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Multidisciplinary Approaches to Alternative Food Networks

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A. Corsi et al. (eds.), *Alternative Food Networks*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90409-2_2

Alternative Definitions of Alternative Food Networks

The many examples of food chains that depart from the conventional type of organization have attracted interest not only in the social arena but also from the academic world. Such chains are generally known as Alternative Food Networks (AFNs). Alternative food networks are a wide-ranging body of practices dealing with food provisioning in a way that differs from the mainstream agro-food system (Murdoch, Marsden, & Banks, 2000). AFNs usually take the form of grassroots experiments that aim to reorganize the food system along ethical, political, moral, and health lines (Honkanen, Verplanken, & Ottar Olsen, 2006; Sassatelli, 2015; Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). The term "alternative" seems to have been first used by geographers (Whatmore & Thorne, 1997) as "alternative geography of food", while Marsden, Banks, and Bristow (2000) more specifically cite "alternative food chains", and Renting, Marsden, and Banks (2003) introduce the term "alternative food networks", which has now become current. In spite of the extensive scientific literature on the topic, there is no shared definition of AFNs, partly because the literature focuses on different phenomena and thus uses different criteria for defining AFNs. Tregear (2011) argues that it is necessary to distinguish among different types of AFNs, rather than assigning common features to all of them. We will thus summarize the different criteria used to analyse the issue and the rationale behind them.

One of the first criteria that can be used to classify a specific food chain as "alternative" is the *length of the chain* and/or the *number of intermediaries* between producers and consumers. Several different, often interlinked, concerns underlie this criterion. The length of a chain can be considered in organizational terms, that is, the number of nodes in the chain, and from this perspective, short chains can be seen as a way of supporting farmers against intermediaries, who have market and bargaining power vis-à-vis farmers and thus benefit from rents at the expense of consumers and producers. This is especially the case when the number of intermediaries is used as a criterion of inclusion in the category of AFNs or of "short food supply chain", as it often is in official statements (Aubry & Chiffoleau, 2009). A second concern is environmental, popularized by the "food miles" concept (Paxton, 1994), where chain length is defined in terms of physical distance.

Short chains, "zero miles" initiatives, and the like are considered as tools to reduce an unnecessary waste of resources and an avoidable impact on the environment, under the assumption that the conventional chain entails several different nodes and transporting food over long distances. While this claim will be discussed in detail in Chap. 13, here we are concerned only with the rationale whereby chains are considered to be alternative.

A related criterion is the *local origin of food*. This largely overlaps with the concept of short food chain in terms of spatial distance, and the main concern is with environmental issues. Often, it shares the idea of supporting small local farmers with the criterion of the number of intermediaries, to which it adds the symbolic value of local food as a rediscovery of cultural roots. There has been much debate on this issue, both in the academic and popular literature, and a large stream of scientific literature deals with preferences for local food (often overlapping with preferences for other characteristics of AFN food, see Corsi and Novelli, Chap. 4). Consumers' preferences and the demand for policies in favour of local food have also fuelled the debate on "locavores" (e.g. Desrochers & Shimizu, 2012; for an opposing view, see Scharber & Dancs, 2016).

In the AFN literature, the production and consumption of food are closely tied together spatially, economically, and socially (Goodman & Goodman, 2009). As we argue, however, these criteria are not analytically clear and do not support a sound research perspective. Both the first and second criterion are much too close to the practical definitions of AFNs as used by lay people and practitioners. Moreover, they do not combine with each other coherently. One of the things they are lacking, for instance, "and Walmart's local food initiative is a perfect example of this, is a recognition that reduced spatial distance need not automatically result in the reduction of social distance" (Carolan, 2017, p. 219). These shortcomings have been addressed by the further criterion, popular in the academic literature, of *embeddedness*, that is, the product's connection with information on the way it is produced. In the words of Marsden et al. (2000), "It is this which enables the consumer to confidently make connections and associations with the place/space of production, *and, potentially, the values of the people involved and the production methods employed*". These values stem from the departure from the anonymous and fungible character of the undifferentiated products of the conventional chain, and it is the information content that is at the origin of the

three main types of short food supply chain theorized by Marsden et al. (2000): (1) *face-to-face*, whereby authenticity and trust are directly provided by the producer-consumer interaction, possibly even through the Internet; (2) *spatial proximity*, when food is locally produced and retailed and the origin is communicated; and (3) *spatially extended*, when the information of the origin in a specific region, bearing meaning and value, is communicated to consumers elsewhere.

The embeddedness criterion has the clear merit of encompassing the different motivations for giving value to specific food and/or to specific chains under a single concept, that of information concerning the value of food. Nevertheless, it may by definition include types of food chain that are integrated in the conventional food system. This is the case for certain "spatially extended" food products. It is certainly true that products like Parmigiano Reggiano, or Champagne, derive their appeal for consumers from their regional origin. And it is certainly true, too, that the quality of these products stems from long-lasting historical practices that were originally linked to shared knowledge and skills transmitted over the centuries. Nevertheless, the relevant skills and techniques could now be easily imitated, and the economic value of reputation is legally protected by labels and appellations. More importantly, these products are often fully integrated in the conventional food chain. They are distributed by supermarkets or specialized shops, they are advertised, and from this point of view the differences with branded food are slight.

All in all, we agree with the idea that the meaning of analytical categories used by researchers is often context-dependent (see DuPuis & Goodman, 2005; Morris & Kirwan, 2011; Tregear, 2011) and that the distinctions between alternative and conventional are becoming ever more blurred.

Given this background, we thus consider a different criterion, or rather, a combination of different criteria for determining whether a food network is *alternative*. We define AFNs as those forms of marketing chain for which (1) the consumer-producer relationship is not only mediated by purely commercial operators, (2) the product has special symbolic values for consumers linked to its origin and to the type of trade, and (3) the marketing chain spans a short distance and implies personal relationships. In other words, we consider that alternativeness stems from the fact that the exchange is not purely between an anonymous and fungible commodity and money; that the benefit (or utility, in economics jargon)

for consumers does not only stem from the intrinsic (physical, chemical, or organoleptic) quality of food but from the modalities themselves of the exchange; and, possibly, the utility for producers derives not only from the monetary reward but, again, from the exchange itself.[1] In our view, it is the *quality of the exchange relationship* and what is implied in the exchange that distinguishes the exchange taking place in the AFN from the exchange in the conventional chain. Exchanges in AFN bring their own rewards to individuals (De Schutter, 2017).

