

SOCIAL PRACTICES, RUPTURE EVENTS & AESTHETIC CAPITAL IN LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: *This work identifies a dual process in intergenerational cultural transmission and reception mechanisms: on the one hand, a break in historical continuity between past and present, and, on the other, the use of its legitimacy to make a mark on history. The approach emphasizes two aspects of cultural and economic transformation, the change induced by sudden, pervasive events, and the plasticity of cultural reception. Therefore, it is intended to argue that without the socio-cultural disposition to accept change, economic transformations cannot work. Drawing on this idea, this article aims to elucidate how cultural transmission crosses time, allowing humanity to recognize and legitimize a new socio-economic order.*

Key words: *Local development; market modernization; cultural and economic transformation.*

1. Introduction and Theoretical Assumptions

The structuralist matrix that characterizes theories of the social rooting of economy postulates a linear and selective accumulation of institutional and cultural factors and their causality from the past through to the present (Putnam, 1993). This is true both for the sedimentation of trust mechanisms and for the emergence and consolidation of entrepreneurial syndromes. For example, in the dynamics of the formation of local industrial development, the largely accepted hypothesis of a linear development of industrialization out of the previous agricultural structure has removed territorial dividing lines segmenting lifestyles and consumption models within territorial contexts, especially where the orography of the territory included a certain settlement plurality of mountains, valleys and coastal areas. The lack of attention to interregional diversity has favoured the narrative of “development without fractures”, an institutional dynamic whereby local communities have been decisive in industrial modernization (Fuà & Zacchia, 1983), producing both a cultural preservation of traditional identities and a functional mobilization for industrial take-off.

This work, however, identifies a dual process in intergenerational cultural transmission

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and reception mechanisms: on the one hand, a break in historical continuity between past and present, and, on the other, the use of its legitimacy to make a mark on history (Carboni, Orazi, 2020). The approach emphasizes two aspects of cultural and economic transformation, the change induced by sudden, pervasive events, and the plasticity of cultural reception².

On an epistemological level, reasoning in these terms implies the presupposition of an ordering structure, a social grammar of the ways in which individuals relate in order to organize collective and private forums. The possibility of drawing on a grammar of signification is what simultaneously produces and transforms the fabric of meaning. In turn, this process influences choices, inequalities, value hierarchies and politico-economic regimes within which individuals and groups establish the reality of facts. Language is the symbolic biotechnology with which an ordering structure becomes intelligible and normative, leading to institutional formation. In this sense, language is a creative act generated by our cognitive ability to symbolize. Even mathematics, according to Brouwer, is a symbolized intuition that creates worlds rather than discovers them. However, the interpretative analysis of symbolic structures is rejected by the assembly of mainstream social sciences precisely because it rests on an indemonstrable assumption: that there is a symbolic and unconscious ordering structure of human material activities. However, if the accusation of indemonstrability, thus conceived, is legitimate, so too is that directed at a naturalistic reductionism of social sciences which demands a biological foundation of human behaviour anchored to metabolism (to satiate and contribute to satiating the community to which one belongs) and to reproduction (contributing to biological replacement). The cultural and aesthetic sphere, with the creation of its transcendent worlds through sacred thought, is, indeed, a lever without which no hierarchical order of power and no economic inequality between associates could be legitimized. Many recent archaeological discoveries testify to how the anchoring of social actions to the “sense of the sacred” has anticipated and/or informed the conservative and reproductive biology of economic profit (Aubert et. al. 2019; Lenoir 2011). When man began to experiment with agriculture, the cultural and religious element became fundamental for his power of social bonding. Before agriculture, human population was naturally inclined to divide itself into small groups that could deal with food crises more easily. If not the primary cause, religion was very plausibly the instrument of agricultural transformation.

Evidencing the indemonstrability of the cultural structure and the naturalistic foundation of human behaviour does not imply dismantling social sciences but a recognition of different grammars which with the same legitimacy and indemonstrable presuppositions can symbolize and reconstruct the social, cultural and economic dynamics of organized human aggregates. Reading the material development of humanity in order to interpret it and evidence its dynamics of symbolic functioning is no less illegitimate than explaining it with the assumption that human biology is the natural

²By plasticity of cultural reception, we mean the human capacity to enact daily practices that integrate contrasting ways of conceiving the world in non-continuous spaces of meaning (Geertz, 1998).

mirror of an economic behaviour that can be described with natural language.

