

## **From Global to Local. Political Consumerism in Times of Multiple Crises.**

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### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Political consumerism as a means of acting politically expressing solidarity with those who may be considered as more economically and politically vulnerable has become a tactic increasingly used by social movement organisations (Giugni and Grasso 2018). Although not new, as we will discuss in this article, market-based actions have increasingly been used not just generically to call citizens' attention to the abuse of workers' rights in the global supply chains but also by a growing number of grassroots organisations acting mainly at a local level supporting local economic development and aiming at the reduction of the environmental impact of consumption.

As well known, political consumerism refers to the purchasing of goods and services based not only on price and product quality, but also on the evaluation of producers' behaviour and production methods with respect to environmental sustainability, labour and more generally social justice and human rights (Micheletti 2003). This mode of citizen participation through the act of buying (boycott) or not buying (boycott) emphasises the importance of individual responsibility for the common good through the acknowledgement that the act of consumption is a fundamental part of the production process and embodies a relevant political meaning (Micheletti 2009).

The increase of political consumerism observed in recent years in Europe and beyond (Forno and Graziano 2014; Echeagaray 2015) has been often connected to the events that followed the so-called Battle of Seattle (the Seattle demonstration against WTO that took place in 1999). By identifying the market as one of its main arenas for political activism, the Global Justice Movement put an increasingly attention on market-based political actions (della Porta 2006; Micheletti 2003; Baumgarten 2017). Although the GJM remained largely focused on more "classic" repertoires of action (della Porta and al. 2007), in these years, political consumerism began to expand to an increasingly large number of people and to enter in the protest repertoire of a wide and variegated range of social movement actors. Nevertheless, unlike the Sustainable Community Movement Organisations (SCMOs) studies in this article, political consumerism was not at the heart of the

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tactics developed by the GJM (see also Baumgarten 2017) as it was rather with respect to other organisations of the past (as we argue in the following section).

Furthermore, although intense, the Global Justice Movement had a rather short life (della Porta et al. 2007; Baumgarten 2017). The lack of institutional allies, the internal and problematic differentiation among the various components of the movement, the violence with which certain demonstrations were repressed and the disappointment of activists for the negative outcome of the great popular mobilisation against the war in Iraq in 2003, led to a rapid decline of mobilisation. The end of the cycle was followed by a substantial re-positioning of some social movement organisations from the global to the local scale of action. In fact, it is at the local level that political consumerism has continued to spread and expand by virtue of the rise of several new initiatives aiming at raising awareness regarding sustainable living, ecological preservation, and greater respect of workers' and human rights. Examples of such efforts include barter groups, urban gardening collectives, new consumer-producer networks and cooperatives, recovered factories, time banks, local savings groups, urban squatting and others similar experiences.

As it will be argued below, in all such experiences political consumerism moves beyond the narrow understanding of 'individual responsibility taking' (Stolle and Micheletti 2013) as it is used as a tool to bring different collectives together, helping them to develop common strategies of territorial and economic intervention, in the name of the common good and sustainable future (D'Alisa et al. 2014; Ferrer-Fons and Fraile 2014). Put differently, such grassroots initiatives create new spaces for 'economies of trust' (Grasseni 2014: 281), building alternative, productive and sustainable networks of production, exchange and consumption representing both political and ecological forms of resistance (D'Alisa et al. 2015).

Although increasing scholarly attention towards what have been called *alternative economic practices or networks* offers a much richer understanding of these initiatives, the way in which individuals get collectively organised in such experiences and how they succeed in triggering sustained political engagement still remains to be explored. This is the area of research where we would like to specifically make our contribution. By looking at three Italian alternative economic networks pertaining different organisational fields, the article aims to answer two main questions: how political consumerism can be used to build solidarity, and how this can be particularly valuable in times of economic crisis.

The article is organised as follows. The next section summarises the recent debate, which has developed in the context of the scholarly discussion on collective action around those forms of

activism that consider political consumerism as one important tool to reactivate citizens' political participation. As recent research has argued, the rise and spread of grassroots initiatives aiming at building alternative and sustainable networks of production, exchange and consumption are strictly linked with times of economic crisis (Castells et al. 2012; D'Alisa et al. 2015; Bosi and Zamponi 2015; Lekakis 2015; Kousis 2017; Koos et al. 2017; Giugni and Grasso 2018). After this introductory part and a research design section, the article focuses on the three selected experiences, discussing how they have emerged, developed and coped with the context of the economic crisis. The three cases are: *Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale* (solidarity purchasing groups - SPGs), *Addiopizzo* (an anti-racket organisation) and Rimaflo (an Italian factory 'recovered' by its workers in 2013). The article ends with a conclusion.