This approach of course encompasses several types of chain as considered above. Face-to-face exchanges are obviously included in our concept. The number of intermediaries criterion (especially when the discriminant is one intermediary between producers and consumers) does not necessarily fit in it. Even a single intermediary between the producer and the consumer might eliminate the difference in the quality of the exchange. By contrast, an organization like a Solidarity Purchasing Group (SPG), even if posited as an intermediary, does not prevent the relationship, thanks to the mechanisms of participation by members and to the trust created by reciprocal knowledge with the producers. On the other hand, this approach excludes the spatially extended food chain and, hence, Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) or Geographical Indication (GI) products when they are marketed in the conventional chain.

We hasten to add, however, that this criterion is not meant to present a binary vision of food systems. Quite the opposite, our definition calls for seeing alternative and conventional food networks as lying along a continuum where areas of overlap abound (Ponte, 2016). As argued by Tregear (2011), neat bifurcation between "alternative" and "mainstream" or between "alternative" and "oppositional" agro-food systems may often obscure the ambiguity of reality, where mixed situations and continuous rather than binary choices are frequent. Several studies (Jarosz, 2008; Murdoch & Miele, 1999; Stræte & Marsden, 2006) show that the boundaries between systems are not always clear (Sonnino & Marsden, 2006). As stated by Goodman and Goodman (2009), the interface between alternative and conventional food provisioning is an increasingly permeable and highly contested terrain.

For instance, most members of SPGs also purchase food in the conventional chain, and many farmers who supply SPGs also sell on the conventional chain. Or, among consumers' motivations for buying

directly from farmers, selfish concerns coexist with altruistic motivations. Furthermore, the very idea of quality (locality, freshness, typicality) is shared among different food chains.

Even from these few brief remarks, it is clear that AFNs can be analysed from very diverse points of view, which makes different approaches and disciplinary competences necessary. Different perspectives add to the understanding of the social phenomenon, and this is a crucial goal of our work. We will now present the different disciplinary approaches to AFNs and will attempt to find a synthesis.

The Economic Approach

In a sense, the economic approach radically simplifies reality in order to bring the fundamental mechanisms behind people's and agents' behaviour into sharper focus. The basic assumption of standard economic theory is that agents try to maximize the benefit from their actions, be it personal welfare (utility) for individuals, or profits for firms. From this tenet, the trivial conclusion follows that if an AFN exists in which goods are exchanged, it is because both sides of the exchange have an interest in it. Hence, there is a demand for and a supply of goods. Understanding, and if possible quantifying, the variables affecting the demand for goods in the AFN, and doing the same for supply, is thus a primary concern of the economic approach to AFNs. A second concern is understanding the chain's functioning and organization, its efficiency, and the type of market that it represents. Third, economic activities often entail benefits or costs that do not accrue to the parties who engaged in those activities, that is, externalities (positive and negative, respectively), and this also applies to AFNs. For instance, the functioning of the chain necessarily entails an environmental impact, imposing a cost on society at large. Lastly, some economic theories deal with cases in which, by contrast with the assumptions of standard consumer theory, the exchange does not provide only personal selfish benefit, given that it also creates personal relationships, which we argue are an important component of these chains' alternativeness.

Analysis of demand tries to identify its determinants. Standard consumer theory posits that consumers maximize their utility under a budget constraint, which for homogeneous goods means that the demand for a good is a function of its price, of income, and of taste shifters. Price plays a crucial role for homogeneous goods, since it is an indicator of consumers' preferences, more specifically of their marginal willingness to pay (MWTP[2]). For goods possessing several characteristics of interest for consumers, though, both Lancaster's (1966) and Rosen's (1974) theories provide a theoretical basis for the analysis of consumers' preferences for different attributes or characteristics of a given good. As a result, there is a large literature dealing with consumers' preferences with regard to the characteristics of food. This literature will be presented in more detail in Chap. 4. Suffice here to say that it analyses which characteristics of food are sought by consumers, including different categories. Some refer to the intrinsic qualities of food, such as taste, freshness, and safety, that are of personal interest for the consumer. However, preferences (and willingness to pay) can also have altruistic motivations and concern symbolic values such as provenance from local producers, support for local farmers, environmental stewardship, and opposition to the conventional food system. Moreover, what is particular about AFNs is that, at least for some participants, utility stems not only from the exchange of goods vs. money but also from the modalities of the exchange. In other words, participating in the AFN is itself an object of preference. The economic analysis typically does not investigate the origin of preferences and takes them as a given. What is of interest in the economic analysis is which characteristics of a good are preferred and possibly to quantify their impact on demand.

Concerning the supply side, standard production theory assumes that firms are profit-maximizers. If farms are profit-maximizers, the choice of the marketing chain is simply based on a comparison between revenues and costs (including distribution costs) in the different chains (Verhaegen & Van Huylenbroeck, 2001). Nevertheless, since most firms in agriculture are family farms in which the operator's household provides a large part of the labour, a well-established stream of literature utilizes farm household models to represent family farm behaviour (Huffman, 1980; Singh, Squire, & Strauss, 1986). According to these models, farmers maximize their utility, which is a positive function of farm and off-farm

income and a negative function of their labour. These models are flexible enough to allow the utility function to include any element affecting farmers' utility. Hence, along with the monetary incentive to supply the AFN chain (e.g. a price premium), the choice to engage in the AFN can depend on non-monetary motivations, such as the desire to promote the intrinsic quality value of their products (as opposed to standard/technical obligations of the conventional chain), or the pursuit of personal relationship with consumers. Again, the economic analysis is mainly interested in determining and quantifying the effect of these variables.

A third stream of economic analysis looks at the chain in itself, at how goods are exchanged in the chain, and at what the relationships along it are. In particular, a relevant issue is how distribution costs are borne by the different operators along the chain, since each stage of the chain (storage, processing, transport, retail) entails costs that are passed on to the following stage. In the conventional chain, the costs involved in the final sale to consumers, for instance, the transport costs to the selling point, are borne by supermarkets or by retailers. By contrast, these costs are borne by farmers in farmers' markets, or even by consumers for on-farm direct sales, but they still exist. That distribution costs do not vanish with shorter or even direct chains is frequently overlooked in the literature on the social aspects of AFNs. This is also because the labour used by farmers (or consumers) in AFNs is typically provided by themselves and does not entail an explicit, out-of-pocket cost, so that they often do not take its opportunity cost into consideration.