On the basis of these assumptions, it is intended to argue that without the socio-cultural disposition to accept change, economic transformations cannot work. People need to make the new “cultures” of action and coordination their own. This reception is possible by breathing a new climate of ideas and perspectives, or by assimilating concepts, motivations and truths, previously otherwise experienced or explicitly condemned. This is how cultural rationalization regulates human subjectivities, making them compatible with and functional to the change in material configurations of social organization. Following this interpretative path, this article aims to elucidate how cultural transmission crosses time, allowing humanity to recognize and legitimize a new socio-economic order. At the turn of an epoch that is waning and another that is replacing it, the cultural transition between generations and its influence on the socio-economic order constitute a problematic rupture, with the new structure inheriting the problems left unsolved by the past, and experimenting with solutions to establish its legitimization. The same function as metaphorical re-occupations of truth fields, a mechanism through which a shared culture that is affirming itself establishes its own links between truth and reality (Blumenberg, 2009).

As part of the metaphor of the Discovery that modernization will adopt as a legitimizing figure, access to mass consumption will allow large portions of the rural population to make a new existential discovery, symbolic and material at the same time, that of the self. This will give introspective subjectivity the centrality and diffusion required by a social system based on the privatization of consumption and the commodification of lifestyles.

In these fields of the possible, common imagination shatters the expressive specificity of art, myth and ritual, becoming part of the daily mental work of ordinary people (Appadurai, 1990). Such cultural rationalization, with the metaphorical force that characterizes it, will be a decisive aspect for Italian local industrial development, no less than the structural components of family organization, the inheritance of goods and assets, the characteristics of landholding systems and rural ethics brought forth by the theory of the social rooting of the economy.

2. Social Imaginaries and Consumer Aesthetics

The described theoretical approach considers the cultural process as activated by the attribution of meanings, and aims an interpretative focus on the use made of culture in every context in which social actions are tangibly articulated. In this way, we avoid separating the cultural analysis from its object: the informal logic of everyday life. Cultural analysis is thus focused on the actual behaviour of people, on social practices in which cultural forms find articulation, becoming the support for meaning in the material and behavioural infrastructures of economic relations (Geertz, 1998). The emphasis on the crucial role of social practices in informing the “logic” of action means considering rituals, that is, the recursive practices of meaningful gestures, as activators and not products of belief systems (cults). This assumption, systematized by Durkheim and his school, postulates that social dynamics can be interpreted starting with the fact that

men organize their world according to what they do, and that only after these actions do they find legitimacy in what they think and believe.

Considering change and innovation as factors that activate economic cultures and new forms of mobilization allows us to look at motivational schemes as a product of social practices. Institutional processes, although articulated over a *longue durée* of history, are influenced by specific events and the breaking of continuity. They imprint specific trajectories of socio-economic structuring, enhancing the capacity for continuous adaptation and self-representation of the new by the institutional aggregates (Sewell, 2005; Trigilia, 198;).

The Second World War and the Resistance, for example, played a decisive role in the formation of the collective identities of the development of the Italian North-East-Centre. Adherence to a new political order asserted itself in the first post-war period, as part of a broader reaction of local communities to the effects of the war. The dynamics influenced class relations, modifying social stratification and structures of inequalities, integrating them into the nascent industrial economy. The habits and class structure of the rural world was transformed, impacting the collective imagination of entire generations and their manners of social mobilization. The work culture and proto-entrepreneurial inclinations of sharecroppers, important for local industrialization, expressed their potential thanks to this favourable political, social and economic circumstance. The emergence of interpersonal fiduciary dynamics favouring local entrepreneurship brought into play both social and cultural continuity, typical of traditional agricultural structures, and moments of rupture for these structures.