### **From political consumerism to place-based solidarity practices of production, exchange and consumption**

The re-positioning of some social movement organisations from the global to the local scale of action observed after the downturn of the GJM can be read in the light of the latency-visibility model (Melucci 1996). According to this model, networks and activities do persist even when movements are not mobilizing, and it is during these latent phases that new meanings and identities are often forged and new repertoires of action are put to test. As Melucci (1985) argues, visibility and latency are mutually constructive. It is in fact during the phase of latency that solidarity ties and new cultural frameworks are often created, becoming in turn essential resources for further mobilisation and new cycles of contention.

To capture such 'movement building dynamics' as well as describing how movements evolve during periods of latency, Staggenborg uses the concept of 'social movement community' (Staggenborg 1998; Hassan and Staggenborg 2015). More than the concept of social movement, which is often interpreted as a 'sustained interaction with authorities and other targets' (Tilly 1984), the notion of social movement community helps to better grasp the interaction between various political cultural elements that help to sustain social movements. As Staggenborg puts it: "A social movement community (SMC) consists of networks of individual, cultural activities, institutional supporter, and alternative institutions as well as SMOs and other actors that support movement goals" (1998: 182).

Within the recent debate on collective action and various forms of activism, the concept of sustainable community movement organisations (hereafter SCMOs) has been proposed to indicate

those forms of economic activism which mobilise citizens primarily via their purchasing power, trying to build alternative and sustainable networks of production, exchange and consumption (Forno and Graziano 2014). Through political consumerism, such grassroots initiatives create new economic and cultural spaces for civic learning and consumerist actions which aim to construct and sustain alternative markets based on knowledge exchange, loyalty and trust. As Grasseni (2013) argues, “especially in a context of general breakdown of trust in institutions such as banks, the state, and quality guarantors, confidence is established on the basis of proximity and direct collaboration” (Grasseni 2014: 184). In other words, these networks facilitate both the circulation of resources (information, tasks, money and goods) and the construction of common interpretations of reality, thus simultaneously providing a framework for collective action and enabling the actual deployment of alternative lifestyles (Forno et al. 2015).

With some differences due to their contexts of origin, such networks share several common traits regarding both their motivations and organisational structures. Although SCMOs are hugely indebted (also in terms of activists) to movements of the past (della Porta, 2007; Forno and Gunnarson 2011; Forno and Graziano 2014; Guidi and Andretta 2015), unlike earlier mobilisations, they are more oriented towards building constructive and thoroughly organised alternatives within contemporary (capitalist) societies by acting simultaneously on cultural, economic and political levels.

More in general, as it has often been observed, social movements tend to become visible and expand in situations where the political, economic and social opportunities are neither fully open nor completely closed to these actors’ claims (Kriesi et al. 1995; Wahlstrom and Peterson 2006). That means that mobilisation tends to remain confined within groups of activists when the instances ‘from below’ are or immediately implemented and channelled through traditional interest mediation routes, or when collective action fails to gain support from powerful allies and/or is repressed through violence. The degree of opening and closing of the opportunities systems towards the instances put forward by movement organisations is also important with regards to the tactics of action (‘repertoire of action’) used by these actors.

When looking at the history of social movements, for example, it is possible to highlight some historical periods during which social movements have directly opposed to the dominant powers at the national level, while others in which movements have challenged the structure of power by proposing and supporting forms of self-organisation at the local level. This is the case of the movements that have emerged and developed during the first half of the nineteenth century, such as

the mutualistic and co-operative movements (Forno 2013), as well as of the movements which developed in the wake of the 1970s crises, when the growth of external financial debt forced many states to adopt austerity measures (Bosi and Zamponi 2015).

