

**NEW MORAL ECONOMIES IN WESTERN SICILY:  
FAIR-TRADE AND ORGANIC AGRICULTURE  
BETWEEN CHANGE AND CONSTRAINT**

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I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis addresses the dialectic between capitalist values and those of moral economy, and the implications of that dialectic for how people who are engaged in alternative economic practices in Palermo and western Sicily experience their agency. It examines in particular the local commodity network created by people who practised ethical consumption and who worked in fair-trade retail and organic farming. It is based upon fifteen months of fieldwork in the city of Palermo, Sicily's capital, and its rural province, among predominantly lower-middle-class citizens.

In contrast to abstract views of the market logic as the dominant one in industrialised societies, the people of Palermo and western Sicily drew upon numerous values from outside a capitalist belief system to conceptualise the economy as a moral construct. However, the ways in which they did so were mobile, contested and ambiguous, and varied along the lines of production, exchange and consumption. The thesis explores how notions of value, normativity and motivations to behave ethically in economic processes all had to be negotiated through the demands of daily life. It therefore argues that the economic, political, and cultural constraints faced by people striving to build alternative economies cannot be overlooked, thus interrogating ethnographically the central anthropological issue of how and if economies are embedded in social relations.

After the introduction (chapter 1), the discussion begins with an outline of the three main groups of actors—consumers, fair-traders and farmers—and a critical historical review of western Sicily and Palermo (chapter 2). Each group is then analysed in detail (chapters 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7), by looking at how agency is played out both at the symbolic and practical level. Finally, chapter 8 highlights the commonalities and contradictions shown by the local moral economy.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

In 2006, one of the first episodes of my fieldwork was a meeting held by the Palermitan chapter of the Lilliput Network, a national collective of left-wing and Catholic activists working in the anti-globalisation movement.<sup>1</sup> I had learnt of the occasion through an email circulated on the group's listserv, which specified only the time and place without a programme. I had been involved with the Network during my university years in Palermo, and after moving to London for postgraduate studies in 2004, I used the listserv to keep in touch with its activities. The meeting took place in mid-October, on a day that felt still quite warm. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) had agreed to host the meeting in its headquarters. (As an informal grouping of activists, the Lilliput Network had no permanent base and always relied on more formal groups to find venues to meet.) The Palermitan office of the WWF was located in a building in the posh northern area of the city.

Only seven people were present that afternoon: two women in their early twenties, both of whom were university students; two men in their thirties; two in their forties; and one in his fifties. After some initial chatter, we began the meeting proper. First, one of the women reported back on some of the Network's national activities, in which she was involved as a result of attending university in the north of the country. Almost all the campaigns she talked about seemed to be happening there. As the conversation about these events progressed, I was struck by the apparent lack of any local agenda to discuss, and started wondering why the meeting had been called for in the first place. Eventually, someone voiced a similar concern, and asked to shift the focus back to Palermo and Sicily.

Three of the people who were there had come to share local news. Among them were a man in his thirties, who belonged to another environmental NGO, the leftist 'Greens, Environment, and Society' (GES), and a much older man, who turned out to be a farmer. They told us they were involved in setting up an organic direct market for the coming month of November. GES was helping a group of farmers from Palermo's province with

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<sup>1</sup> The Network's name refers to the tiny Lilliputians who take down the giant Gulliver in Jonathan Swift's famous novel. This story was adopted by the group as metaphor for the power of people to win over capitalism. For an introduction to the group and a discussion of its politics, see Castagnola (2004).

the paperwork necessary to get authorisation from the local authorities. They talked us through the steps taken thus far, pointing out in particular the difficulties experienced with the town council's various departments (see Orlando 2011a). Eventually, they concluded by saying they would let us know of any further steps, to see if we could lend a hand in any way.

The other person who spoke, a man in his forties, had come to tell the Network of a new fair-trade shop about to be opened by a worker cooperative made up of himself and two other individuals. I recognised him as one of the people who used to work in the city's other fair-trade shop when I lived in Palermo, something that had obviously changed since I'd left and come back. This older shop sold also fresh organic produce. Many of those in the room knew the man in the same capacity, probably because they were themselves consumers of fair-trade and organic foods. He asked us to spread the word about the new shop as widely as possible, and gave us the fliers for the coming inauguration. He also said that if anyone was interested in giving more practical help, there were lots of shelves and other pieces of furniture that needed assembling.

After listening to this news, the meeting quickly drew to an end. At the time, leaving the building and walking into the still warm air of Palermo's city centre, I could hardly imagine that this one meeting, which I had stumbled upon entirely by chance, would offer me so many opportunities to know and work with the actors of the local organic and fair-trade movements. For almost fifteen months, I met contacts that could be traced back to that one day.

\* \* \*

In this thesis I ask how people from north-west Sicily who practise ethical consumption, fair-trade retailing, and organic farming attempt to integrate the values embodied by such practices with their daily lives. I look, on the one hand, at how the discourses of 'social justice', 'sustainability', 'caring', 'equality', 'natural', etc.—often glossed over unproblematically by lay people, the media and researchers—are understood through local interpretations, thus showing how their categories are in fact contested. On the other, I explore the social and economic constraints affecting the populations of Palermo and Sicily, to see how different sets of relationships support and/or impede these

would-be ethical practices. I address the contradictions that emerge between a moral approach to economic activity and the requirements of market economy and society.

My work thus deals with the intersections, continuities and disjunctures between agency, as expressed through individual experience, and social structures and networks. It also considers the complexity of locality, markets and economic discourses. I chart a middle ground between culture and society by keeping one eye on values and the other on the practical behaviour of making a living. From an epistemological perspective, I combine insights about the instituted nature of economy—that relations of livelihood occur through social ties of various kinds—with a revised cultural-economic approach that illuminates people’s own models framing such relations and the goods that circulate among them, which pays particular attention to diversity rather than uniformity.

## **1.1 The fair-trade and organic movements in history and text**

Until recently, fair-trade and organic agriculture were largely unknown to the wider public, having previously occupied what one author has aptly called the ‘interstices’ of economy and society (Renard 1999). This is true both in terms of the wider public’s knowledge of them, and that of the academic world. This section serves, therefore, two purposes. First, I explain how the two initiatives work, and provide a brief historical overview of the movements’ development from their beginnings to the present. Second, I review the scholarship that has dealt with fair-trade and organic farming since the late 1990s.

Today, fair-trade is a global movement, organising over a million small-scale producers on all continents. Yet it began in a very humble way. At the end of the 1940s, Quaker and Mennonite religious groups in England and North America began importing handicrafts from areas as diverse as Puerto Rico, Palestine, and China (Littrell & Dickson 1999).<sup>2</sup> Eventually, during the 1960s these groups set up formal import organisations, and added food staples to their portfolios. In the 1970s, the movement grew considerably as a result of the expansion of the non-governmental sector, especially of those organisations that protested for the failed development of what became known as ‘Third World’. The

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<sup>2</sup> For reasons of consistency, in my work I have decided not to focus on handicrafts. These do, however, constitute an important part of the Italian fair-trade market.