In a perfectly functioning marketing chain, in any case, the final price should be the sum of production and distribution costs. Nevertheless, some operators along the chain can have market power, so that the price may not only reflect costs but also a monopolistic or oligopolistic rent. Indeed, AFN operators and scholars often claim the market power of middlemen as a strong reason for supporting direct producer-consumer relationship. More generally, the structure and the functioning of the entire chain is of interest and how revenues, costs, and value added pertain to each participant. This must be assessed on a case-by-case basis, since there seems to be much variation in this respect, as shown, for instance, by the empirical case studies comparing the structures and the performance of local and mainstream food chains in the US reported in

King et al. (2010). These considerations could also bring to the fore the issue of the different chains' efficiency, that is, which chain entails the lowest overall cost for delivering food from the farmer to the consumer. A purely monetary comparison, though, would be inappropriate, since the benefits for participants in AFNs are not limited to revenue (for sellers) or food (for buyers), given that the exchange itself and the personal relationships provide utility, which should be deducted from the (possibly higher) costs of the AFN chain as compared to the conventional one. This is probably the reason for the lack of such comparisons in the literature, but it should not be forgotten that if AFNs are to last, a balance between (both monetary and non-monetary) benefits and costs of participation must be reached and maintained.

Indirect effects of AFNs include their economic impact and the positive and negative externalities. It is often claimed in the sociological and geographic literature that AFNs can favour the local economy (Ploeg et al., 2000; Marsden et al., 2002; Renting et al., 2003). This can happen via the multiplier effect on employment, local purchase, upstream procurement, and the like. Several studies evaluate the impacts of local or short food chains on the local economy, generally reaching the conclusion that they have a better impact than traditional chains (for a review, see Kneafsey et al., 2013). Negative externalities, according to economic theory, are a cause of market failure, that is, of inefficiency, since a larger sum of net benefits for society at large could be reached if the external costs were reduced to the level at which the marginal external cost equals the marginal abatement cost. Since virtually each consumption and production activity entails some negative externality, an immediate question is the comparison between the external costs determined by the AFN chains and those of the conventional chain. The comparison can be conducted using economic valuation techniques, but a preliminary step is the "technical" assessment of the environmental impacts of the chains. This is the objective of Chap. 13 of this book.

So far, the motivations of participants (both producers and consumers) in AFNs have been considered as independent from each other, and it was assumed that operators pursue their own interest: even when their motivations are altruistic, it can be argued that they are "purchasing moral satisfaction" (Kahneman & Knetsch, 1992). This is the standard

assumption in the analysis of market functioning. Nevertheless, we argue that the alternativeness of AFNs lies in the fact that the benefit of the exchange comes from the modalities of the exchange themselves, so that the very fact of participating in an AFN brings a reward. This benefit is strictly linked to personal relationships. Personal relationships are beyond the scope of economic relationships. While one can be willing to pay to have someone sing for her, no one would pay a friend to sing together. Economic transactions are often between people, but these are fungible, anonymous, and self-interested relationships, as opposed to the idiosyncratic, reciprocal, and free nature of personal relationships like friendship, sympathy, and love. Increasingly, however, economics has dealt with various facets of human behaviour involving interpersonal relationships, leading to a growing recognition that they play a role even in economic life. The role of interpersonal relationships has been theorized as the production of relational goods (Gui, 2000; Gui & Stanca, 2010; Uhlaner, 1989). In particular, Gui (2005) views "interpersonal events as 'encounters': peculiar productive processes that employ various types of resources contributed by interacting parties (human resources, above all), and that deliver not only conventional outputs (…) but also relational outputs" (Gui & Stanca, 2010). A relational good can be created between consumers and farmers in a situation of direct interaction in alternative chains. This is the case, for instance, when a consumer buys regularly from the same vendor, becomes on friendly terms with her, and chats during the sale. For both parties, this relationship has a value, even if, by its very nature, it cannot be bought. Of course, this can also happen in a conventional chain, though less frequently. And not every transaction in an AFN creates a relational good, since attending an AFN may have only egoistic motivations.

The Sociological Approach

In sociology, AFNs are analysed in several subfields, each with its own analytical emphasis. First of all, sociological analysis looks at AFNs within the overall framework of the so-called sociology of development (Barbera, 2016). Here the sociological analysis of AFNs provides a critical appraisal

of the current systems of producing and marketing food from a *political economy* standpoint. The general idea is that modern food systems are not sustainable since they have health and environmental impacts that are intertwined with strong *power imbalances* in food chains. These power imbalances stand in the way of any radical change towards a better food system (De Schutter, 2017). Malnutrition and obesity are a consequence of the top-down and profit-seeking introduction of high-processed and high-caloric food in rich countries, while hunger is the consequence of supply-side factors linked to agricultural policies and the *uneven* globalization of food chains (De Schutter, 2012). The green revolution, the spread of monocultures, and the correlated mechanization of agriculture impacted agro-biodiversity and brought about a captive value-chain with inter-firm linkages involving one-way dependency of suppliers (Gereffi, Humphrey, & Sturgeon, 2005). From the environmental viewpoint, the world agro-food system is directly implicated in the degradation of habitats and soil resilience: "Agricultural expansion has had tremendous impacts on habitats, biodiversity, carbon storage and soil conditions. In fact, worldwide agriculture has already cleared or converted 70% of the grassland, 50% of the savannah, 45% of the temperate deciduous forest, and 27% of the tropical forest biome" (Foley et al., 2011, p. 338). This line of research thus views AFNs as an antidote to the failure of the multiple crises of the "globalization project" (McMichael, 2012, chapter 8). The environmental emergency and the crisis of natural resources, the unresolved problem of hunger, the political and social crunch, and the cyclical crisis of financial capitalism have marked the path through the third millennium. As a result, there have been many attempts to rethink the very roots of global development towards a "sustainable development". But faced with collapsing ecosystems, toxic environments, soil depletion, climate chaos, disappearing species, and finite fossil fuels, does sustainability even make any sense when there is so little left to sustain? (Bullard, 2011). Accordingly, AFNs refer critically to the topic of "development", as in the case of the "degrowth" approach (Latouche, 2009). This line of thought rejects the very concept of economic growth in favour of a model founded on the quality of life, communitarian re-embeddedness of food, and conviviality.