The history of the mutualistic and cooperative movement is particularly important to understand how several social movement organisations shifted from the global to the local level. During the years of the industrial revolution - an historical time characterised by great changes and a system of opportunities not particularly favourable to the action of social movements - the co-operatives became an instrument of economic organisation and emancipation for workers (Hilson 2009, 2011; Scott 1998). Regardless of their type, size, geographical location, or purpose, cooperatives provided a tool through which it was possible to achieve one or more economic goals, such as improving bargaining power when dealing with other businesses, socialise purchasing to guarantee lower prices, obtaining products or services otherwise unavailable, gaining market access or broadening market opportunities, improving product or service quality, securing credit from financial institutions, and increasing income (Forno 2013). Through their educational work, social life and internationalism, co-operatives were also fundamental for the spread of a culture of cooperation and the formation of solidarity ties among their members, which in several cases led to collective actions undertaken by specific social groups (Gurney 1996). As Diani has argued, social movements do not only rely on upon existing social ties but they may also produce new ones (Diani 1997).

Although we currently are in a different situation, many traits that characterise some new experiences such as new consumer-producer cooperatives, barter groups, urban gardening, time banks, local savings groups and currencies, urban squatting, etc., seem to recall forms of self-organisation of the past. In the past, mutualistic forms of political organisation were connected to the crises produced by industrialisation, whereas the recent revival of direct social actions – i.e. collective actions aimed at directly transforming specific aspects of society by means of the action itself (Bosi and Zamponi 2015) – may be connected to contemporary crises (social, in terms of increasing individualization and social fragmentation; political, in terms of decreasing legitimacy of national and international institutions due to their inability or unwillingness to solve pressing environmental and social issues; and economic, in terms of rising economic insecurity linked to growing unemployment and rising poverty).

As a matter of fact, as it was for cooperative and mutualistic movements, also all these initiatives address both the intensification of economic problems and the difficulties of rebuilding social bonds

within society emphasising solidarity and the use of ‘alternative’ forms of consumption and production as means to re-embed the economic system within social relations, starting from the local level. In all these experiences political consumerism is in fact not just used to build awareness to try to exert pressure on producers and corporations, but also to promote new forms of social and political participation and facilitate the construction of new alliances among different actors starting often from the local level – shopkeepers, farmers, entrepreneurs, consumer and environmental groups, local public administrations etc. – that often take on the form of alternative production and consumption networks (Cembalo et al. 2012; Grasseni 2013; Migliore et al. 2014).

As the cases analysed below will show, while sharing several common traits with social movements of the past, SCMOs tend to bypass the traditional state-addressing repertoires of action, and to focus on a self-changing society as part of everyday politics, where the public and private spheres are increasingly blurred (Castells et al. 2012; Kousis and Paschou 2014). If political consumerism has been initially interpreted as a form of post-materialism and as a result of increasing wealth, within SCMOs this form of action needs to be re-considered (Guidi and Andretta 2015). In fact, within such experiences the act of shopping is not simply promoted individually, but socialised among different groups of people, organised either formally or informally. To put it more simply, within SCMOs, rather than to be an end in itself, political consumerism represents a *tool* through which these organisations build, construct and reinforce solidarity ties in order to foster collaboration among usually small-scaled consumers and producers. In other words, in such experiences consumption represents a mean for recruiting and mobilising individuals and organisations to enact collective action (Dubuisson-Quellier et al. 2011; for contra, but with limited evidence, see Zoll and others 2018). Put differently, our guiding hypothesis is that within the context of broader crises mentioned previously (social, economic, environmental and political), political consumerism has become a useful tool for the promotion of solidarity and collective action.

### **Research design and methodology**

While traditional SMOs have been studied mainly by looking at their relations with political institutions and actors (della Porta & Diani 2006; Tarrow 1995; Kriesi et al. 1995), such grassroots initiatives need to be analysed by paying attention to the interplay between market, politics and culture (Guidi and Andretta 2015). With this regard, it has been argued that solidarity-based economic practices can be seen directly in connection with: (I) increasing attention towards sustainability among citizens; (II) changes in consumption practices due to the increasing

unemployment and the reduction of credit access experienced in conjunction with the implementation of new austerity programme; (III) a general loss of sense of personal purpose in the face of a culture of individualism and consumerism which it seems to make people more willing to opt for alternative economic practices (Castells et al. 2012). Furthermore, it has been stated that while providing the necessary resources to economically support collective action, such practices facilitate the process of social learning and participative decision-making, which represent a way to foster alternative resilience processes (Keck and Sakdapolrak 2013) – aspect that may become even more true in the context of the recent financial crisis and economic downturn.