1990s saw vast changes and expansion in the system, mainly due to the creation of labelling organisations (Renard 2003), which provide fair-trade certification to third parties and have taken a primary role in the movement alongside that held by its original actors, the alternative trade organisations (ATOs, see Leclair 2002). Indeed, for the majority of consumers today the movement is synonymous with products of normal brands that are certified as being fair-trade, and are usually sold in large supermarkets, rather than with specific fair-trade brands (see Fridell 2007). In Italy, though, a network of small dedicated shops selling foods circulated by alternative trade organisations is still prevalent. This is the kind of fair-trade that I look at in this thesis.

Organic agriculture is older than fair-trade, dating back to the 1920s and '30s. Its origins are also more complex, ranging from a landed class constituency in England, to the anthroposophic movement in Germany and Austria (Conford 2001). The unifying motive was clear, though: an opposition to the development of mechanised, industrial, and chemical farming. After 'going under' in the post-WWII decades, which saw the triumph of precisely this kind of farming, the modern organic movement was reborn around the same time that fair-trade was expanding, in the 1960s and '70s, due to the rise of 'green' counter-cultural protest. This was not coincidental. It testifies to the cultural milieus shared by the two movements, and also to the politico-economic climate that framed them. Again, as with fair-trade, the 1990s were years of rapid changes and development for the organic sector (Rigby et al. 2001). The many 'food scares' that occurred during this period (e.g. DuPuis 2000) propelled the movement on the public arena, which resulted in a process of mainstreaming and formalisation of cultivation criteria (see Buck et al. 1997; Pratt 2009).

As the previous paragraphs shows, the fair-trade and organic movements have a complex history dating back at least to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. During this history, social scientists have shared the wider public's lack of interest towards the two initiatives. The earliest book on fair-trade I was able to locate, for example, is Barratt-Brown (1993); other studies remain sparse until around 2000. With regard to organic farming, some key texts date back to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but these are largely technical or 'activist' books, written by the practitioners of the early movement to promote their cause. When one looks for scholarly works, a pattern similar to that of fair-trade is apparent: a sustained academic interest in the organic movement emerges only in the 1990s (see for an exception

Atkinson 1980, 1983). It is only recently that social scientists have begun to look at these phenomena as objects of inquiry, mainly as a result of the initiatives' heightened presence in the media and other public arenas.

Although still under-researched, then, there is now a rapidly growing body of scholarship on fair-trade and organic agriculture. Given the multi-faceted nature of the two movements, and the disciplinary specialisations of those currently studying them, this scholarship combines topic, theory, method, academic affiliation, and regional specialisation in different ways. In the following paragraphs I briefly review these 'bundles' of research, pointing out where anthropologists are contributing to them, in order to then highlight where my approach departs from the currently existing literature.

Probably the largest body of work on fair-trade is currently that which deals with producers and their organisations in the global South (Ronchi 2002). Usually, this literature focuses on the livelihood and cultural impacts of growing food for the international fair-trade market (Raynolds et al. 2004). Studies of fair-trade farmers predominate in this scholarship, compared to those of organic ones, as historically the latter have been more numerous in the North (see below). However, as organic production increasingly becomes part of a world market, and fair-trade foods are certified also as organic, the two strands are coming closer (Barrett et al. 2002). From a disciplinary perspective, anthropologists and sociologists with a particular interest in development studies have been those most involved. Geographically, Latin America has been by far the most heavily studied macro-region (Jaffee 2007; Lyon 2007), followed by the African continent (Parrish et al. 2005). This geographical focus has been partly the reflection of an emphasis on a particular commodity: coffee. The body of literature in question adopts fieldwork as a core methodology, though the degree to which this is employed varies considerably, from very brief impact assessment exercises (Paul 2005), to longer term ethnographic studies (Luetchford 2008). Quantitative data tends to predominate in works located at the short-term end of this spectrum, while qualitative data is privileged in research focusing on the long-term.

A different scholarly trajectory on the fair-trade and organic movements takes a broader view by moving the focus away from the South and looking at the commodity networks that constitute these initiatives (Lockie & Kitto 2000; Morgan & Murdoch 2000).

The central theme, therefore, becomes the workings of the market, and how value, both monetary and cultural, is accumulated between the producer country and the northern one where the food is sold and consumed (Allen & Kovach 2000). Geographers, sociologists, political scientists and business studies scholars engage in this kind of research. Their focus is transnational, which often results in a methodology relying entirely on secondary literature, or on the elaboration of exclusively quantitative data. Multi-sited fieldwork studies remain considerably rare, mainly as a result of the widely different locales where the many actors involved in fair-trade and organic farming are found (but see Fridell 2007). ‘Mixed studies’ exists, where an ethnographic component on Southern producers is complemented by the analysis of a particular food’s commodity chain (Murray & Reynolds 2000). Often, these studies look at the issue of certification and how this particular mechanism affects farmers’ lives locally and (re)creates value non-locally (Taylor 2005).

A third strand of research looks specifically at fair-trade and organic agriculture actors in the North. Different scholars, from anthropologists and sociologists, to political scientists, to scholars of business and consumer studies are all presently engaged in this kind of work. The actors selected in the two movements vary. They tend to include the third sector and civil society groups (e.g. NGOs) that support and promote those two systems (its ‘activist’ core), and sometimes—though rarely—the businesses that transform and distribute the foods in question (e.g. Rice 2001). In the case of organic specifically, work focuses primarily on farmers, the majority of whom are still found in industrialised countries (Andreatta 2000; Guthman 2004; Pratt 2009). The literature on organic producers in the North deals with issues of livelihood and political economy similar to those of fair-trade farmers in the South.

Consumption is the other major interest of this third body of work. It usually takes two forms. On the one hand, quantitative surveys form the basis of theory-building both for studies of the politics of consumption and for consumer research (Ozcaglar-Toulouse et al. 2006; Tanner & Kast 2003). On the other, many studies focus on the cultural production of the fair-trade and organic commodities, particularly in the media (e.g. advertising, activist campaigning, etc.), pointing to the degree to which these are oppositional to capitalism or follow its logics (see Golding & Peattie 2005). Again, these aspects can be mixed, for

example by looking at the different ways in which NGOs and supermarkets contribute to mould ethical commodities.

Shared by this third strand of research is a lack of long-term fieldwork as foundation of theory, and in general of qualitative data drawn specifically from people, rather than from advertisements and other such materials. The focus on actual lives that informs studies of producers, especially in Southern countries, is somehow lost when the emphasis shifts to consumers. The same is true of ‘place’ as an analytical variable, with fair-trade and organic farming rarely being viewed as phenomena that possess a *local* social and cultural dimension in Northern countries (but see below). Given the nature of the two initiatives as transnational and driven by formal organisations such as enterprises and NGOs, their values and imageries are often thought of in very general, if not simplistic terms both by the public and by some scholars. In contrast, place and a qualitative methodology are the points of departure of this study.