A second take is within the framework of the "sociology of food production and consumption". Here the standpoint is that AFNs entail a different idea of quality from conventional food chains, the so-called quality turn in food production and consumption. Accordingly, the "quality conventions" perspective has gained momentum in the sociological understanding of AFNs (Ponte, 2016). The contribution of this stream of research has been summarized by Ponte (2016) in two main lines: the worlds of production framework (Salais & Storper, 1992; Storper & Salais, 1997) and the orders of worth approach (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991, 2006).[3] The worlds of production framework was developed by Salais and Storper (1992), who distinguished between two analytical dimensions: (1) the more or less restricted community of specialists for the supply of technology, information, and skills at the production level and (2) whether demand is more or less anonymous/generic. The four possible combinations lead to a classification of "worlds of production" as follows: (1) Industrial World (production of standardized-generic products); (2) Network Market World (standardized-dedicated); (3) Marshallian Market World (specialized-dedicated); and (4) World of Innovation (specialized-generic). With regard to the orders of worth approach, Boltanski and Thévenot (1991) develop six worlds of legitimate common welfare (inspirational, domestic, opinion/fame, civic, market, and industrial worlds) that call upon orders of worth other than the neoclassical parameters of price/utility maximization. According to conventions theory, rational choice is the main component of exchange only when differences in prices directly express shared differences in quality. In this case, pure market coordination applies. When—as with AFNs—price alone cannot translate quality, actors set up other, non-market, conventions and forms of coordination (Barbera & Audifredi, 2012). In domestic coordination, uncertainty about quality is dealt with through interpersonal trust (i.e. long-term social ties between actors). In industrial coordination, uncertainty is reduced through common enforceable standards. Civic coordination works where there is a collective commitment to the welfare and/or public interest. In the opinion-based world, uncertainty about quality is solved through public celebrity, and worth derives from expert opinion. Lastly, in the inspirational world, what is worthy is what cannot be controlled, what is felt in inner experi-

ence, manifested by feelings and passions and what rejects habits and routines (Ponte, 2009). The theory of conventions has been applied to a variety of research problems, including wine production (Ponte, 2009), non-standard food production/consumption practices (Murdoch & Miele, 1999; Sassatelli & Davolio, 2010), local partnership between producers and consumers (Lamine, 2005), alternative food networks (Sage, 2003a; Goodman, 2009), the turn to quality in food production and consumption (Murdoch et al., 2000), culinary networks (Murdoch & Miele, 2004), and geographical indication (Barham, 2003). Conventional food networks would thus refer to *hard quality*, namely to certain detectable characteristics such as prices and standardized rules of production, as well as the attribution of premiums, brands, and other recognition. AFNs instead point to *soft quality*, namely to less directly perceivable qualities, which emphasize the role of stakeholders in a local context, respect for tradition, the existence of trust relations, attention for the environment, the value given to shared community spirit, and passion for farming (Barbera & Dagnes, 2017). But: "in reality, clear distinctions cannot be made between definitions of quality and (…) boundaries between categories are often blurred" (Sage, 2003b, 7). Even if soft quality is more relevant in AFNs, conventional food chains conjure up certain "alternative" ideas in the products they propose to consumers. The complexity of exchange and the overlap among different quality worlds open a window of opportunity for *camouflage* strategies by hybrid organizations whereby conventional food chains conquer specific zones of AFNs' quality space in order to fulfil consumers' desire for "alternative" quality conventions (see Barbera, Dagnes, & Di Monaco, 2018, chapter 2.2).

Lastly, in the field of rural sociology, AFNs are connected to grassroots social innovations (De Schutter, 2017), such as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), Solidarity Purchase Groups, and new-peasants. The key topic in this stream is the relationship between food and territory. Re-thinking the agro-food chain by proposing an alternative model starting from bottom-up experience also means redefining the spatial, social, cultural, and economic relationships of each specific context (Barbera & Dagnes, 2017). AFNs are here considered from both the demand and supply side, thus overlapping the analysis with the two streams illustrated above. Community Supported Agriculture is a system in which consumers

contribute to supporting local farmers by entering into direct producer-to-consumer marketing schemes. The founding idea of CSA is to: "re-establish a sense of connection to the land for urban dwellers and to foster a strong sense of community and cooperation with a decided social justice goal to provide food security for disadvantaged groups" (Adam, 2006, 2). Solidarity Purchase Groups (Grasseni, 2013) are self-organized groups buying from small producers, often although not always organic and/or in the same region or area of residence. They play a role in fighting the marginalization of small and micro-farms in the country (Grasseni, 2013; Maestripieri, 2016) and in promoting consumer's awareness and their empowerment for the impact of consumption on the food system. Lastly, the new-peasant perspective emphasizes that industrial farming is being replaced by a peasant model, both in developed countries and in developing ones (van der Ploeg, 2008). The replacement is qualitative rather than quantitative, as it points to a new model built upon ecological capital, subsistence self-provisioning, actively constructed difference, dynamic co-production, multiple resistance, extended networks, and new marketplaces (van der Ploeg, 2010). These features can translate into a variety of trajectories and development opportunities for localities where new-peasants emerge and flourish.

The Environmental Approach

In the current trend in the food market, consumers are increasingly looking for more environmental sustainable products as well for more sustainable forms of trade. The problem of the environmental impacts of the conventional food system, which until the 1990s was almost exclusively identified with pollution (water, air, soil) caused by farming and livestock production, has gradually come to be seen as much more complex and has been extended to the food supply chain's technical functions (transfer of products over time and space) and distribution features (the proximity relationship between producer and consumer, the range, the ways of provisioning, the ability to respond to specific needs, consumer behaviour).

AFNs have also gained importance as a result of their promising capacity to respond effectively to this new market demand with more environ-

mentally friendly and small-scale production, local embedded products, and more direct systems of distribution.

