

# ETHICALLY-ORIENTED ECONOMIES AND DEMOCRACY: THE POLITICAL ROLE OF CRITICAL CONSUMPTION. THE EXPERIENCE OF SOLIDARY PURCHASING GROUPS IN ITALY

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**Abstract:** *The objective of this paper is to situate solidary economies and critical consumption within an explanatory context in which economic and institutional processes are configured as symbolic fabrics. In this way consumption can be interpreted as a political activity that triggers transformation starting from its own changes. The paper draws its research information on Solidary Purchasing Groups (GAS) and solidary economies from a survey conducted in the Marche region (Italy) between 2010 and 2011 on a sample of 182 families belonging to 20 GAS.*

**Key words:** *solidary economies, critical consumption, solidary purchasing groups, economic democracy, cultural production.*

## 1. Introduction: consumption and democracy

The objective of this paper is to situate solidary economies and critical consumption within an explanatory context in which economic and institutional processes are configured as symbolic fabrics. In this way consumption can be interpreted as a political activity that triggers transformation starting from its own changes. It is the effect of reflexive modernization, whose phenomena of change are generated by the same (uncontrollable) secondary effects produced by industrial society [3]. All these activate self-transformations through recursive interaction between continuity

and rupture of the cultural flow that shapes the social structure. This dynamic renders symbolic fabrics (cultural production) fragmentary and politicizes society in the interstices of daily activities. Further, it characterizes consumption as a public medium that releases and institutionalizes meanings with which social actors develop an ongoing negotiation. This process affects the definition of public identities that structure and legitimize the market "shape" [12].

In this sense, consumption is the result of individual choices not so much between products but between different kinds of relationship. A basic choice in the formation of a "modern" individual concerns the lifestyle to be adopted, and

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from this follows his/ her positioning within the social system. Goods are selected to make this choice public with this choice, which can be a challenge and confrontation with the other goods that the system offers. "I am vegetarian and disown the eaters of corpses". Consumption thus becomes a source of collective anti-system identity, a necessary stimulus of legitimization of the democratic process.

Enhancing the relationship between democracy and market places this institution as a political field where the structure of power is determined with respect to the levels of inequality that characterize the social structure. Around the regulatory capacity of human activities created by the market, mobilizing the behaviour of billions of people on its functional ideals turns global political balance into a gamble. The democracy of consumption is defined not only in terms of access to resources but also in terms of the quality of such access, that is choosing consumption and production that are alternatives to those of the neo-liberal cycle. The spread of ethically-oriented markets promotes cultures of consumption that are more attentive to environmental sustainability and social solidarity. This is a global phenomenon that appears to be growing steadily and consistently. Solidary economies working with the rules of free trade simultaneously produce new economies. This occurs through the emergence of different narratives and cultures that affect the system of needs and, in many ways, desires.

Changing the world largely depends on how we ask for and want things.

Seen in this light, goods can favour democratic hopes, though it would be entering the realm of illusion to believe that democracy can arise from the construction of the marketplace. In the final analysis, the path to development is less an economic process than a political

and symbolic one that draws on the shared sensibility and culture of a social system, defining a narrative which produces and reproduces its own institutional, regulatory and value-based underpinnings [6].

## 2. Solidary economies

In recent years, development of forms of "other economy" has resulted in research aimed at understanding different modes of articulation and working practices. Globally, solidary purchasing groups and self-production, along with other experiences of critical consumption and ethical economy and finance, are trying to apply the principles of justice and environmental sustainability to development.

In addition to representing a set of practices, these realities suggest hypotheses for social transformation through the construction of spaces for people [19]. All these form the basis for an alternative model of economy based on a lattice structure which spreads and strengthens and spreads through the choices of consumers who provide the resources necessary to support it, creating jobs and income in favour of unemployed and marginalized people. At the same time, a solidary economic system based on ethical relations opens spaces for action to all those wishing to build new relations of production, improve consumption habits, protect the environment, and give rise to social models free of exploitation and in balance with the ecosystem.

The functioning of these economic forms requires that their members - consumers, producers and service providers - refer to the same organization and that they propose the practice of solidary consumption, buying products and services from their network. In this way, a share of value added is reinvested in the network, enabling other forms of productive

cooperation, additional work, expansion of solidarity and greater autonomy from the market.