At the centre of my work on fair-trade and organic food is how the practices of growing, selling and eating these ethical foods combine with values that *include*—among others—those specific to the locale where such practices take place. Throughout the thesis, the ways in which people experience them in Palermo and north-west Sicily provide an analytically meaningful thread. I thus engage with certain elements of the literature discussed above, while leaving aside other ones, depending on their relevance to a place-based study. I start from the articulation of the fair-trade and organic movements in a specific time and place (though I do not look at every aspect of this articulation): small-medium organic growers, small retailers of fair-trade and organic foods, and consumers of such foods represent the particular commodity network found on the ground. I am interested in uncovering how the locale affects and transforms the two movements socially, economically and culturally, by asking how the people who are active in them attempt to integrate the movements’ values with their daily lives. In what ways do ‘moral’ meanings and symbols affect behaviours of alternative production, circulation and consumption? And how, in turn, does actually practising such behaviours shape moralities in specific ways?

This thesis is therefore an example of the most recent theoretical developments in the study of alternative economic movements, such as those found in De Neve et al. (2008b) and Carrier & Luetchford (2011). These studies have a pronounced comparative approach

(see also Varul 2009), and a grounded perspective that recognises the importance of fair-trade and organic as integral to processes of social reproduction (also Barnett et al. 2005). In my view, two key analytical concepts relate to this body of work, both of which provide a compass in the analysis of my own case study. One is that of ‘moral economy’ (e.g. Bryant & Goodman 2004: 344-5, 347-349; Fridell 2007: 272-296; Goodman 2004; Jaffe et al. 2004; Luetchford 2008: 152-186); the other is the concept of ‘embeddedness’ (e.g. Hinrichs 2000; Raynolds 2000; Sage 2003; Winter 2003).

Both concepts have a central place in the history of economic anthropology (see Mollona 2009, Hann 2010), and are presently being utilised ever more often beyond the discipline’s boundaries. In this process of disciplinary expansion, they have acquired an emphasis on process, movement and networks that is receptive both to the empirical nature of the two phenomena addressed in this thesis, and to wider theoretical developments in the social sciences that strive to move beyond a production/consumption divide (e.g. Applbaum 2004: 19-115; Goodman 2002; Goodman & Dupuis 2002; Le Heron & Hayward 2002; Miller et al. 1998, esp. chapter 1; Wilk 2006). Moral economy and embeddedness acquire significance as analytical tools particularly in the context of these recent scholarly trajectories, charting the course on an intellectual map of which this thesis is but one small quadrant. In the following two sections I thus explore in detail the theoretical implications, both positive and negative, of the two concepts for my work (section 1.2), and underline the key contributions made by the thesis (section 1.3).

## **1.2 Historical notes on moral economy, capitalism, and embeddedness**

One of the enduring contributions of both Thompson and Scott was to highlight the extent to which “markets” are political constructions and outcomes of social struggle.

(Edelman 2005: 332)

The establishment of moral economy as a scholarly term in the social sciences can be traced back to Thompson’s (1971) article ‘The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century’, and to Scott’s (1976) book *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*. In the following pages I will focus particularly on these two authors and their sources of

inspiration, though one could easily list other important points of reference (e.g. Moore 1978; Linebaugh 2003).

In a reappraisal of his classic 1971 piece, Thompson (1991) notes that ‘moral economy’ was first used by English common folk in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to contrast their own practices to those of the “quacks” who promoted a “political economy” (1991: 336-337). (In anthropological terms, then, moral economy can be seen as a ‘native’ concept borrowed for theory-building.) It was particularly the Chartists and other critics of capitalism, in their fight against the ruling elites and nascent laissez-faire legislation, who contrasted it to the derogatory ‘political economy’, or politicians’ economy. In the history of capitalism, moral economy therefore stands as one of the very first grassroots attempts to conceptualise an alternative to what was about to become the dominant paradigm (see also the historical analysis in Sayer 2000, 2004).

Food, economy and culture, particularly the interplay of the latter two elements among different class constituencies, are the cornerstones of the early literature on moral economy. Orlove (1997: 242) summarises Thompson's original definition thus:

A consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, [and] of the proper functions of several parties within the community ... taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy ... . This moral economy ... supposed definite, and passionately held, notions of the common weal. (Thompson 1971: 79)

Thompson looked at these notions specifically during periods of “confrontations in the market-place over access (or entitlement) to ‘necessities’—essential food” (1991: 337). He found a high degree of cultural elaboration beyond concerns about ideas of access, with different kinds of foodstuffs deemed more or less important in the popular mentality. This preoccupation with types of food will be a central focus of the thesis (particularly in chapters 3 and 7). Also relevant to my argument is the appreciation of moral economy as a phenomenon linked to specific classes within industrial society (see chapters 4 and 8).

Class was a crucial analytical tool for Thompson in developing his historical hypothesis (he notes [1991: 259], for example, that he began work on the 1971 piece at the same time of his older *The Making of the English Working Class*). Many people in 18<sup>th</sup> century England were opposed to farmers who sold to middlemen instead of selling at the market, to grain hoarding, to bakers and millers who adulterated products or tampered with

weights, and to prices set on the basis of supply-demand instead of customary principles, all of which was seen as profiteering. These beliefs originated from an array of collective values held particularly by the lower strata (and to a lesser degree, by the landed class) about the just way to act with, and on, food.

Scott (1976) looked at the moral economy of Vietnamese subsistence farmers during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. While Thompson focused on the traditional rights of common folk as ‘consumers’, Scott’s concern lay with peasants’ beliefs in the right to a just price for their produce, in rights of access to the land and use rights to various resources, and other customary behaviours to which both peasants and, especially, the elite needed to conform. The politics and cultural dynamics of Work, which I address in chapters 5, 6, 7 and 9, are two specific concerns that Scott brought to bear on the moral economy scholarship. Models of production, exchange and consumption, then, were key concerns of this literature from its very beginning. My research considers work as a key aspect not only from the perspective of production (the growers) but also from that of market circulation (the retailers).