This environmental sustainability has been much touted as one of the distinctive features of AFNs and their characterization (otherness and alternatively) as compared to conventional food provisioning forms. Much of this view has depended on the popular concept of food miles (Paxton, 1994), which sees AFNs as being linked to local food origin and, hence, more environmentally friendly. However, this assumption gradually came under critical scrutiny from the specialist literature (Coley, Howard, & Winter, 2009; DEFRA, 2005; Edwards-Jones et al., 2008; Van Passel, 2013), with a progressive deconstruction of the automatisms that led to belief in AFNs' intrinsic environmental sustainability (Tregear, 2011). Exemplary of this evolution was the debate about the local trap (Born & Purcell, 2006), which created the preconditions for the development of analyses and comparisons between the environmental impact assessment of alternative and conventional marketing channels.

The development of interpretative approaches for assessing the sustainability of the various organizational forms of agro-food supply chains in which the local becomes the boundary of the system and "not the intrinsic purpose of the system" (Coley et al., 2009), along with case studies that provided more insight into AFNs' actors and behaviours, relational shapes, objectives and forms of interactions in the supply chain, contributed to undermining the plausibility of a direct link between alternative networks and environmental sustainability, highlighting instances of hybridization with conventional systems of distribution.

On the one hand, almost paradoxically, the difficulty of drawing unequivocal conclusions about AFNs' environmental sustainability has challenged their own alternativeness. Consequently, even the conceptual frame based on the alternative-conventional binary opposites (Sonnino & Marsden, 2006) has been contested, legitimizing a representation of the food system (and of a possible quest for sustainability) with nuanced boundaries and where the local and global scales take the form of a continuum (Brunori et al., 2016). In practice, this continuum becomes evident with the corporate mainstreaming of the products and values conveyed by AFNs (Goodman, Goodman, & DuPuis, 2011).

On the other hand, although the literature on this matter has been extremely lucid and emphasizes that the sustainability outcomes of AFNs are unclear (Forssell & Lankoski, 2014), environmental sustainability continues to be pursued in AFNs by consumers as well as by producers and creates fertile ground for innovative social dynamics (Grasseni, 2013).

Starting from AFNs, food movements are springing up in city-regions and working with local government to address dietary health, environmental quality, and greater civic engagement.

Today, a number of questions arise spontaneously from the contradictory relationship between AFNs and environmental sustainability. These questions concern the extent to which the content on which we build AFNs' identity are shared and objective in the encounter between supply and demand, what attributes are sought, which aspects are left out but would be worth considering, and what strategies can be used to fill the information asymmetry. These are questions that have a general significance for the debate on AFNs' environmental sustainability, but can only be answered on a case-by-case basis.

To sum up, therefore, two issues are of the greatest interest from the environmental perspective. The first is the understanding of the subjective concept of environmental quality by both consumers and producers. This is relevant because it shapes consumers' purchase behaviour and farmers' production choices. The second is the objective "technical" analysis of the impact of different food chains on the environment, which responds to the question of whether the environmental quality sought by consumers and producers in AFNs is actually provided.

The Anthropological Approach

Modern anthropology is based on an empirical and deductive approach usually referred to as ethnographic fieldwork (Barnard, 2000; Barth, Gingrich, Parkin, & Silverman, 2005). Fieldwork can involve a variety of activities, but the most important one is participant observation. This method rests on the idea that to understand how different societies operate, the researcher has to take part in them, observing the society in ques-

tion by participating in the daily life of the people who belong to it (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Robben & Sluka, 2007). Participant observation is usually a long-term activity, lasting many months, if not years. Historically, anthropologists have studied primarily the peoples of the ex-European colonies, but since the end of the Second World War, their attention has shifted to include also their own societies. The study of AFNs can be considered part of this anthropological work carried out "at home" (Jackson, 1987; MacClancy, 2002).

From a sub-disciplinary perspective, AFNs fall broadly at the intersection between economic and political anthropology (e.g. Carrier & Luetchford, 2012; Counihan & Siniscalchi, 2013; Grasseni, 2013; Pratt & Luetchford, 2014; Rakopoulos, 2014). Two core principles may be said to underline this work. First, the questioning of Western (Euro-American) economic models that purport to have universal applicability. Through their encounters with other cultures, anthropologists have documented ways of life that do not adhere to the tenets of neoclassical economics. AFNs are often seen precisely as partial examples of these ways of life. The second principle is the acknowledgement that, even within Western societies, capitalism and market rationality, though prevalent, are not the only economic forms present (Hann & Hart, 2011; Wilk & Gliggett, 2007). Starting from these two core principles, anthropology makes use of a series of analytical distinctions to guide the study of AFNs.

First and foremost is the distinction between market and society (Hann & Hart, 2009), a deceptively simple one that cannot be taken for granted in our day and age, as Margaret Thatcher's famous comment that "there is no such thing as society" keenly testifies. The idea that capitalist markets may constitute a separate realm of reality ("the" Market) is a historical product that emerged in the UK around the eighteenth century. From the perspective of anthropology, this event marked the first time in human history when the economy became completely *disembedded* from the rest of society (Polanyi, 1944/2001). This is not to say that capitalist markets are not subject to society's influence; they are. The influence lies precisely in their being constructed—symbolically and materially—as separate from society (Pratt & Luetchford, 2014, pp. 9–10). Anthropologists have tended to document the negative consequences of

this disembedding, together with people's responses to it in different times and places. AFNs may be seen as an example of this phenomenon in the world of food, where farmers, retailers, and households have become increasingly subjected to markets in the last 30 years (Heatherington, 2011).

The distinction between embedded and disembedded economies is thus also central to the anthropological approach. Neoclassical economics sees markets formally, treating them as a problem of mathematical logic. It assumes the operation of principles that are thought to have universal validity. Anthropology, on the contrary, sees markets "substantively"—as a problem of fact, not logic—treating them as one aspect of the myriad concrete ways in which human societies organize themselves to provide for their material wants. While these ways are incredibly complex, they tend to coalesce around three processes—reciprocity, redistribution, and exchange—and three social arrangements: horizontal groupings (e.g. households), central authorities (e.g. the State), and price-making markets (e.g. the international coffee market). These elements vary historically and geographically but one is usually dominant, regulating the allocation of natural resources, labour, and money and thus integrating the economy in society (Polanyi, 1957, pp. 243–250; see also pp. 90–126). The human economy, then, "is embedded and enmeshed in institutions, economic and non-economic" (Polanyi, 1957, p. 250).