By looking at three different Italian SCMOs, in the following section we will provide a detailed discussion about how such experiences organise, evolve and cope with the context of the 2008 economic crisis. In terms of case selection, Italy and the three experiences here discussed have been selected as crucial ones to illustrate how political consumerist tactics are used in different contexts with the same effect (solidarity-building between different social actors). More specifically, we tried to trace the commonalities in outcomes of some of the most innovative social practices of recent years in Italy, at different territorial level of analysis. As for SPGs, our analysis is conducted primarily with survey data coming from Lombardy but some general remarks (for example, with respect to their consolidation during and after the crisis) are also made with reference to national context information derived from secondary sources; the second case refers to Sicily and economic actors who have decided to build solidarity through commercial cooperation prior to the economic crisis development but that also managed to expand during the unfolding of the crisis; the third and last case – a recovered factory, *Rimaflow* – is the one which is most linked to the economic crisis. Therefore, the three cases are different in development and main focus, but all seem to have developed solidarity-based practices in a context of multiple crises.

Furthermore, beside the fact that the three cases discussed below pertain different fields of action (food, anti-mafia, work), they have also emerged in different periods in relation to the 2007-2008 crisis: long time before the crisis in the case of SPGs, few years before the crisis in the case of Addiopizzo, and just after (and as a direct consequence) of the crisis in the case of Rimaflow. Also, all the three cases take place in Italy, particularly hit by the economic crisis in the period 2008-2012 (Petsesidou and Guillen, 2015).

Data for the analysis comes from several sources: (i) observation in physical settings, participation in meetings, collection of self-produced informational materials in the three cases semi-directive interviews with key actors belonging all three organisations, participant observation and surveys

among activists; (ii) 39 in-depth interviews with key informants, selected following the ‘snowball’ technique and assuring territorial differentiation; (iii) two surveys among activists, an online one for SPGs in Lombardy and one for Addiopizzo. All empirical material was collected between 2008 and 2016 (Tab.1).

[TAB 1 ABOUT HERE]

### **How Political Consumerism enacts Collective Action: The Emergence and Consolidation of Three Sustainable Community Movement Organisations (SCMOs)**

As other Southern European countries, if we take a medium term perspective Italy has been hit hardest and longest by the 2008 economic crisis (Petmesidou and Guillén 2015). Furthermore, Italy has also been characterised by growing political distrust, although this did not turn into a specific cycle of protest under the form of social movement protests (Zamponi 2012).

As recent research has pointed out, the financial crisis and the ensuing austerity policies appear moreover to have fuelled the growth of a wide range of practices aimed at redressing the escalation of labour and life ‘precarisation’ (Guidi and Andretta 2015; Bosi and Zamponi 2015; Andretta and Guidi 2017). Political consumerism (Micheletti 2003), however, started to grow well before the crisis. It was in fact since the Nineties that political consumerism started to be increasingly widespread also in countries where there was not this tradition, such as in Italy (Forno and Ceccarini 2006; Tosi 2006; Lori and Volpi 2007). Furthermore, the increasing demand for ‘fair’ products, recorded especially after the Global Justice Movement (GJM) cycle of protest, helped to strengthen and consolidate experiences such as fair trade organisations, responsible tourism and ethical finance as well to spread less formalised experiences, such as Solidarity Purchasing Groups (SPGs). With this regards, Bosi and Zamponi talk about a spill-over effect (Mayer and Wittier 1994) between the GJM and the current social movement landscape in Italy with the transmission of a broad set of practices of economic activism (Bosi and Zamponi 2015; Bosi and Zamponi 2018). As we shall see in the discussion of the three cases analysed in this article, once the crisis started to unfold, the presence of a growing number of ‘responsible’ consumers appear to have enabled the constitution and strengthening of locally based practices of production, exchange and consumption.



### *Building solidarity and resisting to the crisis: the case of SPGs*

SPGs can be described as mutual systems of provisioning, usually set up by groups of people who cooperate to buy fair trade products, food and other commonly used goods respecting specific social or environmental standards. Within such groups, individuals and families join together to collectively buy bread, pasta, flour, milk, dairy products, oil, fish, meat, detergents, wine, preserves, juices and jams, fruit and vegetables and other items of everyday use (such as detergents and basic toiletries). They also increasingly purchase textiles and ‘alternative’ services such as renewable energy and sustainable tourism (SPGs – Int. 4). Moreover, activities within an SPG entail for example collecting orders from other group members, establishing direct relationship with producers by checking availability, picking up the order, paying in advance for others, and arranging a time and place for other members to come by, pay, and collect their order.