The *oeuvre* of Thompson and Scott is part of a broader intellectual debate about the transition to capitalism in different regions and historical periods. Though they both came from different disciplinary backgrounds (historiography and political science respectively), they thought anthropology had a key role to play in this debate. In the 1970s, the ‘serial history’ group within the *Annales* school had done important work on issues similar to those looked at by Thompson and Scott. Serial history identified long-term trends in peasant wages, the prices of land (rents), and agricultural inputs more generally, and used these data to explain popular unrest. It focused on the quantitative rather than the qualitative dimension. Both Thompson and Scott acknowledged the *Annales* school in their work, but favoured the *mentalités populaires* approach of Bloch and Le Roy Ladurie, which differed considerably from serial history (e.g. Scott 1976: viii, also 2005: 397). In his 1971 article, Thompson commented on the latter *modus operandi* saying it was

a manifestation of the schizoid intellectual climate, which permits this quantitative historiography to co-exist ... with a social anthropology which derives from Durkheim, Weber, or Malinowski. We know all about the delicate tissue of social norms and reciprocities which regulates the life of Trobriand islanders ... but at some point this infinitely-complex social creature, Melanesian man, becomes (in our

histories) the eighteenth-century English collier who ... responds to elementary economic stimuli. (1971: 78)

Thompson points to an economic reductionism that leaves little space for social, political and cultural aspects in its explanations of individual and collective action. Talking of a moral economy was a means of moving away from simplistic histories, towards a more complex perspective, which he identified with anthropology. This scholarly tradition was thus born of a cross-fertilisation between *longue durée* history (one of its strands) and anthropology; as I show in section 1.4 of this chapter, this is also true of southern-Italian studies, a fact that proves the close links between the two fields.

Thompson's reference to Weber above is interesting as it goes hand in hand with that made to Chayanov by Scott (1976: 13-19). Both highlight nicely the central place, already mentioned above, that Work occupies in the moral economy literature; this usually takes shape as an interest in folk livelihood constructs. Under certain aspects, the differences between Weber and Chayanov are great. While both studied peasantries, Weber (1930) saw their behaviour as irrational, whereas Chayanov (1986) sought to explain it as coherent in its own logic (see Scott 1985 for a critique of Weber's thesis). The ground they share is an emphasis on the meaning and end(s) of human work under different politico-economic settings, an emphasis on the 'politics'—broadly understood—of Work. It is this aspect that makes the references by Thompson and Scott not coincidental. Compared to the dominant discourse of capitalist accumulation professed by Smith (1998) and his followers, in fact, Weber and Chayanov made an anti-maximising argument. Both noted cases in which earning more (through working more) was not the most attractive opportunity. This is a question that speaks in complex ways to my ethnography, for example to the fair-traders' models of labour in chapters 5 and 6. But anti-maximising behaviour pertains also to the domain of consumption, for which I note a similar complexity in chapters 3 and 4.

For Thompson and Scott anti-maximisation was another constitutive element of moral economies, so much so that for the latter it became the crux of a famous debate he engaged in with Popkin (1979), who maintained that Vietnamese farmers were entirely rational in the economistic sense of trying to maximise their individual satisfaction. The theme of market behaviour plays a central role in another important anthropological point of reference cited by Scott (1976: 5, see also 2005: 397), Polanyi's *The Great*

*Transformation*. Scott's historical reconstruction is similar to Polanyi's, as is the idea of the Vietnamese farmer's economy as fully part of a web of social relationships, which closely resembles the latter's suggestion of an economy 'embedded' in society. The same points can be made for Thompson, of whose definition of moral economy as 'confrontations in the market-place' Edelman writes:

The term *market-place* evokes a concrete location. From our vantage point today, it is sometimes difficult to grasp that even in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century *market* by itself often referred primarily to a specific physical location ... . Only later did it assume the metaphorical and deterritorialized qualities that increasingly adhere to it. (2005: 332)

Moral economy, then, can be seen as one strand of research in this wider academic tradition. Polanyi's idea of economy's embeddedness is the second key argument of this thesis.

As Block (2001) notes, *The Great Transformation* (hereafter TGT), is often mistakenly interpreted as suggesting that a true market economy is effectively disembedded (e.g. Barber 1995; Lie 1991). Admittedly, 'embeddedness' makes only a passing appearance in this work. But this is not say that the term lacks importance, as some have argued (e.g. Swedberg 1997).<sup>3</sup> Rather, it suggests that historically the concept of embeddedness has been the focus for a changing set of discourses. In TGT, this is represented by the 'self-protection' of society that set in after the devastating effects of labour, land and money commoditisation became apparent (see also Baum 1996: 3-19). This self-protection was a counter-movement to that of the market, which created a specific historical dialectic:

The double movement can be personified as the action of two organizing principles in society ... . The one is the principle of economic liberalism ... ; the other is the principle of social protection aiming at the conservation of man and nature as well as productive organizations, relying on ... protective legislation, restrictive associations, and other instruments of intervention as its methods. (Polanyi 2001: 138)

Clearly, there is much in this argument that resonates with the thesis' objects of inquiry, as I discuss below (section 1.3).

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<sup>3</sup> The fact that there are only two references to the term (Polanyi 2001: 60, 64) is noted by Barber (1995). But as Olofsson (1995) has argued, in TGT Polanyi uses various expressions—such as 'enmeshed', 'embodied in', 'submerged', 'absorbed'—which can all be considered particular instances of the general discourse.

The TGT, however, raises also some important theoretical problems for the kind of study developed here. The processes of fictitious commodification and counter-movement are not a theory of society and economy under capitalism, but time-bound historical reconstructions (see Block & Somers 1984 for a reflection on Polanyi's methodological contribution to historiography). This probably explains why Scott referred to this particular work among those of Polanyi's oeuvre. As Carrier (personal communication) remarks, it can be difficult to apply TGT's argument today from an ethnographic perspective (but see Alexander 2009). In the following paragraphs I thus look at some of the attempts made within economic anthropology to conceptualise the relation of capitalist to non-capitalist forms in contexts where the former are found to be prevalent. In doing so, I reveal the difficulties that arise from the adoption of moral economy and embeddedness as guiding principles. Many obstacles have blocked the way to a more complex understanding of agency under full market regimes, an understanding that is now being developed and from which the present work draws inspiration.

#### *The (im)possible moral economy of capitalism*

Compared to TGT, Polanyi's second major work, *Trade and Market in the Early Empires* (hereafter T&M), provides a less historicised argument intended to be of wider applicability, at least in theory (see below). Embeddedness is clearly indexed in T&M, both on its own and under the heading 'economic process' (Polanyi et al. 1957a: 378-9).

According to Polanyi (1957), formal economics deals with aspects of logic and not necessarily of fact, while empirical economies are 'substantive': they embody the *concrete ways* in which human societies organise themselves to provide for their material wants (1957: 243-248). He suggests the latter usually "acquir[e] unity and stability ... through a combination of ... reciprocity, redistribution and exchange" (p. 250), processes which are accompanied by what he calls 'social arrangements' of symmetry, centricity, and price-making markets (ibidem). "The human economy, then, is embedded and enmeshed in institutions, economic and non-economic" (p. 250, see also p. 248). This framework allows to create a rough classification of economies "according to the dominant forms of integration", those arrangements that regulate the allocation of land and labour. "Market society" is one of these (p. 255). Also, the integration of an economy determines what particular paradigm to use, formal or substantive.