By looking at AFNs through this lens, we can see how these initiatives try to combine horizontal reciprocity, market exchange, and central redistribution to achieve their goals. Most initiatives rely primarily on a combination of the first two. Within AFNs food is still exchanged in the market by using money, but this activity is subjected to a variety of moral values that temper the excesses of self-interest, making exchange more collaborative (reciprocal) and less competitive. Some initiatives also rely on redistribution (in the form of the state) to widen their appeal by getting local institutions to contribute to their costs, for example, through publicly funded allotments, food policy councils, green public procurement, electronic benefit transfers at farmer's markets, and so on.

Another important set of ideas in the anthropological study of AFNs is that the exchange of objects (including food) helps to create and maintain relationships between social beings and groups. Whereas neoclassical

economics sees trade and consumption as impersonal activities that take place among anonymous individuals who try to maximize their satisfaction, anthropology recognizes the importance of forms of exchange that are based on the sociocultural identities of those involved and are inspired by moral and cosmological motives altogether different from utility maximization (Malinowski, 1922/2007; Mauss, 1925/2016; Sahlins, 1974; Strathern, 1988; Thurnwald, 1932; Weiner, 1992). These forms have been usually grouped under the umbrella term of "gift" and distinguished from commodities and commodity exchange (Carrier, 1995; Godelier, 1998; Gregory, 1982). Gifts and commodities, however, should not be rigidly opposed as simply different kinds of objects. These terms are indexes for processes that can apply, in different social contexts, places, and historical periods, to the *same* object. In other words, something may start its "life" as a commodity and end up being a gift, while a gift may be turned into a commodity by falling into the market realm (Appadurai, 1986; Gregory, 1997; Parry & Bloch, 1989).

These insights are important for the study of AFNs for two reasons. First, because many of these phenomena are represented as being—or as striving to become—social relations, rather than purely economic ones. As Pratt and Luetchford write: "The moral content of alternative [food] markets draws on non-market idioms and ideas" (2014, p. 10). Second, because they help reveal and understand the considerable overlap that exists between what is "alternative" and what is not, between the conventional food system and the initiatives that seek to set themselves apart from it. Anthropologists have thus documented the "work of appropriation" (Miller, 1987) that individuals perform by turning mass-produced commodities into objects that have more than economic value for themselves and their loved ones—effectively turning them into gifts. Eating food that is certified for its social or environmental qualities is an example of this work of appropriation (Carrier & Luetchford, 2012; Jung, Klein, & Caldwell, 2014). But anthropologists have also investigated how these "alternative" foods become again commodities, that is, how their farming systems, retail channels, and practices of consumption become more and more similar to the conventional sector they once sought to escape (DeLind, 2000; Pratt, 2009).

Finally, the anthropological approach questions the use of the terms "producer" and "consumer" that is often found in the literature on AFNs. These two terms hide the influence of neoclassical economics by suggesting that the people who take part in these initiatives are anonymous agents with only one goal in mind, selling or buying. As such, these terms reflect a disembedded view of the market as the intersection of relative scarcity (supply) and relative preference (demand). This "economistic fallacy" (Polanyi, 1977) simplifies the social and political complexity of the phenomena in question. From an anthropological perspective, "producers" are always inevitably embedded in particular historical and cultural trajectories from which their behaviour stems (Pratt, 2014). They are, in other words, small farmers from Piedmont (Black, 2012), ex-peasants from Sicily (Rakopoulos, 2017), capitalist growers from Michigan (DeLind & Bingen, 2005), banana plantation workers from Dominica (Moberg, 2016), tea pickers from Darjeeling (Besky, 2014), and so on. The same is true of "consumers", who are subjects belonging to households whose practices of food provisioning, preparation, and eating are the result of their particular life histories and that of their communities, at the local, regional, and national levels (Luetchford, 2014). Anthropologists therefore prefer speaking of families in Lombardy (Grasseni, 2013), Tuscany (Counihan, 2004), and Sicily (Orlando, 2018); of the citizens of Stockholm (Isenhour, 2010), Washington (Okura Gagné, 2011), and Lexington (Lyon, Ailshire, & Sehon, 2014); and so forth.

The Geographical Approach

AFNs are a field of study in which geographers, especially those from the US and UK, are particularly active, as they continue to play a leading role in the international debate that they do not often have in other topics, and have made a founding contribution to its "discovery" and problematization, as well as to its evolution and criticism. At the same time, geographers' contributions to this field are not restricted to their own discipline. It is significant to note that one of the geographers who has taken a pioneering part in AFN studies, Terry Marsden, has this to say of

himself on his personal webpage: "I research the interdisciplinary social science and applied policy fields of rural geography, rural sociology, environmental sociology, geography and planning".

As in other fields of knowledge, the debate is also highly compartmentalized between the dominant English-speaking world and a plurality of national debates in geography (such as those in French and Italy). The latter are not always solidly anchored in this debate and indeed may have cut themselves loose, as in the case of France. Dialog is limited, or rather, reflection proceeds along parallel pathways, which is all the more significant the more the realities we investigate—the realm of AFNs and the transformations in the geographies of food—are swept by significant processes of change, as they are locally defined practices that we attempt to bring back into broader interpretative frameworks.

In one of the seminal writings (Renting et al., 2003), the authors noted that in comparison with the lagging peripheral areas, "much less reference was made to regions that were highly integrated in the global food markets like the Netherlands, and much of the United Kingdom, where the dominant discourse foresaw a continued expansion of food production systems along the lines of modernisation and within conventional market structures" (p. 395). It is probably not coincidental, then, that the most significant contributions, at least at an early stage, have come precisely from British, Irish, and Dutch geographers (or students who were trained in schools of geography in the UK), who worked together in important European research projects (such as COST actions or Food Links, SUSCHAIN, etc.). Likewise, US and Western European literatures have differed significantly on several points—though this was limited, at least initially, to a relatively small group of scholars, as we have seen (Goodman & Goodman, 2009). The question that arises, and to which Goodman and Goodman's reflections seem to provide only a partial answer, is whether this divergence in the "respective research constituencies" which "project different sociopolitical imaginaries" is due to the phenomena being observed or the manner in which the researchers have observed them, or, as is probable, to both.

