friend who made cheese without official certification. At markets, Angela can be found selling both her legal lentils and the clandestine cheese. Initially, she found selling in the local Slow Food Presidia meetings, but remained disappointed by the rules of the presidia. For example, the price of lentils was fixed at 4.50 Euro and she found it more convenient to sell them at 3.50. She says, "I like to be honest and why should I earn more than I need. At Slow Food they told me I was thinking like a consumer and not a business person". As these words show, Angela is proud to think as a "consumer" and focus less on profits. In an almost Zen-like attitude, many activists seem to succeed in overcoming many constraints of profit-making through engaging in non-market relations- rather than at a later stage- allowing (indirectly) higher profits. In the case of Angela, her "social" approach to selling lentils widened her range of consumers and strengthened their trust in her and her products. What is interesting in both cases is the emphasis on social relations and the opposition to economic logics in the statements of both small-scale farmers; the one who does it in order to make a living and the one who sells his wine in order to keep abreast with friends. Exchange of food is transformed into a way of developing human relationships, based on trust and creativity.

### **"Spheres of Resonance"**

Despite several ambiguities, the value of these "non-market" relations, in both the experiences of Tony and Angela, are at the basis of dynamics that establish new forms of "trust" between producers and consumers (often re-labelled as co-producers within CG circuits). This emphasis on trust and the recovery of social relations is evident in the organizational structures of CG assemblies, markets and meetings. At Clandestinely Genuine markets, producers are keen to spend a surprisingly lengthy time with buyers, explaining the processes of production and making friends. Moreover, relations are organized horizontally- rather than in a hierarchical manner- as in the procedures of certification through external authoritative experts. Within the CG network, participatory self-certification works not on the basis of objective guidelines or structured

descriptions, but rather relationally. What you find is a list of voices of people. For example, in a document published on a blog focusing on how these certifications work, Laura says, "To propose meetings and workshops at the farm, this might be one of the ideas on how to create contacts". In another significant passage, Carlo says, "The path of participatory self-certification leads mainly to a human relationship, a relationship of trust: it represents a welcome to the community of consumption, from the moment you begin to share the day, the week, the year: to be born forces a relationship of mutual trust".

These rather short extracts aim to demonstrate the innovative attempts of CG to recover horizontal and trustful social relations in food chains, thereby opening up the possibility to rethink food governance in unexpected ways. The concept of "spheres of resonance," as developed in the work of Hartmut Rosa (2012), offers a possibility to better understand the emphasis on personal relations in CG's approach to sustainability. Inspired by the interest of the Frankfurt School in understanding alienation in contemporary capitalism, Rosa examines how the increased sense of alienation in contemporary societies derives from the need of finance capitalism to economize, accelerate, measure and standardize human relations.<sup>10</sup> In this line of argumentation, the proliferation of these instrumental relations also de-politicizes issues of public concern, ultimately threatening democracy. Rosa contrasts these instrumentalised relations as a means of governance with humanistic "relations of resonance", inspired by Charles Taylor (1994), which are based on experiences of fullness, similar to the experience of a good song, a prayer or a dance. In other words, social acceleration leads directly to a loss of "resonance" in human relations. For example, listening to a delightful song, our heart and soul is touched in a way that resonates with the piece. In other words, the song "resonates" throughout our body and spirit in an emotional experience that is based on trust. As subjects, we feel a sense of being in the world through such relations of resonance. This type of relation is for Rosa a "relation of resonance," in contrast to empty, causal, and instrumentalised relations, as in the case of filling out a form, the completion of so-called To-Do-Lists (before we actually start to do what we want), and so on. In industrialized agribusiness, the exchange of food remains organized over such instrumentalised relations, not only in supermarkets. The process of food production itself is also increasingly regulated not through relations of resonance and trust, but on formalized and automated processes of certification and standardization. Farmers do not know who consume their products, but experience depersonalized relations towards big intermediate traders. By contrast, the motivations of

people like Tony or Angela to engage in the alternative networks of Clandestinely Genuine are motivated through various practices and experiments to recover the direct personal relations of trust between consumers and producers.

### Conclusion

In *The Castle*, Kafka's figure K remains ambivalent. K never succeeds in his struggle to reach out to meet the aristocratic elite of the castle. Kafka did not finish the book and as such, we cannot ever know the ultimate fate of K. This book remains a fragment. It might well be said that the invisibility of the aristocratic elite in Kafka can be seen as a precursor of the contemporary reconfiguration of social relations, as evident in the establishment of authority through objective certifications. The limits of these relations are demonstrated forcefully in the experiences of people like Tony and Angela- who challenge the right to certify. As a novel form of re-appropriation of the "right to certify", the practices of activists and independent small-scale farmers who engage with the Genuinely Clandestine network have broader and more profound political implications than well-known ethical consumer activism. The attempts of this network to rethink instrumentalised relations as enacted in de-personalized food certification cannot be explained in terms of ethical consumerism or the emergence of new and specialized niche markets. By contrast, the Clandestinely Genuine network has the ability to penetrate and challenge a cornerstone of contemporary power- it constitutes a broader model that can be used to rethink the kernel of the articulation of contemporary power, certification and standardization.

Thus, the "ethnographic eye" offers a critique of the way in which mainstream policies of sustainability are implemented. Emerging and experimental forms of activism such as the CG network point to the *status nascendi* of forms of mobilization that cannot be confined or contained in institutional definitions of governance of sustainability. Unnamed figures make their appearance beyond the expectations of instrumentalised practices of governance. According to Engin Isin, "it is unidentified ... not because it is invisible, but because we have not recognized it. It is inarticulable" (Isin 2009: 367). These unnamed and experimental forms remind us of the subversive beginnings of organic agriculture itself. In sum, an anthropology of sustainability rooted in the ethnographic praxis of uncovering emerging figures of mobilization might destabilise the certainty of some policies of sustainability, but reveal those yet unnamed dynamics that are often at the forefront of new development.

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