Unfortunately, this aspect of T&M's argument makes any attempt to study the moral economy of capitalism deeply problematic. 'Primitive' and archaic economies can—and should—be examined as embedded. But capitalism, because of its market institutionalisation, and thus of the conditions that empirically hold in such domain, is best approached from a formal-economic perspective. This is true insofar as embeddedness is coterminous only with a dominant form of integration, and an empirical approach to economy must reflect such dominant form. Polanyi believed that in the course of the last two centuries “an organization of man's livelihood” was produced to which the rules of profit maximisation indeed applied. This meant that: “No merely [substantive] concept of the economy [can] even approximately compete with economic analysis in explaining the mechanics of livelihood under a market system” (Polanyi et al. 1957b: 241).

Few anthropologists today would identify with this position, which was at the root of the formalist/substantivist debate. That this is true can be gauged by the fact that those who currently reflect on Polanyi's ideas are likely to do so in reference to the explicitly historical TGT, rather than the more anthropological T&M (e.g. the recent collection by Hann & Hart 2009).<sup>4</sup> This is no place to revise an old polemic, but some of its legacies are of interest to the present analysis. It is not at all clear, in fact, whether Polanyian scholarship, particularly the concept of embeddedness, can be applied to capitalist phenomena outside of the particular historical narrative found in TGT. Or whether the moral economy concept, closely related to the former one, can hold true beyond its historical thrust also in the present time.

In a recent review of Polanyi's legacy, Isaac (2005: 20-1) says that the author's eventual demise was due to the unsolvable nature of the debate, which implied epistemological assumptions of personal choice rather than argument, and to Dalton's extreme position of excluding capitalism from analysis. Isaac suggests that this impasse has been overcome, with some of Polanyi's basic concepts being now so engrained in some

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<sup>4</sup> I thank David Graeber for pointing this out. The context is that of a rediscovery of Polanyi. As Mendell comments, in fact: “The publication of ‘Trade and Markets [sic] in the Early Empires’ in 1958 [sic] launched a historic debate in anthropology ... . The more radical conclusions of ‘The Great Transformation’, that these principles were universally inappropriate—for market as well as non-market economies—was not part of the debate” (1996: vii-viii). Hann states that “there is little sense in distinguishing ‘early’ from ‘late’ Polanyi”, given his work as an historian is “essentially consistent” with that as a substantivist (1992: 148). This is true, though I believe it should not exclude the recognition of differences in his scholarly production (see Duczynska 1977; Polanyi-Levitt & Mendell 1987).

research trajectories as to go unattributed. But he qualifies his statement thus: “It is probably no exaggeration to say that virtually all present-day anthropological analysis of *prehistoric or non-Western economies* ... are carrying on the Polanyi tradition” (Isaac 2005: 22, italics added). This would suggest Dalton’s position has *not* been fully overcome. One body of research that stems (among other sources) from Polanyi, and that has also tended to separate the study of industrialised and ‘pre-capitalist’ societies, is the one on gifts and commodities. Throughout the thesis, the debates that have centred on this body raise important questions regarding the social, economic, and political value of the foods in question, and of informants’ agency on them.

The best point of departure, I believe, is Bohannan and Dalton’s (1962a) idea of multiple ‘spheres of transactions’, where different kinds of goods circulate according to the emotional connotations and values of each sphere. This idea illustrates not only the genealogical link between Polanyi, embeddedness and moral economy, but also that between the latter three and the gifts-and-commodities literature. The two authors draw from the threefold typology of T&M: “Reciprocative and redistributive transactions cannot be understood outside the context of the social situations of which they form an integral part” (1962b: 3). They then continue, opening the terminological grounds for moral economy:

The market principle ... may be institutionally distinguished by the society concerned from the kinship and political structures; hence – as the economist does – *it can be analyzed as a self-contained unit* ... [In other societies] nonmarket *moral attitudes* are brought to bear on exchanges which, *in our society, would be subject only to market, or economic, morality.* (1962b: 4, italics added)

This is not necessarily true (see below), but it is a logical conclusion of the line of reasoning brought forward thus far.

Sahlins (1972) questioned the role of gifts and commodities in European and non-European societies by articulating the theoretical and comparative insights found in T&M and its followers, like Bohannan and Dalton, with the works of Mauss (2002) and Marx (1999). His primary focus on reciprocity, among Polanyi’s typology, reflects a Maussian reading of this form of exchange as the fundamental principle of social organisation. This is particularly true of the generalised and balanced kinds, while his negative reciprocity draws both on Mauss and on Marx’s idea of an accumulative circuit of exchange (M-C-M’).

Through Sahlins, Gregory (1982) developed further Mauss' points about personal gift-giving and impersonal commodity exchange, and Marx's about commodification and alienation. For Gregory (1982: 41), objects exist in separate domains of gift or commodity exchange, with the former creating qualitative social relations, while the latter mediating quantifiable material wealth.

In order to allow for cross-cultural comparability, Sahlins retained Polanyi's intuition about the social and political arrangements that accompany exchange. His three forms of reciprocity were intended to be a universal continuum manifest in *all* human societies (1972: 191-197). However, from the start this was understood to imply the possibility of locating entire cultures towards one or the other pole of the continuum. (Sahlins himself originally used his classification in an evolutionary scheme—Sahlins & Service 1960.) A very similar interpretation stemmed from Gregory's (1982) earlier work, which appeared to suggest that whole economies could be labelled of the 'gift' or 'commodity' type. This problem of scale is inevitably compounded by one of time, with the belief that human societies have moved from a universal condition of gift sociability, antecedent to capitalism, to one of alienation following its rise. The historical rupture and spatial division implicit in this perspective runs, according to many authors, through substantivism and Polanyi all the way back to Mauss (e.g. Derrida 1992; Shershow 2005), an interpretation convincingly questioned by others (see Graeber 2001: 151-228; Hart 2007).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Gregory (1997) has vigorously denied that his work suggests entire cultures are dominated either by a gift or a commodity logic, and that in historical terms non-Western societies exhibit the gift dimension while European ones the commodity one. He characterises the two dimensions as coeval (1997: 8-11) both in the west and 'the rest' (my terms), while maintaining that they act as clearly distinct forms of value (pp. 47-52). However, some of the authors who Gregory himself identifies as having "accepted [his] basic distinction" and "sought to develop the theory" clearly favour a model that sees one period passing into the other (e.g. Carrier 1992, 1994; Werbner 1990).

### **1.3 Movements, process, and plural economies beyond the market society**

It is necessary to recognize that 'culture' does, and must, enter into the constitution of 'the economy' in all societies ... . There is no need to give up the analysis of our own market economies to the formalist economists.