For these groups the term ‘solidarity’ represents a sort of a guiding principle in the choice of products and producers (Graziano and Forno 2012). In the words of one group representative interviewed (SPGs – Int. 2) solidarity within these groups is simultaneously expressed towards both the environment and producers. Unlike other collective purchasing groups, SPGs do not in fact strive to obtain the lowest price possible, but instead choose their products and producers with the explicit goal of co-producing social and ecological common wealth. Put differently, though their shopping they try to build a viable alternative to the ‘consumer society’, a societal model which they tend to regard as based on the unacceptable exploitation of human and natural resources.

With this regard, the survey that we have conducted in Lombardy between 2011 and 2013 shows that while less than half of the respondents (48%) indicated that they became members in order to save money, 79.6% said that they have joined these groups in order to ‘support local producers’, 63.7% wanted to ‘build new social ties’ and 56% of the people responded that they participate because they have an ‘environmen(al) concern’ (Forno et al 2015)<sup>2</sup>. Put differently, the main concern is around solidarity in its various implications – within the group (*internal* solidarity), outside of the group (*external* solidarity) and with respect to the environment (*environmental* solidarity).

Also, in terms of the impact of the crisis, according to Guidi and Andretta (2015), SPGs have substantially increased during the years of the economic crisis. Data provided by the website of the

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<sup>2</sup> The survey was conducted in 2011-2013 within a larger research project entitled “Inside Relational Capital” under the scientific supervision of Francesca Forno, Cristina Grasseni and Sivana Signori.

national SPGs network also confirm this trend: the number of self-registered SPGs has risen from 153 in 2004, to 394 in 2008, to 518 in 2009, and to 977 in 2014 (Fig. 1). To be sure, these figures, as is argued below, are likely significant underestimates of the real number of existing groups.

[FIG 1 ABOUT HERE]

The increase in the numbers during the years of the crisis should not be considered as a mere coincidence. In fact, the crisis has not reduced their overall number but on the contrary SPGs have increased while pushing their action towards more specific and local projects aimed at supporting small producers affected by the crisis. For example, in 2009 one of the cheese producers of the SPGs in Northern Italy that was about to run out of business due to the sudden contraction of credit opportunities, was saved from bankruptcy by a network of 200 SPGs (Grasseni 2014: 184; Signori 2017). As we will see also below, SPGs have been also involved and fundamental ally in the case of Rimaflow, as in other several cases that have recently started to be documented by empirical research (Olivieri 2015; Andretta and Guidi 2007).

In sum, our findings suggest that within SPGs solidarity is intended in a threefold manner: internal, external and environmental. The first one is solidarity within the group, with members equally sharing duties and responsibilities among them and in cases when the more affluent within the group support other less affluent – for example, in the case of a Sicilian SPG, gratuity is granted in order for marginalised people (such a poor elderly) to have access to the SPG products (SPGs – Int. 9). The second type of solidarity is the external one: not only with respect to fair trade organisations which are involved in international cooperation but also with respect to local producers which are constantly supported and therefore ‘consumer fidelity’ is guaranteed (see the data mentioned previously on the reason why people have become members of SPGs). The third one is environmental (i.e. towards the environment). Beyond our interviews (SPGs – Ints. 4, 5 and 8), other pieces of research have highlighted that although their overall economic impact so far seems to be rather limited, SPGs play important societal, relational, and political roles as spaces of apprenticeship for a new type of consumer citizenship (Grasseni 2013; Forno et. al. 2015). In other words, through these groups, people not only satisfy ‘liberal guilt’ needs by shopping ethically. They actually join to try to make a difference to environmental and social justice issues.

### *Everyday shopping to spur self-organizing anti-mafia communities: the Addiopizzo case*

The incorporation of political consumerism in the anti-mafia repertoire of action represents another example of the important transformations taking place in the organisational form and strategy of several contemporary social movement organisations. Thanks to the actions of a relatively small SMOs called Addiopizzo, political consumerism has in fact also entered in the repertoire of the anti-mafia movement, proving to be a particularly effective strategy, as it has also enlisted the participation of certain social actors traditionally reluctant to take collective action against the mafia, thus allowing for the achievement of goals never previously attained (Forno and Gunnarson 2010).