The innovative practices of subjectivities emerging from the change or crisis in tradition are, however, often removed from analyses. By universalizing the mechanisms of the economic field, political economics and, in part, social sciences have projected the principles of the market economy onto the set of social practices, preventing us from considering “multiple rationalities”, the various forms of interest articulated in socio-economic configurations and the complex variety of acting motivations (Bourdieu, 2004). In mainstream models, subjective creativity is irrelevant to socioeconomic structuring. In this way, continuity and/or gradual change hide the rupture and social innovation produced when social practices cross contingent historical events (Paci, 1999).

Even as a commercially stimulated peculiarity, the introspective subjectivation constructed by social imaginaries is an emblematic figure of market societies. Via subjectivation, each individual introjects the meanings of signification that come from the social environment in the form of symbolic solicitations. These interact with unconscious dispositions and intentional behavioural inclinations. This internalization of meanings enables the sharing of moral values, normative fabrics and institutional regulations (belief systems) that facilitate organized life. Recognition of this field of reality is mutable. Indeed, the symbolic structures and material resources it conveys can become mixed up with the generated social practices and the evolving economic conditions.

This human attitude qualifies the plasticity of cultural reception. This is the ability to enact daily practices that integrate contrasting ways of conceiving the world in non-continuous spaces of meaning (Geertz, 1998). Walking around the city, individuals move

through the things of daily life. Within this cultural, material and psychic world, various strategies and tactics operate. The former are an expression of institutions, the latter are used by individuals to create their own spaces in the environments defined by the strategies (de Certeau, 2010). A city can be conceived both as a product planned by the strategic interaction of institutional entities and as a space travelled by the pedestrian moving in tactical ways never fully determined by such planning. He can take shortcuts or wander aimlessly, breaking the institutional setting of road grids. Accumulated culture, while influencing everyday life, never wholly determines individual action. Culture experienced on a daily basis is the product of a recombination of structural and tactical factors within which institutional pressures and individual creative strategies operate.

From this point of view, this work tries to use the driver of consumption to describe the emergence of a crucial factor of modernity: the democratization of access to subjective introspection as a “creative idleness” that prepares the consumer for the aesthetic valuing of products, commodities, social hierarchies and political systems.

According to Campbell (1992), on the plane of social rationalization of economic behaviour, the consumer society is a metaphorical reoccupation of the moral constraints placed on private enjoyment by the Protestant ethic. These prescriptive provisions are replaced by the aesthetic pursuit of all-consuming desire and daydreaming, both legitimized by the affirmation of the romantic ethic. It is on these “ontological” assumptions that the society of mass consumption is based and that cultural industry is articulated, which, with its social imaginaries, actualizes the enjoyment of goods through an imaginary lever (Orazi, 2018a). Consumption becomes an explosion of fashions stratified by mass audiences.

For some time, however, art has not been the main generator of beauty. This has changed the aesthetic conception and the circulation of its meanings in the frames of signification within which people perform their most ordinary everyday actions. The social affirmation of design and industrial objects has multiplied, diversified and standardized the methods and sources of aesthetic experience. The aestheticization of the world has spread thanks to easily accessible collective products that have taken the place of unique objects, that is works of art and craft. Georg Simmel was a pioneer in analyses of the social consequences of the aestheticization process. In his thinking, the heart of modernization was the social sphere of aesthetics and the role it assumed in legitimizing the capitalist order. The affirmation of mass aestheticization emerged in market societies, the first capable of involving the unconscious of the consumer in the process of valorisation, using fascination and beauty as the “ideal of the ego”. Aesthetics thus becomes an indispensable competitive weapon.

In this regard, Lipovetsky and Serroy (2017) support the “epochal” affirmation of “artistic capitalism” in which aesthetic phenomena enter into the production, marketing and communication of products and brands. Through the encounter between the aesthetic lever and digital technologies, collective representations, which as objective social facts transcend individual volition, are flanked by the imagination and its ability to establish imaginable worlds (Appadurai, 1990). In this way, “communities of feeling” are formed, that is groups that begin to imagine and feel collectively.