As we pointed out above, the blurred and ambiguous edges of the alternative food networks were brought into sharper focus by the work of several British geographers (and geographically trained scholars in the

Netherlands), who were the first to refer to an alternative geography of food (Whatmore & Thorne, 1997). Though these geographers apply their own discipline's approach to rural development and food studies, they are also fully engaged in the multidisciplinary debate in these macro-fields. From the disciplinary point of view (here again, however, the delimitation is somewhat forced), the theme of the AFN is part of so-called food geography, a field where rural, urban, economic, political, and social specialists break down disciplinary barriers in a lively interchange of views on critical food studies.

The reviews and discussions spearheaded by Winter (2003, 2004) and later by Cook (Cook et al., 2006, 2008, 2011) in the pages of *Progress in Human Geography* have highlighted the multitude of theoretical approaches and empirical research procedures employed by geographers in this field. In attempting to define a geographical approach to AFNs, we can thus proceed along two lines. First, by looking at how geographers have dealt with AFNs, and second, by trying to see how exquisitely geographical concepts have been deployed to interpret AFNs. Both perspectives would appear to be unsatisfactory, because in the first case it is not easy to understand what criteria should be used in deciding whether a given author is a geographer (are we to judge by current academic position, training, or the fact of writing in geography journals?), while in the second, almost all the contributions of scholars who have dealt with AFNs and who cannot be defined as geographers by any of these criteria have to do with concepts like space, place, region, and local that are explicitly spatial.

We will thus attempt to combine the two perspectives, starting from the writings of geographers (who qualify as such on the basis of at least one of the three criteria we have mentioned) that are the obligatory reference point for any study of AFNs and formulations such as Local Food Systems or short food supply chains (SFSCs) which at times are used as synonyms without much concern for the distinctions between them, and in other cases are differentiated on the basis of various considerations.[4] Lastly, we must not overlook the fundamental distinction between the perspectives of the academics and those of the practitioners, as they point out (Venn et al., 2006) and, we might add, since these reflections are incorporated into research calls and policy instruments.

The scholars—geographers for the most part, as we have said—who first began to analyse phenomena, social contexts, and actors such as direct sales, farmers' markets, organic and local food, close producer-consumer relationships, and so on and established AFNs as an analytical category were primarily interested in coming to grips with changes in rural contexts and food production by building representations that were alternative to, or at least more sophisticated than, the dominant discourses of globalization (Whatmore & Thorne, 1997) and its negative repercussions on the environmental and social levels and the actual and perceived quality of food. Initially, attention was primarily focused on the production side, while consumption and the role of consumers gained importance at a later stage.

AFNs were, at least for a certain period,[5] an umbrella under which geographers with different backgrounds, interests, and approaches took shelter: from specialists in rural development to environmentalists, scholars of development processes in the South of the world, and researchers—who in many cases were activists—interested in the analysis of social movements (Levkoe, 2006). Though the geographers who dealt with AFNs engaged mainly with economic issues (and specifically with rural and environmental concerns), they were also involved in the various "turns" that reshaped economic geography, in particular the quality and the cultural turns. On the theoretical level, geographers have approached the topic from the vantage points of political economy and institutional economy (Whatmore & Thorne, 1997), and more recently with the moral geographies of the ethics of care (Goodman, 2004; Popke, 2006), exploring combined approaches such as Latour's actor network theory and quality convention theory (Murdoch et al., 2000).

As shown by the reviews by Venn et al. (2006) and by Goodman and Goodman (2009), research approaches have been predominantly empirical, based chiefly on case studies employing ethnographic research methods, interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, in addition to traditional methods of spatial analysis (though the latter are not often used, except in some studies of local food systems, see, e.g. Kremer & DeLiberty, 2011) and comparative approaches such as that adopted by Renting et al. (2003).

The spatial dimension is central to the reflection on AFNs, where it has been variously interpreted in relation to the different research orientations. The debate on AFNs has mobilized several concepts dear to geographers, but widely used in other disciplines when scrutinizing the relationship between food, environment-territory, and quality from an analytical and political perspective. As one of the forerunners of AFN studies pointed out, "research on the emergence and development of alternative food (or agro-food) networks in recent years has highlighted the significance of quality, locality and ecology as establishing the embedded character of food derived from this sector" (Sage, 2003a, p. 47).

Obviously it is to be expected that "spatial" thinking (in the broadest sense of the term) on the part of scholars with a geographical background will be a bit more extensive and more sophisticated than that by those who use the concepts without problematizing them overmuch. Nevertheless, as Goodman and Goodman (2009) have noted "[…] major theoretical advances in human geography, notably relational conceptualizations of place, space, economy, and the politics of scale, find little reflection in AFN research, despite the critical importance attributed to the local and provenance" (p. 5). On the other hand, the same authors point out that "the AFN literature has neglected theoretical development in favour of empirically grounded, case-study analyses of alternative food production and provisioning networks, new economic forms, and institutional mechanisms of governance and policy" (p. 6).

For example, it may be instructive to consider attempts to develop spatial analysis categories such as that by Jessop, Brenner, and Jones (Jessop, Brenner, & Jones, 2008) to see how much distance lies between the theoretical depth of these concepts and their application to AFNs.

Space and place are at the centre of many authors' reflections, in observing how AFNs redefine the moments of production and consumption. The space is that of networks, a category that is generally preferred to the system, at least in the literature on AFNs, precisely in order to overturn the implicit normative and performative logic underlying the representation of the global food system. In the literature on local food systems, which originated chiefly in North America and gradually extended to involve European and international scholars, the view taken of urban food systems is implicitly critical, if not indeed explicitly radical

and resistant, compared to that of the global food system (see the categorization of the scales of the food system proposed by Hinrichs, 2003).

Space also means space for social and political action. "Making spaces for alternatives" is a recurrent phrase in many writings. Some authors, drawing closely on the literature on innovation systems and the Francophone debate, reconfigure space through the concept of proximity, where AFNs redefine proximity spaces measured on different axes: physical-spatial (or Euclidean geometries), organizational, and cultural (Dansero, Pettenati, & Toldo, 2016). With respect to such advances in geographic thinking such as the conceptualization of space proposed by Harvey (2006) or Levy's systematization (1997) (to cite two leading figures from the English- and French-speaking debates), contemporary geography seeks to develop conceptual frameworks that can encompass the different configurations and measurements of space (and its various definitions) and not just physical distance in Euclidean space.

Place is an interpretative category applied above all in connection with the notions of embeddedness and re-connection between food and consumers, with quality and territories: all seen as locally specific discourses.