When Addiopizzo started to mobilise, market-based actions were already well-known among an increasing proportion the Italian population, mainly representative of the so called middle class, the young and the better educated. The success of political consumerism in spurring civic mobilisation and social change has clearly encouraged anti-mafia activists to *emulate* groups and organisations that used the market as a political arena. Addiopizzo thus incorporated market-based actions among its tactics for fighting organised crime.

Addiopizzo's first public appearance occurred during the night between June 28th–29th 2004, when thousands of stickers edged with a black border – like traditional Italian death announcements – were plastered all around the city centre of Palermo. The stickers, which read: “*Un intero popolo che paga il pizzo è un popolo senza dignità*” (‘A whole community of people who pay the pizzo is a community without dignity’), were not addressing anyone in particular, but were deliberately aimed to rally all Palermo citizens to the cause. Just a couple of days later, on July 1st 2004, the ‘*attacchini*’ (bill-stickers) explained the sentence in an open letter sent and then published by local newspapers. It was in this moment that, by echoing *fair trade* discourses and campaigns, for the first time political consumerism was explicitly introduced among the practices utilised by a grassroots anti-racket organisation. From that point on, by encouraging Palermitans to buy from pizzo-free products, Addiopizzo activists started working to create the conditions for the emergence of new alliances between conscious consumers and local economic actors resisting the *pizzo*.

Thus, as in the case of SPGs, also in this case political consumerism was utilised to (re)build solidarity ties, reciprocity and trust among diverse subjects operating in the same territory.

Moreover, as it is possible to note in Fig. 2, similarly to the growth of SPGs, also the number of shopkeepers and entrepreneurs who joined the Addiopizzo initiative increased after 2008, i.e. in connection with the worsen of the economic crisis.

[FIG. 2 ABOUT HERE]

The economic crisis hit Italy particularly hard, and was even more serious in the Southern part of the country, not only reducing entrepreneurs' possibility to pay the *pizzo*, but also in principle increasing their intolerance towards the *pizzo system*. At this regard, the respondents to the survey that we have conducted among 277 shopkeepers that joined the Addiopizzo campaign between 2005 and 2011 reported that the majority of them judged the economic wellbeing of firms in their same sector as decreased a lot (64%) or somewhat (20%) in comparison with ten years before<sup>3</sup>. Put differently, the economic crisis may have reduced both the economic capacities of firms to pay the *pizzo* and the entrepreneurs' willingness to accept the 'extra (illegal) cost'.

Also in this case we can observe how political consumerism played an important role as key tool for both recruiting and mobilising individuals as well as for building an alternative economic network based on revitalised form of solidarity and flows of mutuality between different actors. In its specific way, also the Addiopizzo's initiative recalls those alternative economic networks which are (re)emerging in local communities where various groups and movement actors work towards localised development and are driven by the hope of improving human conditions (Gibson-Graham 2006; Conill et al., 2012).

As in the case of other SCMOs (Forno and Graziano 2014), Addiopizzo played simultaneously on three distinct levels (cultural, economic and political). At the cultural level, such organisation was able to affirm new discourses based on individualised-collective practices. At the economic level, it encouraged greater economic collaboration among local economic actors striving to survive in a particularly adverse economic context exacerbated by the crisis. Finally, at the political level, especially through the promotion of political consumerism, Addiopizzo has been successful in proposing an innovative regulatory governance tool based on voluntary actions and participation – which if clearly did not solve the mafia problem, put the racket issue on the public agenda and political (Forno 2015).

Therefore, also within the context of anti-mafia mobilisation, the contemporary increase of political consumerism among broader sectors of the population seems to have (re)activated citizens'

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<sup>3</sup> The survey was supported by the Swedish Research Council under Grant [2010-1309]. Data was collected by Francesca Forno, Carina Gunnarson and Giulio Pizzuto, in October-December 2011, and in April 2012.

involvement and participation, thus confirming how lifestyle politics (De Moor 2017) can constitute a base for more sustained and public political engagement. The increase in the number of shopkeepers and entrepreneurs that have joined the Addiopizzo's network in times of crisis clearly testifies the capacity of political consumerism – as a form of 'daily politics' (Rodriguez 2001) – to expand the terrain of political contestation to the everyday social practices.