Within this framework, we define the “aesthetic force” as the ability of actors to create and concentrate technological and symbolic resources for the valorisation of products and goods and for the cultural and political legitimation of the social systems they contribute to building. The “aesthetic force” is a crucial lever for exercising symbolic hegemony in the cultural flows of market societies. The same, exalting the symbolic force of fiction, overwhelms that of the function with which industrial modernization is imposed and consolidated (Harvey, 1993). The signifiers of cultural industry model fluctuating, indefinite and interchangeable identities, through their ability to generate a sense of reality that is rationally programmed and technically produced by regimes of signification. Such technological and symbolic machines function as cultural paradigms endowed with emotional and immersive force. The first acts on the ordering of the hierarchies of desires, the second, working with visual imaginaries, transforms those desires into possibilities that can be actualized through the pure power of representation (Lash, 2000).

In modern democracies, this technological reconfiguration of symbolic exchanges has been accompanied by a process of institutionalization of new regimes of accumulation, technical configurations that consider the economic process as a joint set of ways of producing goods and consuming them. Given the need to regulate individual emotions and motivations, every accumulation regime must be accompanied by signification regimes that produce and consume cultural objects. The centrality of the aesthetic dimension in the civilization process enhances sensational aspects of reality by gradually replacing discursive regimes using the written form and the word as supports to signify reality with figural ones that instead use images, projecting them into both the acting structure of the ego and the dreaming and desiring one of the id. Representation becomes realistic, and aesthetic realism, with its ability to bring order to cultural and political systems of preference, becomes the driver of democracies and markets.

In this way, the normative force of symbolic devices (e.g. the sacred) is used by world-creating medial ecosystems (metaphors), giving rise to continuous institutional production of “visual imaginaries”, which act in contemporary conflict within the force field generated by the dynamics of global enlargement and local narrowing of their trajectories (Canevacci, 2001).

3. Consumerism and Local Development

Mass consumption is a phenomenon that clarifies the relationship between subjectivation and modernization, provided that its study is “freed” from several interpretative constraints of historical and social events: 1) the reintegration of time in analysis models based on the *longue durée*, which, however, dissolves in an indistinct succession of cumulative regularities; 2) the restriction of time down to the superimposition of historical-social events to ordinary ones and its dissolution in an etherizing continuity; 3) the consideration of the decisive function of time beyond periods in which the extent of changes imposes it. The instituting role of consumption processes can be released from such restrictive assumptions by proposing a reading of mass consumption as a process connecting traditional society, as subject to great

transformations, with modern society, as predominated by movement and uncertainty. Various contingencies are thus highlighted, such as the presence of social configurations beset by change, the emergence of ongoing reorganizations that produce unprecedented equilibria, and the effects of external relations and the environment on social settlements (Balandier, 1991). All this leads us to the idea that societies operate on a continuum where continuity is both a fact and an illusion. Societies continually mix together and re-invent permanence, crises and mutations. The affirmation and transformations of consumer cultures exemplify this process.

The family and the entrepreneur embody many such transformations (Orazi, 2018b). The family, expelled from the productive field, thus becomes a consumer nucleus. On the one hand, it structures domesticity as an affective network, an individualistic refuge and an aesthetic vehicle. On the other hand, it undergoes and establishes the “new” from a change in peasant habits. This takes place along the widespread countryside-city axis and is decisive for metabolising the cultural change necessary for local industrialization. Already in the seventies, among the Italian middle classes, work, income and mass consumption privatized many areas of social legitimacy and self-realization. This privatization of existential destinies reduced the family’s obligations to public regulatory compliance. The family, by accessing industrially produced symbols, status, information and values, became a self-referential social unit concentrating its affective, cultural, moral, economic and political choices “inside the home”. The role of the modernized family does not erase the importance of social networks and traditional bonds. On the contrary, it relates them to the dynamics of the new exogenous symbolic forces, bringing out the socio-cultural milieu of industrial communities. The privatization of economic and emotional destinies in the consumer family better integrates every biography, the more it dilates the illusion of free choice. This occurs by fragmenting preferences and ontological hierarchies that market culture and its interests recursively remove and reinvent. Freedom of choice is the ideological emblem of consumer subjectivity and the progressive driver of social individualization.