Consuming ethically means that within mass society an ever-widening chink is opening up where increasingly less "stuff" and increasingly more meanings are being consumed, different however from the mere dimension of *status*, wealth and social class [14], [9], [8]. Solidary Purchasing Groups (GAS) has become widespread in Italy [20]. The first GAS was set up in 1994 in Fidenza, the second in Reggio Emilia and later in various other places. During the same period, "Budgets of Justice" spread, where groups of families come together to implement fair behaviour in their areas of residence, particularly through joint purchasing. The history of the GAS continued in 1996 with the publication by the Centre for a New Development Model of the "Guide to Critical Consumption" In 1997, the Solidary Purchasing Groups network was established with the aim of coordinating and promoting exchange of information on products and producers and of disseminating best practices that had been implemented.

Currently, almost 800 GAS are part of the Italian network, although it is estimated that this figure could be almost double. On average, 25 families participate in a GAS (each of which internally spends about 2,000 euros a year), which means about 100 users per group. About 150,000 Italians use GAS products (see [www.retegas.org](http://www.retegas.org)). These are groups of people who meet to purchase food and/ or goods of common use on the basis of a critical approach to consumption, oriented towards social solidarity and environmental sustainability.

A purchasing group becomes solidary when it decides to apply these criteria to its purchasing choices, favouring the quality of products and of the environment (local

products, organic food, short chain, etc.). These solidary purposes of consumption may activate innovative practices of citizenship.

Territorial sphere and local economy are central among the criteria that guide GAS members in their choice of products and producers. For this reason, a number of aspects are involved: reduction of pollution, enhancement of the local economy and preservation of biodiversity. This has profound political repercussions. Democracy and development are mutually indispensable. Development is not confined only to the search for technical configurations of the production and distribution of wealth. More important factors come into play: sustainability of the ecosystem, the right to conscientious consumption, dismantling of distribution chains in new solidary-type forms of organization and with a local base. Among these latter factors, the most notable is the Solidary Economic District, which enhances resources according to social equity and sustainability, creating distribution chains of goods and services through best cooperative practices and models of production, distribution and consumption. On the supply front, small farmers and entrepreneurs operate in quality manufacturing sectors for the protection and preservation of the environment. On the demand side, it is a question of organized interest or neighbourhood groups for the collective management of common services, based on mutual exchange, as in the case of the GAS.

These ethically-oriented subjects may represent experiences of economic innovation, promoting the diffusion and depositing of projects and strategies of *governance* for sustainable development and testing of alternative socio-economic models.

### 3. A socio-political profile of GAS members

We now turn to the analysis of critical consumption and the social profile of members of a Solidary Purchasing Group (GAS) that emerged from the results of research. These are individuals with high levels of education (44.5% graduates and 9.3% post-graduates), a female majority (58%), predominantly middle class (55.8% clerical; 23,7% self-employed) and fairly young (55.9% are between 24 and 44 years of age).

The family profile of a GAS member is in line with prevailing models in Italy: 64.3% are married, 72% have children. The standard family, parents with two children, represent 49.6% of the sample. They are people who live mainly in urban areas and have achieved economic stability and employment.

The individual level of declared income falls within the national average. The majority of the sample is concentrated in the income segment ranging from 1,000 euro to 1,500 euro a month (53.6%); 13.9 earn up to 2,000 euro, while incomes of 3,000 euro and beyond are earned by 18.5%. In contrast, 13.9% earn less than 1,000 euro. These are members of the educated middle class with a certain cultural refinement and a sense of belonging, together with fairly elite systems of aesthetic distinction. It is no accident that education is viewed as the primary means of social mobility (Bourdieu, 1982).

The income/ gender ratio shows females at a disadvantage. The lower-income segment contains a marked concentration of women (17.6%), who are also more numerous in the primary income group (58.8%), whereas they register below-average levels in all the higher segments. Other gender differences come forth when the link between changes in habits of

consumption and membership in a GAS is examined. Males are more likely than females to state that life as a "GAS" member has changed their eating habits for the better (72.6% vs. 66.5%). An even higher percentage states that their chances of establishing new social relations have increased (76.1% vs. 70.3%) and that they have been able to improve the quality of the time at their disposal (64.8% vs. 56.0%). In other words, Male "GAS members" are more likely to view the experience as an improvement in their lifestyles and in opportunities for casual relations, whereas women show a tendency to consider it a transformation in their patterns of consumption along more responsible, ethically committed lines.