*Bringing together workers and citizens through 'alternatively produced goods': The case of Rimaflow*

Political consumerism utilised as a tool to both recruit and mobilise individuals was also quite central in the experience of an Italian 'recovered' factory (RiMaflow) that was (re)born in 2013 in the hinterland of Milan. As a contemporary phenomenon, recovered factories emerged in the wake of Argentina's debt crisis of 2001: *Fábricas or empresas recuperadas* is the name used to describe instances in which the workers of failed businesses restarted their activity without the former owners. Such instances were part of a much larger movement of social protest, sometimes called the *Argentinazo* (Kabat 2011).

In Italy, the vast majority of 'recovered factories' has emerged after the 2008 crisis<sup>4</sup>. However, the Italian phenomenon seems to have very little in common with the Argentinian as in Italy the bulk of the cases followed the so called worker-buyout path, described as one particular way of creating new cooperatives (for a discussion of the Italian case, see: Orlando 2015). However, within the experiences of Italian 'recovered factories', Rimaflow appears to be rather different. Here, in fact, the occupation has led to a number of new income-generating activities aiming at building a system of relations through the factory's occupation based on self-help, mutualism and cooperation all strategies that appeared to activists to respond better to the general impoverishment caused by the crisis (Rimaflow – Int. 1).

Facing the prospect of being left alone and at the mercy of the labour market, which gave them little hope of being employed again (partly because of the perceived weakness of trade unions), Rimaflow workers decided in fact to work on building a series of new activities with the aim to

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<sup>4</sup> A total of 64 cases were found, spanning from 1982 to the present day. The vast majority has emerged after the 2008 crisis. Six of these cases, however, are no longer active, while two are struggling to survive. Emilia Romagna and Tuscany host the greatest number of cases, respectively 17 and 15 (Veneto has 7, Lombardy 6, Lazio 5, Marche Umbria Campania and Sicily 3 each, Friuli and Puglia 1 each) (Orlando 2015).

establishing alliances with other social movement organisations such as the local SPG group “Gas Baggio” (Rimaflow – Int. 9) active in their territory.

As in the case of SPGs and other SCMOs (Forno and Graziano 20014), also among Rimaflow activists the idea of co-production is central. As several activists have argued (Rimaflow - Int 1, 4, 5, 9) this concept permits to overcome the views of purchasing as simple shopping. Co-production goes beyond strategies of individual boycott and ‘buycott’, as it refers to collective strategies deployed by groups (or “communities”) rather than individuals, seeking to establish direct relations between consumer, producers and distributors.

As in the other two cases discussed above, also in such experience the value of solidarity is at play together with the idea of re-connecting citizens in their role of consumers to certain issues concerning production such as, in this case, the condition of workers (Rimaflow – Int. 1). So far, Rimaflow workers have established several diverse activities all inspired by principles of ecological conversion and alternative lifestyles. The main warehouse has been turned into a poly-functional space that is used by local groups for concerts, meetings, movie screenings, plays, etc. There is also a kitchen and a bar. In the second warehouse, an artisans’ market with permanent stallholders takes place on weekends. Another warehouse has been turned into a parking space for campervans, and another one into a storage area for people who cannot afford garages. All these activities are meant to generate income for the workers, but also to raise funds to set up two other productive activities. One would be the repairing and recycling of electronic goods, which already happens on the site but at a very small scale. The other is the repairing of pallets (the wooden frames used to move cargo). As the vast majority of those who repair pallets use unregulated, poorly paid labour, the Rimaflow workers aim to sell their products to retailers as ‘ethically produced’ pallets. Finally, the workers have taken to distributing food from organic growers in the south of Italy (mostly oranges) to SPGs in and around Milan, using the site to stock the produces. Workers do also produce some products as the *Ripassata* (tomato juice) or the *Rimoncello* (lemon liqueur) whose main function is performing as *bridges* between workers and the outside world of citizens-consumers. As seen in the case of SPGs, also this specific case of political consumerism, “political producerism” (Andretta and Guidi 2017), not only expresses, but also practices, solidarity.

Among the three cases, Rimaflow is clearly the most recent and the most directly connected to the crisis. Precisely for this reason, among the cases here discussed, this case shows even more clearly how the economic crisis, in conjunction with other factors facilitating citizens organising in political

consumerist groups (such as the pre-existence of SPGs), can transform threats into opportunities for collective action.