In this perspective, the formation of the subjective bases of local entrepreneurship was a response that integrated performative values and existential capitalist concerns into traditional communities. The entrepreneur is a “pioneer” who reworks the old cultural order, modelling it to the priorities of socio-economic innovation. Savings, the investment of income, the accumulation of capital and the division of labour become widespread concerns characterizing an adherence to an original and positive attitude towards wealth and pleasure. The most relevant historical-sociological aspect is that the change of mentality in conceiving wealth and pleasure as legitimate existential ends affects social groups previously excluded from this symbolic potential. The actors of local development and the motivations to innovate traditional customs and behaviours are placed in a historical framework influenced by a pervasive consumer economy, which transformed Italian and local popular culture suddenly and profoundly. The reconstruction and the economic boom was decisive at this turning point, which saw middle classes, widespread entrepreneurship and a new working class with strong aspirations for well-being as the leading protagonists (Capuzzo 2006; Sassatelli 2004; Cavazza & Scarpellini 2006).

The increase in consumption in the 1950s, albeit with significant class differences, affected the entire country. Growth was extremely consistent initially, at over 6% per year, before subsequently settling down to between 3 and 4%, with two years of stagnation, 1954 and 1958.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the increase in consumer spending, approximately 4.8% per year, was decisive in both helping Italy rise out of the widespread poverty of the immediate post-war period and in initiating a partial rebalancing at the territorial level. Indeed, while in the North-West consumption grew by 4.1% per year, it grew by more than 5% in the North-East and Centre and 4.7% in the South. The differences, however, remained significant, especially between North and South, with the South having an expenditure of 56% of that of the North-West at the beginning of the decade rising to 58.5% at the beginning of the 1960s. The rebalancing between the other areas of the country was even more marked. The North-East's expenditure, which was 77.2% of the North-West's, rose to 83.5% at the beginning of the 1960s, while the Centre's went increased from 83.4% to 89.4% (Capuzzo, 2015).

The modernization of consumption that began in the decade under consideration brought about changes in the social and psychological behaviour of the national population, though among a context of general cultural deafness. Indeed, consumerist culture came as a surprise to the Italian debating public (Castronovo, 2010), with the ruling classes not having grasped what people had been practising for some time. They had not perceived the link between the productive and distributive innovation of resources and cultural modernization, a synergy that left the old rural structure of the country well behind.

Thus, the reception of consumer culture anticipated its rationalized understanding. By experimenting with new lifestyles, entrepreneurs and consumers preceded social scientists, intellectuals and the ruling classes in understanding the novelty and opportunities that history was offering. Hence consumerism entered the practice of Italians without true collective discourse, whether critical or enthusiastic. "Education" on the new phenomenon came to be monopolized by the media and by symbolic grammars of the television and commercial complex. The individual liberation of destinies and market culture silently undermined secular forms of social obligation of the rural world, consigning to history the petty-bourgeois thrift that had been consolidated from post-unification through to the fascist period among employees, small autonomous producers and the popular classes of cities (Asquer, 2011).

The dynamic is evidenced by the trend in housing, fuel and electricity costs, which, with a national average of 96% in the period from 1951 to 1961, increased between 80% and 100% in the various areas of the country, taking their share in total consumption expenditure from 10 to 13%. This increase is attributable to improvements in housing, increases in land costs related to the urbanization process, widespread electrification of the country, and increasing use of motorcycles and cars. In the context of rapid urbanization and the processes of family nuclearization, there was, indeed, a sharp increase in the availability of housing. At the same time, there was a progressive decline in rural extended families, with housing occupied in a capacity other than ownership or

rent (e.g. under agricultural emphyteutic lease contracts or partial colonies) falling by approximately 250,000 units during the fifties, and thus from 11.3 to 7.5% of total homes (Capuzzo, 2015).

Ownership of one's own home became the main economic and symbolic investment of Italian families, evidenced by the almost doubling of expenses for furniture and appliances from 1950 to 1960. Those buying such goods did so in reference to values such as durability, having not yet adopted an American consumerism characterized by a high turnover of owned goods (Asquer, 2013). The transition leading to an Italian consumer society was therefore not yet complete. However, already a significant part of the country, made up of urbanized middle classes, was, at the turn of the decade, the most significant component of the national socio-economic structure.