With regard to political outlooks, most GAS members see themselves as critical consumers (52%) and have a policy for the choice of purchase (27%). Their approach to politics is ambivalent. They have little interest in parties (83.9%), low confidence in the ruling class (4%) and parties (3.7%) and low *appeal* for the main institutions. Among these, the highest levels of satisfaction are concentrated on non-political institutions: family (89.3%), associations (88.5%), the judiciary (70.8%), and schools and universities (61.9%). However, the "politics of ideas" interests 68.9% of the sample, many of them mobilized at the level of elections.

To a large extent, GAS members (especially women) see critical consumption as an instrument for redefining culture and social demand. Although showing low confidence in representative institutions, the political class and the party system, at the same time the sample showed an interest in public affairs and a significant propensity to vote. These are subjects who consider themselves above all as citizens and are ethically-oriented; they present character traits that are in line with those of

"responsible citizenship" [7]. They are also distinguished by high and plural information access and strong civic commitment, and demand a new socio-economic and political, solidary and participative model. We therefore face a *citizenship elite* with a profile and characters that do not represent local or national society in their complexity and that, analogous with other experiences [21], take on the contours of a *social movement of active citizens*. Members of GAS express a critical vision based on public and solidary commitment as a way to fill the void of representation and redefine the public sphere, balancing political and institutional distrust (mobilized middle class).

The above observations do not support a "panacea" - type view of GAS and self-organized forms of critical of environmentalism [5]. On the contrary, their ability to revitalize democracy starts with the contradiction highlighted by Bauman [2] and Furedi [13] who detect an "anti-democratic" ethos at the base of these movements. In other words, in the wake of socio-political thought ranging from Tocqueville to Brown [1], the idea is held that, in order to survive, democracy needs internal, even radical, criticism that is able to innovate assumptions and meanings.

In this context, the suggested *identikit* of GAS members is a simplified picture of reality. The GAS movement analysed in the Marche region, as for the national movement, is a complex and plural "galaxy", characterized by differentiation of the motivation and identity of its members. Two main factors affect the heterogeneity of GAS members: the level of structuring of GAS and individual reference values. On this basis, an ideal-typical structure of "concentric circles" is conceivable. In the innermost circle are the most motivated individuals with the highest levels of awareness of the

principles that inspire the solidary economy, and are engaged in the social sphere in order to influence "dominant" political and economic equilibria. Among them prevail *values of self-expression*. There are two variants of this profile. The first concerns the most "ideologized" individuals who aim at a radical critique of "dominant" economic models. They hope for their "overtaking" in favour of models of an "other economy". The second variant refers to people, also aware and committed – we might say "reformist" – who do not aim to "overturn" but to redefine business practices, creating new mechanisms of democratic participation.

In the second circle is a category of GAS members (typically less structured at the organizational level and/ or of recent constitution) who are characterized by a "pragmatic" approach. They are politically less active, ethically less aware of the ethical principles that inform solidary economies. Also in this set, in which "instrumental" rather than "self-expressive" values prevail, there are two subgroups. The first consists of GAS members interested in developing interpersonal relational networks and experimenting alternative and/or integrative purchasing practices with respect to their consumption choices. These focus on the possibility of obtaining quality products or of known origin in order to enhance the local territory. The second subgroup of "pragmatic" GAS members consists of newcomers who decide to join primarily out of curiosity. They are also motivated by being able to save shopping costs, guaranteeing access to quality products. They usually become part of a GAS on the basis of "word of mouth" and reports from informal social networks.

Other concentric circles gradually move away from the inner circle of GAS members who are most aware and

committed. One of these is made up of those who, although part of a GAS, put complementary (predominant) strategies of consumption in place (e.g. fair trade shops, "bio points", stores for solidary purchases, etc.). Another group consists of those who are not part of a GAS, but are potential new members, integrating the "other consumption" circuit with large retail chains. In the outer circles are both people who have not yet approached solidary economies or critical consumption but may be willing to "enter into contact" and those who do not know and/or are not interested in this field. The different profiles presented here are characterized by a contamination of characters, in an ideal-typical continuum forming the image of a "molecular galaxy."