## **Conclusion**

Social movements tend to follow a cyclical dynamic and protest cycles are often characterised by the emergence of new organisations and, in some cases, by shifts in the means (i.e. repertoire of actions) used by social movement actors enabling them to exert pressure on their targets (Tarrow 1994).

During the current crises, social movements are confronting two interrelated difficulties. On the one hand, institutions are less willing to accommodate demands for social justice and equity, due to the austerity policies largely prevalent in Europe. On the other, the highly individualised nature of contemporary society makes it difficult to create bonds of solidarity and cooperation among people. Nevertheless, in some cases people's discontent has been the basis for collective actions that try to increase both resistance to crises and the resilience to its impacts (Koos et al. 2017).

In the previous sections, three different types of solidarity-based practices of production, exchange and consumption have been discussed. It has been argued that, while sharing several common traits with social movement organisations of the past, such experiences do not usually rely on protest politics but rather focus on a self-changing society as part of everyday politics, and this although being quite radical in their attitude and discourses.

As mentioned previously, with some differences, the cases analysed in this article share several common traits and followed a similar dynamic. All the three experiences consider political consumerism as an important tool to reactivate citizens' political participation and to express solidarity with the more economically and politically vulnerable, and – more in general – express internal, external and environmental solidarity (not only in the specific case of the SPGs but also in the other cases). Moreover, in all three cases solidarity-building can be seen as embedded in their social and economic networking activities. It is in fact through solidarity exchanges that these organisations support strategies of direct action (Bosi and Zamponi 2015) such as information sharing, awareness raising, educating and lobbying. As Papaoikonomou and Alarcon have observed, SCMOs represent life alternatives and forms of resistance to the traditional marketplace (Papaoikonomou and Alarcon 2015). SCMOs try in fact to go beyond capitalist settings by encouraging ongoing and direct relationships between different actors (workers, producers and

consumers) based on solidarity and reciprocity rather than economic convenience (i.e. utility or profit maximisation).

For example, sustained community agriculture organisations, as in case of SPGs experiences, create and consolidate local social relationships between producers and consumers, which are also characterised by the presence of monetary exchanges (i.e. buying specific products) but primarily cantered on the social – and not the commercial – relationship created. Put differently, through these experiences, individuals have the opportunity not only to satisfy a series of consumer-related needs in an ethical and sustainable way, but also to join together and make their voices heard (primarily on environmental and social justice issues).

Furthermore, the three cases have shown that although following different approaches and starting from different perspectives (alternative food network, anti-mafia movement and labour movement) and starting in different moments in time (well before the economic crisis – SPGs; during the economic crisis – Addiopizzo; right after the beginning of the economic crisis – Rimaflow) they all managed to develop forms of solidarity which were rooted in other, long lasting forms of crises (social and political) and consolidated by the reaction to the economic crisis. Put differently, within all the three SCMOs, the use of political consumerism not only has served to express, but also to practice solidarity, providing every member with a tool to participate actively in collective action, activating intensive process of mutual learning and socialisation. For example, within SPGs, political consumerism becomes a mean to co-produce the common good by (re)building reciprocity and trust among diverse subjects operating in the same territory, intervening directly in local food provisioning chains, and reintroducing social and environmental sustainability issues in regional economies, sometimes with the explicit aim of participating in the governance of the territory.

The current economic crisis seems, moreover, to have given a further impetus to the spread of these experiences, confirming Castells et. al (2012) intuition according to which the alternative economic sector is one of the four emerging layers of EU and USA economy after 2008. In fact, beyond promoting and practicing solidarity market exchanges, alternative economic networks are often incubators and accelerators of further local economic initiatives.

To conclude: our analysis has shown that pre-existing crises (social and political) may have provided a context for new networks of solidarity-based economy to emerge – such as in case of SPGs and Addiopizzo – but the economic crisis has either provided a way to consolidate such experiences (as in the two cases mentioned above) or it has provided an opportunity for new actions to emerge and consolidate – such as in the case of Rimaflow. Our research is obviously limited by



the focus on a single country (Italy) and by the limited number of cases, but we believe that with this exploratory research attempt we have identified how collective action based on multiple forms of solidarity (internal, external and environmental) may emerge or consolidate also as a reaction to the economic crisis – especially when it is embedded in other types of crises, such as the social and political ones that characterised the case analysed in this article.

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