(Hann 1992: 162)

The assertion that advanced capitalist economies, such as those of North America and Europe, are also embedded in society and culture has been for many decades a controversial one in economic anthropology. The crux of the argument has usually been the dis/embedded nature of capitalism as a market economy, what I have called its impossible moral economy. As economic phenomena regulated by markets are one of the main contexts of reference for the actors in this case study, I want to delve deeper into the ways in which both the moral economy and the embeddedness scholarship are put to use in my thesis, thus underlining its key contributions.

At a general level, the fair-trade and organic movements can be seen as adhering to the thrust that lies behind the works of Thompson, Scott, and Polanyi. The first two authors, though dealing with somewhat different histories, reached similar conclusions. 'Violations' of the moral economy were seen as a threat to subsistence security, and whenever such violations occurred, they provoked resistance. This was expressed through a variety of means, some more visible (the riots discussed by Thompson) than others (see the examples in Scott 1985). In the European case, violations took the form of market behaviours that have now long since become established, and are thus considered perfectly acceptable, but which at the time were new. However, many of these behaviours are still considered problematic by those sections of society that are receptive to the discourses of the fair-trade and organic movements. As the ethnography discussed in this thesis shows, north-west Sicily and Palermo provide a testimony to the persistence of moral-economic sentiments, albeit in locally specific understandings and practices.

Polanyi's idea of counter-movements also illuminates the broader historical significance of organic agriculture and fair-trade as analysed in this thesis. As the discussion in section 1.1 showed, the two movements were born from the initiative of certain groups who fought against the damaging effects of markets on nature and society. In

the case of organic farming, its origins correspond to the early process of industrialisation of agriculture that took place in northern Europe and the United States during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Fair-trade, after its post-war beginnings, took on an oppositional role vis-à-vis the neoliberal policies that reshaped international trading relations from the late 1970s, at the same time as organic farming gained new strength in light of growing evidence of the impacts of industrialisation on the biosphere. Both movements grew further in the 1990s, after the collapse of real socialism and the establishment of the Washington consensus ushered in another wave of market expansion.

Indeed, scholars who have dealt with the protest movements that accompanied each of the periods in question—for fair-trade and organic, especially the 1970s, '90s and '00s—have often noted similarities between such phenomena and those explored by Thompson, Scott and Polanyi (see Edelman 2005). Such similarities can be seen at play on different levels—historical, regional, thematic, epistemological—linking the two bodies of work. First, what the temporal junctures mentioned above had in common (leaving aside important differences) with those of the 'old' moral economy was the expansion of markets into social and political territories that had previously been outside of their influence, at least since the end of the second world war. This expansion of market power triggered various forms of popular uprising that became known initially as new social movements (NSMs) (e.g. Melucci 1989; Touraine 1988); this dynamic, reminiscent of the historical ones described previously, is a second point of contact. Geographically, Europe was again a key region for the protests, but these took place also on the Southern continents. With regard to the values and cultural themes shared by the old moral economies and the post-war social movements, a complex picture emerges.

On the one hand, considerable overlap seems to exist, for example concerning demands to end exploitative trade practices and promote equality in the economy. Edelman writes in this regard of “the fundamentally moral bases of contemporary transnational peasant mobilization. ‘Just prices’, in particular, is a demand that parallels the moral-economic principles Scott described for early-20th-century Southeast Asia” (2005: 339), and also that “the rise of transnational peasant activism draws on a deep, historical reservoir of moral-economic sensibilities as well as on old protest repertoires and agrarian discourses” (p. 341). Many aspects of fair-trade and organic agriculture’s discourses exhibit

this kind of resonance between old and new. On the other hand, however, there are considerable differences.

This is true, for example, in terms of those values centred on risks to the body and the issues of personal identity that are connected to them. This avenue of inquiry proves critical to my case study, where the human body becomes a primary locus to explore, rather than assume, the links between food and social and economic values, both culturally as well as physiologically. Differences can also be found in the domain of the new movements' constituencies, often middle class rather than poor. In fact, one of the key features of post-1968 politics is that while 'old' working-class movements posited class inequality as the central issue for activists, with the crisis of industrial modernity politics of difference, such as gender- and race-based ones, indigenous issues, and concerns for the environment and health risk have risen to prominence. A middle-class origin became an increasingly common trait of those involved in these protests. Thus Fridell (2007: 7-10), for example, focusing on the importance fair-trade assigns to inequality, rejects an interpretation of it as part of NSMs, at least as the latter were described in the theoretical scholarship of the 1980s and early '90s.

More recently, though, the events of what has been called 'globalisation from below' (Falk 1993) have "connected issues and activists in postmaterialist and identity- and class-based movements as never before" (Edelman 2001: 304-305). This connection reveals how a clear-cut distinction between 'new' and 'old' protest cultures was never entirely tenable (see Calhoun 1993). As these most recent hybrid phenomena often centre on a notion of alternative globalisation, rather than on its rejection, they can be termed 'alter-globalisation movements', or AGMs (e.g. Maeckelbergh 2008, Williams 2008). I believe this latter term to be preferable to those that rest on alleged temporal watersheds, though clearly even it does not provide a perfect fit to accommodate the old and the new in moral economy. In the thesis' final chapter I will return precisely to these differences, to see how the ethnography allows to better grasp them.

There is, in fact, a limit to the type of comparisons of the previous paragraphs, which is represented exactly by the need to operationalise meta-levels through the requirements of an ethnographic study. (This is but one facet of the problems raised by Polanyi's TGT, as I already mentioned.) Can we read the idea of moral economy/embeddedness in such a way

that allows seeing the market economy as dependent on culture and society not just historically, but also at the level of everyday life? Connected to this question is that of how to think the market *itself* as a domain *permeable* to moralities different from those of economisation-commoditisation, for example those of the gift, or others yet. To provide my answers, I will first pick up from Polanyi himself to show that there is a hidden transcript running through his scholarship that it is important to uncover. Much as with the rediscovery of Mauss, of recent there has also been a new interest in uncovering the many facets of Polanyi's oeuvre (e.g. Dale 2010).

Polanyi (1957: 250) defined the three forms of reciprocity-symmetry, redistribution-centricity, and exchange-market as a "special tool box". In the same passage, he noted the co-presence of the three forms in time and space: "Since they occur side by side on different levels and in different sectors of the economy it may often be impossible to select one of them as dominant so that they could be employed for a classification of empirical economies as a whole" (ibidem). However, as already mentioned, Polanyi speaks of a dominant form of integration in respect to "the degree to which [it] comprises land and labour in society" (1957: 255). Although the contradiction between these statements cannot, in my view, entirely be solved, what is clear is that such dominance is in fact just a relative prevalence. This aspect of Polanyi's argument was set aside by the substantivists.