The potential evolution of the GAS phenomenon is not easy to interpret and requires further ad hoc research. However, it can be argued that under the pluralistic and disenchanted framework of democracy, critical consumption fuels the mobilization of new collective actors, including GAS. These networks can help to reorganize the social structure of market economies, especially in the ongoing transition of configuration by large homogenizing blocks to molecular aggregations of individuals held together by the narrative fabric of meanings of identity.

#### **4. The political potential of consumption**

The idea of critical consumption opens up possibilities for the formation of new social demands that can also become new images of the world, new truths. Representing widespread social interests as the strengthening of common goods and services and the related possibility of re-socializing Welfare, these citizen movements modernize the democratic and economic fabric. Rethinking an active

Welfare aimed at individuals and not at the general categories that define them implies a new form of social dynamics where responsibility is relational before being institutional, and pertains to the vicinity of the operating spaces in which individuals and groups construct their autonomy. Institutional specialization leaves the field open to "natural" learning networks, to the expertise that is triggered by social interaction, rehabilitation and consolidation of the trustee fabric of proximity.

Although the experiences of solidary economy exist mainly at the level of modifications to consumption and production, they have a great opportunity to turn to other areas of social demand, proposing themselves as a potential alternative from the grassroots to institutionalized systems of care. In a progressively aging society, in which the active population is decreasing and the fiscal crisis of the state is tightening, care systems can find a suitable location in the solidary mechanism of exchange. This means entering that dimension of solidary economies that places the antidote to entropic degradation of the ecosystem within the framework of production of relational goods [15].

Relational goods are identifiable with those that make up the demand for quality of life: goods and services of care, attention, knowledge, participation and spirituality do not imply an environmentally unsustainable impact, that is to say a significant degradation of energy and relevant matter, and further allow solidary economies to enjoy a specific comparative advantage, developing in perspective significant amounts of value production, especially in rich countries. According to Latouche [18], this results in a gradual transformation of the economic and productive imaginary. In this respect, in the near future, many of the

goods and services provided by public and private structures could be provided according to the criteria of the solidary economy, from agricultural production to food and energy production on a local basis, to training, tourism and care. Under these conditions, the market is a political terrain where the pluralistic meaning of democracy is negotiated; this does not disrupts social relations but reconciles society and individual action (see Conclusions).

Consumer spending responds to induced external stimuli and at the same time affirms behaviour of fidelity. The dimension of needs has been investigated at length: what people wanted or would have wanted. In reality, however, within a cultural and relational perspective, the cornerstone on which people show security is what they do not want.

Individuals interact through multiple forms of culture in conflict and specific lifestyles. The culture of the market does not exhaust the possibilities of self-production of individuality: there always exist alternative options, even though in a minority. Choosing a subculture indicates a rejection of dominant currents and promotes strategic and creative behaviour. Consumer protection and market reform (critical consumption) movements develop through this dynamic.

For example, according to the approach used by Douglas and Irshwood [12], food functions as an instrument for interpreting reality and producing the meaning that conveys values that can change identity and social relations.

Thinking in these terms implies that the alternative consumption practices are not justified by reasons of ecological and social sustainability, but rather have a communicative goal. From this point of view, the rejection of conventional industrial channels and activation of short chains represent a narrative on the social

status and groups of belonging of individuals, allowing each one to become aware of the social-value position of others [17]. In alternative food circuits, they constitute arenas of comparison for defining of the quality standards of products that differ from industrial products. Through organized actions consumers take an active, critical and creative role. That is, they negotiate the criteria for classifying food thus breaking the "dictatorial subjection" of the marketing mix of products [17].

All these reassemble the break between production and consumption, turning consumers into system actors and recognizing the strategic social value of relations between the components of the production chain. In this way, consumption takes on political potential. These trends affirm alternative cultures aimed at reforming the markets. Some experiences of critical consumption also regain a community vocation in relational, production and consumption choices. Solidary economies and GAS are examples. The first enhance the territory and its socio-economic resources, the second enhance group forms of social space (e.g., the neighbourhood), with the civic engagement of families, and friendship and neighbourhood networks.

The assertion of alternative forms of production and consumption goes beyond the allocative sphere of resources; it concerns the social and political dimension of groups and individuals who operate them, rearticulating the demand for goods and services and the cultures that inform economic behaviour.