4. Final Considerations

This article aims to rationalise the legitimacy of studying economic phenomena through symbolic interpretation. This places at the centre of the field of analysis the formation of a cultural flux and of the social practices that depend on it and transform it into a continuous non-linear cycle. Therefore, it argues that cultural flux and its orientation do not converge on a selective continuum of influences that the past accumulates up until the present. Rather, past and present are dimensions with continuous interaction between generations. They are imaginary scenarios that fashion meaning, and this fashioning is mutable in correspondence with mutations in human organizations and their economic and technological circumstances. Theories of the social rooting of the economy, which have reincorporated culture in development analysis dynamics, are accordingly characterized by a consideration of cultural flux as a selective continuum of influences along the past-present axis. In this way, they are unable to contemplate change as an expression of the symbolic influence of social practices in organizing signification and governing the material resources of societies and their legitimacy in justifying unequal conditions of power and wealth among peers.

In comparison with traditional studies of local development, the adopted methodology makes it possible to better understand the culture of the market and its infrastructures as rupture events, and as a metaphorical reoccupation of commodification. In theories of the social rooting of the economy, the culture of the market coincides with the inclination of men to trade, while markets are formed on the basis of the biological and cultural flux that the *longue durée* of historical phenomena dilutes in a linear continuity of the incidence of the past over the present. Thus, cultural flux and its structure are limited to acting on social practices. When considering the process of commodification and not the inclination to trade as the driver of the development of mass markets, however, the instituting force of market culture becomes a fractured socio-cultural event that feeds new practices of social life and institutional formation. Interpreted in this way, the cultural flux acts on social practices but is also acted upon by them. Changes in culture, the advent of new social practices and new forms of reception and of the remodelling of the cultural flux jointly become interpretative drivers of the formation of mass market economies, of entrepreneurial

syndromes and of the commodified aesthetics of everyday life that characterize the modernization of the communities of local development. In this framework, the instituting power of commodification has been amplified by the ability of cultural industry to create and legitimize social imaginaries, that is, provinces of meaning widely recognized as reality by the psychology of common sense (Douglas, 1994).

Contextually, we have thus interpreted the rise and transformation of local development along two lines, industrialization and access to mass consumption, which, in collective behaviour, support the catching up of the aesthetic sphere with the ethical one. Industrialization has institutionalized the massification of work, with the metal sharecropper as a chimera, and the rapid transition educating workers on production routines, ethical-moral values, lifestyles, ways of living and new models to imitate, partly opposed to those of tradition. The market has instead built its culture by standardizing consumption and fuelling a demand for goods that have become identifying and distinguishing factors, generating a new way of experiencing identity, social belonging and self-recognition. Local communities are catapulted into a world that orders and distributes economic and symbolic resources to ever more numerous individuals, many of whom discover for the first time that they possess a social subjectivity that legitimises them as individuals (individualization) and not just as members of a collective structure (family, lineage, community). The market creates its own type of subjectivity by placing it at the centre of productive, distributive, social and cultural transformations that activate local development. Rupture events such as the Second World War, the Resistance and market democracy have induced sudden transformations and favoured innovative syndromes that went on to modify individual preferences, priorities and alliances between interest groups and social networks. What remains of active-ancient factors are the various habits distributed among the new social fields. Instead of remaining monolithic, however, primary dispositions and unconscious motives of action, inherited from tradition, have impacted the new cultures of hedonistic consumption and desire, and have, in many ways, been shattered and re-assembled into emerging dimensions of custom, representing the other side of a violent symbolic struggle with which aesthetics, ethics and psychologies of the market have imposed themselves on the passage of two generations.

Finally, with a look at the present and the future, the technological and symbolic dematerialization of territories, community ties and economic processes is seen to be displacing and reshaping the collective identities of Italian local development. This process, via the technical production of social imaginaries, redefines a sense of place in the era of digital access and being, upsetting the materiality and symbolism of a peripheral local society to which industrialization had provided an identity too readily deemed “unassailable”.

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