Several subordinate forms may be present alongside the dominant one, which may itself recur after a temporary eclipse. Tribal societies practice reciprocity and redistribution, while archaic societies are predominantly redistributive [and] reciprocity ... occurs as a not unimportant although subordinate trait. ... In our century, with the lapse of the gold standard, a recession of the world role of markets from their nineteenth century peak set in. (Polanyi 1957: 256)

Different logics, therefore, may be found even in a capitalist society. This is, however, only a first step, because moral domains are still viewed as self-contained, related to each other externally (Polanyi 1957: 253) or as closed spheres of transaction (Bohannon and Dalton 1962a).<sup>6</sup> Market phenomena may be influenced from the outside, but they remain

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<sup>6</sup> Bohannon & Dalton noted that goods could cross the boundaries of such spheres (a phenomenon they termed 'conveyance', 1962: 5-7). However, it is only goods that cross the boundaries, the principles of the spheres remain self-contained.

impermeable to logics different from the economising one: the market retains its a-social core.<sup>7</sup>

Polanyi also wrote: “The economy is an instituted process. Two concepts stand out, that of ‘process’ and its ‘institutedness’” (1957: 248). The *problematic* of institutionalisation was of fundamental importance to Polanyi at the time in order to counter the atomism and methodological individualism of economics (p. 249). Today, his admonishment has been widely received (at least by some in anthropology), which opens the scope for shifting the emphasis in the other direction, towards the processual aspect of economy. There is an enduring tendency to view reciprocity, redistribution and exchange (or gifts and commodities) as entities possessing some sort of autonomous force—a tendency to reify them.<sup>8</sup> We need to focus attention away from instituted-*ness*, and back on instituted *processes* (keeping in mind that “in actuality, the two are inseparable”, Polanyi 1977: 31). This perspective is adopted throughout the thesis. For example, I understand work as a structured practice, thus including under its rubric not only activities of production and circulation, but also consumers’ (particularly women’s) household provisioning. Markets, in turn, and the accumulation of value along the commodity network, are looked at specifically from the perspective of informants’ agency in them, again emphasising their dynamic aspect. I treat markets as social (instituted) processes, alongside other such processes like family and state. When looked at through this lens, these institutions become everyday social realms that can be understood as enactments of social identities, relations, and hierarchies.

This emphasis on process and movement has been a recurrent concern in the most recent literature on gifts and commodities for the past two decades or so, and more broadly in economic anthropology as a whole (interestingly, this is also true of the southern Italian studies field, as I show in section 1.4). Such emphasis has gone hand in hand with the establishment of ‘value’ as a key-word for many scholars (Graeber 2001), a concept which

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<sup>7</sup> In regards to this issue, Krippner has investigated “the way in which the rise of Parsonsian sociology in the 1950s and 1960s altered the theoretical space in which the concept [of embeddedness] could be deployed” (2001: 788). She notes how Granovetter’s (1985) famous piece overlooked that “both Parsonsian sociology and neoclassical economics rest on a view of the social world *as divided into sharply demarcated spheres*” (ibidem, italics added). There is a direct link with Parsons and Smelser’s *Economy and Society* and Polanyi’s T&M, in the form of a critical review of the former work by Pearson (Polanyi et al. 1957a: 307-319).

<sup>8</sup> Hann, for example, warns against “the scientific aspect of substantivism, forever classifying and refining typologies” (1992: 161).

I suggest has important implications for theories of embeddedness and moral economy (see below).

One strand of the research in question has originated from authors like Appadurai (1986), Kopytoff (1986), and Comaroff & Comaroff (1990), and has been considered a watershed in studies of consumption (Miller 1995). Appadurai (1986: 11-13) especially believes the clear distinction between commodities and gifts is untenable and should be overcome. He argues that instead of searching for types of exchange, one has to explore how objects change value while travelling across different social relations of production, circulation and consumption. A number of anthropologists now hold that two transactional orders of 'gift' and 'commodity' exist in *all* societies (Parry & Bloch 1989). Economies are a combination of the two orders, and vary depending on the degree to which people produce for the self or group (community), or for others (market) (see Gudeman 2001, 2008).

It is because of this varying balance of gift and commodity principles in everyday exchange that the same objects are able to transform from one type into the other, acquiring a dual role. This perspective has been taken up by many in the study of fair-trade and organic foods, as the review in section 1.1 makes clear. Its appeal is powerful as it allows to look at the increasing number of contemporary social phenomena that happen in network form. Appadurai's (1986: 57) contention that value "has its source in the fact that not all parties share the same *interests* in any specific regime of value" is an important insight for this thesis.

At the centre of the fair-trade and organic movements, in fact, is the question of what values govern how food is produced, circulated among individuals, groups and scales, and then consumed both as physical and symbolic nourishment. From a theoretical perspective, this translates into the question of how these economic and social practices are influenced by culture, and vice-versa. In the previous section I discussed the ways in which the original moral economy theorists, specifically Thompson, reflected on the connections between food, livelihoods and the marketplace. But whereas Thompson and, within anthropology itself, exponents of cultural economics (e.g. Gudeman & Rivera 1990) tend to emphasise the shared social elements of an economy in community and place, I suggest people's models are not so much a static metaphor as a form of debate with other

individuals, institutions and value systems. Or perhaps an ongoing conversation with their own practices and those, more or less structured, which they encounter (see Robben 1989). Culture is a set of discursive repertoires that are constantly being negotiated by actors in everyday life. This is yet another way in which the present work emphasises embeddedness-as-process, one that will allow me, in the ethnographic chapters, to look at the same (allegedly) ideas about ethics and economy from the perspective of different actors.

A similar approach inevitably impinges on the question of what notions of value I will use. Two answers—a short and a long one—can be given to this question. Here I provide the former, and anticipate the latter. Throughout the thesis, I've preferred to let any evidence that might help shed light on this issue emerge from the ethnography, rather than start my analysis with a normative definition. As a result, different notions of value will be analysed because the evidence shows informants held many. This explains why the present introduction is not a purely theoretical review of definitions of value and its origins. The long answer is that, effectively, the whole thesis is an explanation of informants' notions of value about agency under capitalist markets. Insofar as 'moral economy' (both as a theoretical construct and object of inquiry) is concerned with people's ethics, or simply with people's thoughts about what is good and bad, then clearly this case study deals entirely with the problem of value.

In the thesis, I deal with the entanglements of fair-trade and organic in the industrial North. The underlying logics of capitalism, and their manifestation in western Sicily, therefore, represent the principal counterpoint against which informants' lived experience of the two movements are compared. Holding fast to such counterpoint is crucial to my work. From one point of view, in fact, I recognise the importance of the new approaches mentioned above. But I also note how, while professing diversity and interchangeability, much recent economic anthropology seems to accept unproblematically commodity fetishism and utilitarian interest (as argued by many, e.g. Graeber 2001: 31-33; Gregory 1997: 42-45; Hornborg 2005). Appadurai, for example, famously stressed "the commodity potential of all things" (1986: 13). The risk here is to confirm rather than demystify some of the symbolic foundations of capitalism, or, as Graeber caustically says, of doing "anthropology as it might have been written by Milton Friedman" (2001: 33).