## **5. Conclusions: critical consumption and transformation of social imageries**

Critical consumption activates social demands that can become new images of the world. It is an attitude of individual

responsibility that determines the basis for an ethical response, starting with the choice of a product. The presence of consumers who consider the impact of their purchase on the environmental and social front, who put a specific ethic of their action before the mere satisfaction of a need, even if induced, redefines the role of consumers with respect to the ideas that have been built over time on this actor. We are not dealing with a passive subject, a victim of the consumer market and its privatistic logic, nor the presence of a rational calculator and asocial individualist, nor a person who flaunts his/her socio-economic status through purchasing. What emerges, on the other hand, is an operational role for the consumer as an active constructor of autonomous networks of meaning [11]. This allows him/her to circumvent the signs of consumption suggested or listed by the producer in the configuration of the marketing mix of a product [10]. This process involves the growth of knowledge of the subject and, in a social and political dimension, the construction of a narrative that is alternative to that proposed by advertising. Through strategies in the field of play, critique of the economy becomes the practice of the consumer who plays with the goods: the trickster, the person who joins the goods game but "does not buy it" and reinterprets and deflects the rules.

The trickster is not opposed to the reign of goods nor does he/ she fall to the promises of the communication media. On the contrary, he/ she considers the "rules of the game" reflectively and critically, and devises tactics to turn them to his/her advantage. The goal is "to play the goods on their own ground", drawing on his/ her own reasoning capacity with behaviour that is reflective, critical and aware. He/ she presents him/ herself as a consumer "educated" to the world of commodities. In

this sense, critical/ conscious consumption and solidary economies are sources of meaning that affect the production of cultural codes at the base of the functioning of the market.

Critical and conscious consumption and the solidary economy represent specific narratives of meaning in the general discourse that informs the market institution, two ways to reconsider and alter the institutional image that instituting society supplies to the market. If the market fuelled by mass production acts on the imaginary through archetypes of accretion and hedonism, the solidarity market evokes a sense of guilt and a return to mother nature, at least at the level of opulent and affluent societies which are the most destructive of the conditions for balance of the ecosystem.

It should be stressed, in fact, that while in the backward or developing countries, critical consumption and solidary economies are configured as instruments of economic democratization, that is the expansion of social opportunities for access to consumption and the production of subsistence, in countries with mass consumption and production, the same strategies can be assimilated in "education" on the environmental sustainability of economic practices. To summarize, if in the first case we are faced with minimum guarantee mechanisms for achieving social welfare expanded to otherwise deprived social groups, in the second the solidary economy presents itself as an instrument of social awareness and sensitivity. This is a possible pact for public life - which cannot be postponed in affluent societies - where the mass production-consumption cycle with its entropic pressure compresses the reproduction of ecosystem resources. In general terms, however, in the context of globalization characterized by the exponential growth of market interdependence, the issues take on a



unique dimension. The global market implies a globalization of production and consumption. The pollution from pesticide use in Africa for production exported to the affluent consumption countries are the other side of pollutant emissions from large industrial producers which, under the Kyoto agreements, buy shares of "permits to pollute" (emission caps) underdeveloped areas. In this context, it appears that a new alliance could emerge between poor and rich, the same as awareness of the finite nature of ecosystem resource whose preservation becomes in the strict sense in the universal interests of humanity.

The human impact on the sustainability of the planet, the right to conscientious consumption, the possibility of dismantling distribution chains and turning them into locally-based solidarity types of organization, and the right to energetic disintermediation give rise to a new idea of democracy and economy. Participation, trust and collaboration become essential factors for the public life of every social and political context. Widening of the decision-making sphere becomes a goal whose function is to stimulate social mobilization of individuals necessary to put life into both democratic and economic processes and therefore to have a positive impact on the modernization of local contexts of development.

In conclusion, the movements of critical consumers and solidary economies represent a form of reconciliation between nature separated from social market relations and recognition of this sphere as crucial for rethinking new forms of solidarity, democracy and dynamics of economic development.

### Notes

1. The paper draws its research information on (GAS) Solidary Purchasing Groups and solidary economies from a survey conducted in

the Marche region between 2010 and 2011 on a sample of 182 families belonging to 20 GAS. Title of the research: Solidary economies in Marche Region: state of play and development scenarios edited by Department of Economics and Social Sciences Polytechnic University of Marche (Italy) and REES Marche (Italian Network of Solidary Economies).

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