Much attention has been addressed to the question of the local dimension, with reference to the relations with the area of origin, as in the case of origin labelling, and the physical proximity between producer and consumer (which in Italy has been carried to extreme form in the zero kilometres rhetoric). Regarding the concept of local, the framework advanced by a non-geographer such as Brunori—a socio-economist with a keen appreciation of the territorial dimension—seems particularly significant, as it distinguishes between local and localist very clearly and effectively, considering the physical, symbolic, and relational dimensions (Brunori, 2008).

An attempt to connect the Anglophone and Francophone debates was proposed in one of the writings underlying the AFNIA project (Dansero & Puttilli, 2013), which addresses the concept of territoriality and draws on the geographer Raffestin and the recent opening to the English-speaking debate (Raffestin, 2012).

Lastly, a concept much cherished by geographers, but less used in the debate on AFNs, is that of the region, where Moya Kneafsey (2010)

offers an interesting analysis on how the notion of the region is used in relation to the processes of reconnecting, re-scaling, and re-regionalizing the food system. The English geographer discusses how the concept of the region has been applied in the recent food debate in two ways. The first refers to "regional foods", in close relationship with labelling and designation schemes (PDO, IGT, IGP, etc.), that is, with efforts to link product quality with the places of production. The second can be expressed in terms of "regional food networks", which can occur when a number of elements of a food system—production, processing, retailing, and consumption of food—are organized on a regional basis in order to create a food network that is geographically distinctive and recognized as such by the actors involved. "Regional foods" may be circulated within a short and direct supply chain, but they are not limited to it (Kneafsey, 2010, p. 181).

The Approach Taken in This Book

While much of our investigation concerns issues that have already been debated in the literature, there are some points where our work departs from the received literature. The first is the intentional multidisciplinary approach. In the literature, AFNs have typically been dealt with by specific disciplinary fields (mainly sociological, anthropological, and geographic), as shown in the foregoing presentations of the approaches taken by different disciplines in addressing the issue of AFNs. However, one might conclude from these presentations that some of the approaches are incompatible. The economic approach, for instance, stresses the importance of finding common patterns and of identifying the common underlying mechanisms driving people's behaviour, so that individual and social heterogeneity are viewed as variations within a general behavioural model. By contrast, the sociological and anthropological approaches emphasize the differences and are more interested in detecting the different facets of reality from a social point of view. The environmental perspective looks for an objective measurement of the actual impact of the different chains, as well for the concept of environmental impact held by consumers and producers. The geographical approach tries to identify the

networks associated with AFNs and their spatial distribution. Despite these apparent oppositions, we are convinced that analysing AFNs from these different approaches adds to the understanding of a phenomenon which by its very nature it has economic, social, geographic, and environmental implications, all of which are relevant for its understanding, and that using different approaches provides a global view of these different perspectives.

Second, adopting different disciplinary approaches helps in avoiding an ideological bias in favour of the object of inquiry. While we think it fair to state our sympathy for the AFN movement, in this research we purposely chose to adopt an a priori neutral stance. Several positive properties have been claimed for AFNs, such as embeddedness in regional and local food-culture, quality of food production, sustainability of the food supply chain, democracy of social and economic relations, and added value for the rural area and farmers. These claims have been questioned, but our interest is not to take a stand on these issues. Rather, our approach is to ask what reasons underlie the growth of AFNs, what effects they have, and what their working mechanisms are. In other words, the main objective of our research is to understand and discuss the functioning of these chains and, from this point of view, taking a neutral stand as to their desirability helps avoid the risk of ignoring weaknesses or dubious points in their operation or, conversely, of overstating their merits. In our view, only by starting from such an analysis is it also possible to make predictions about AFNs' prospects for upscaling and passing from the niche to the system level.

Third, we maintain that a comparative perspective with conventional food chains is needed in order to grasp the key features of AFNs. Such a perspective is very rarely taken, since the ideological/supportive slant of research tends to "select" case studies as "true" examples of alternativeness. By contrast, our empirical cases belong to both the alternative and the conventional worlds. Accordingly, we have compared the concepts of quality espoused by consumers who patronize different chains (supermarkets, urban district markets, farmers' markets, SPGs, high-end retailers) and investigated the modalities whereby producers and consumers match on quality and prices.

Fourth, while most of the current literature, the majority of which belongs to the sociological and economic fields, focuses on the consumer side (characteristics of the participants, motivations, etc.), our analysis embraces the entire chain. To understand AFNs' strength and resilience, it is important to analyse the motivations leading people (as consumers, as prosumers, or as concerned citizens) to attend or to participate in these chains. But at the same time, it is crucial to understand the other side of the chain, that is, producers' motivations and reactions in terms of farm setting to participation in AFNs. This is not simply because—obviously—both supply and demand are needed in order for these chains to work. It is because it is important to analyse how participation in an AFN shapes the behaviour of both consumers and producers and, more importantly, the forms of the interactions among operators in the chain. We characterize "alternativeness" in terms of the quality of the interaction that the exchange entails and, consequently, the relationship among traders, its strength, and how price-setting and the quality attributes that are demanded and produced are coordinated. By the same token, analysing the configuration of networks among producers and consumers, both spatially and culturally, helps provide a comprehensive view of the entire chain.

Notes

1. Even the use of online and social media by participants in short food supply chains only supplements existing reconnections between producers and consumers and cannot substitute for personal relationships (Bos & Owen, 2016; Fonte, 2013)
2. The MWTP is the maximum amount of money consumers would pay for an additional quantity of the good. The consumer purchases additional quantities of the good until the utility provided by them is greater than the utility foregone by paying the price of an additional quantity of the good, that is, the utility lost by giving up other goods that could have been purchased with the same money.
3. These two streams (orders of worth and worlds of production) are summarized in Lucien Karpik's perspective, where worlds of quality pair with different judgement devices that provide consumers with the knowledge to evaluate the "worth of goods" (Karpik, 2010, p. 96).

4. It is interesting to note that geographers like Renting et al. (2003), or Kneafsey (2010) now prefer the term SFSCs to AFNs and have also pointed out some distinctions between the concept of "local food system" as widely used in the early American studies. See in particular the distinctions and the choices made in the wider area of the study commissioned by the JRC (Kneafsey et al., 2013).
5. In this regard, see the distinction between the phases of the debate that we have proposed elsewhere (Dansero & Puttilli, 2013, p. 628).

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