When one looks at fair-trade and organic foods and at the values that drive their circulation and consumption both within the market and outside, in the household, it is undeniable that questions are raised about the solidity of their statute as either gifts or commodities. But the ethnography I will present (especially in chapters 3, 5, and 7) suggests that, although people do perceive an opposition that is ascribable to that between gifts and commodities (and between giving and selling), the contexts where this opposition holds in the case of fair-trade and organic foods are different from those commonly assumed to be dominant under market capitalism.

The problem of fetishism and utilitarianism is faced also by those anthropologists who have focused the most on showing people's work of appropriating commodities as gifts, a strand of research to which a lot of effort has been devoted (e.g. Carrier 1991; Miller 1998, 2001). For example, in a recent volume on ethical consumption, Carrier (2011) recognises the many ways in which people appropriate socially and culturally aspects of the capitalist economy. But when analysing the actual mechanisms of ethical consumption initiatives, he uses as explanatory framework formal economics' 'signalling theory', implicitly suggesting that the market component in ethical economies still requires formal tools (see De Neve et al. 2008a for a different view). In chapters 3, 5 and 7, I show the reverse is also true: people transform the morality of the market (profit efficiency and impersonality) into versions of it that embody a higher degree of social and cultural values. As Gudeman writes of the fair-trade movement, for example, this "resists the semantic blandishments of price fetishism ... and opens the possibility of mutuality between buyer and ultimate producer" (2008: 113).

To conclude, in this thesis I view capitalism, market and society not as self-contained entities that relate to each other externally, but as processes that co-determine one another while changing in space and time. This allows to appreciate economy (and also culture and society; see next section) as more pluralistic. Morality adheres to all human activities, of which livelihood ones—the 'economic'—are but a fraction of the whole. No single principle of exchange—or of production or consumption—can be said a-priori to dominate in any one of the processes that we insist on calling 'market', 'state', 'household', 'enterprise', etc. This way of looking at embeddedness and moral economies requires putting aside the assumption of economisation and commoditisation as dominant forms.

This is not to say that domination and contradiction—à la Gregory—do not occur, or correspondingly, that continuums—à la Gudeman—are not sometimes real. But these statements should be our points of empirical arrival rather than theoretical departure (of course, these authors may feel this is exactly the case of their arguments). The importance of price-making markets for labour and nature is undeniable, but it does not exclude the recognition of other, non-economic logics that are inextricably woven to such forms of labour and land exchange. Moralities are superimposed on each other and constantly permeating each other with their respective logics;<sup>9</sup> they also include more constructs than the two or three ones on which anthropologists' attention seems always to recur. Being aware of this generates the need to expand our analyses into new territories. This thesis is one step towards that goal.

#### **1.4 Mediterranean anthropology, Sicilian culture, and moral economy**

Sicily no longer represents a 'paradise inhabited by devils', according to the old adage, but a place like any other, with peculiar dynamics of modernization and resistance to modernization, to be read according to open models.

(Fiume 2006: 54)

The scholarship on moral economies discussed in the previous section relates to this thesis in another important way. The first works to develop the idea of moral economy as such (Thompson and Scott) belonged to the peasant studies field, to which the scholarship on Southern Italy and Sicily also initially belonged. What is more, many of the underlying anthropological themes of moral economy (as broadly understood, i.e. the causal relation between culture/society and economy) have also always been among the central issues of Mediterranean studies. This double common ground—at the level of theories about peasant dynamics, and of theories about economy's and society's co-dependence—remains largely untold.

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<sup>9</sup> For example, scholars working in the European tradition of research on third sector economies (e.g. Evers & Laville 2004) have suggested this sector is the result of a partial overlap of Polanyi's three principles.

*Building theories, creating paradigms*

In a recent article, Edelman (2005) reconstructs the political contours of the period that saw the development of both the scholarships on moral economy and that on Mediterranean studies. He recalls the Vietnam war, the Cultural Revolution in China, and the liberation movements of Latin America, Africa, and Asia as defining moments of this period, before going on to say:

Here in the early 21st century, it may be hard to recall that only 40 years ago this understanding of the peasant as a major historical protagonist was the widely shared commonsense ... . Scott's *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* came toward the end of a wave of foundational books in peasant studies [such as] Eric Wolf's *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*. (2005: 333)

This appreciation is particularly significant as Wolf was among the first anthropologists to found a tradition of research on the Mediterranean in US anthropology (see his work on northern Italy: Cole & Wolf 1974). In the UK, Pitt-Rivers (1954) did the same by conducting fieldwork in rural Spain. As Goddard et al. (1994b: 3) have also noted, the early scholarship on southern Europe was the result of a process of intellectual cross-fertilisation that was notable even for today's standards, with many anthropologists conducting fieldwork in the Mediterranean and in Latin America (this was the case for Pitt-Rivers himself, but also for Redfield and Foster).

The development of this particular trajectory rested on the wider twist that 'modern' anthropology (based on intensive fieldwork) took at the time. After the second world war, ethnographic research in areas that were in the process of decolonising became increasingly difficult for a number of theoretical, political, and logistical reasons. As a result, anthropologists began focusing their attention on the Mediterranean basin. Their assumption was that this represented an area halfway between fully modern, complex societies (e.g. United States and northern Europe) and so-called primitive ones (the former colonies of European empires). At the heart of this new academic trajectory was a belief in the homogeneity, and thus comparability, of the three provinces constituting the region: southern Europe, northern Africa, and the Middle East (see Davis 1977).

Key elements were identified by scholars (e.g. Pitt-Rivers 1963; Sweet & O'Leary 1969) in order to build a comparative framework, which would allow for the ethnographic

study of a distinctive Mediterranean ‘culture pattern’. This included both socio-cultural and ecological features, such as the presence of pre-industrial nation-states; large rural populations with a distinctive urban character of life (one example being ‘agro-towns’—Blok 1969); monotheistic religions; similar climate, topography, fauna and flora, leading to the presence of grain-producing estates and livestock herding. Also key were an emphasis on honour and the fulfilment of sexual roles as a requisite for social status (Blok 1981; Gilmore 1987; Peristiany 1966), which involved various degrees of gender separation and subordination of women (Giovannini 1987; Goddard 1986); strong local and regional identities (e.g. Campbell 1964); and the preference for ‘personal’ forms of politics (Gellner & Waterbury 1977). (See chapter 2 for the Sicilian case in particular.) As I show further below, these views have now been entirely transformed.

A small number of elements came to characterise the image of southern Italy and Sicily produced in this intellectual climate. Sometimes, these elements were used in different combinations by different authors, but in general ended up depicting the same stereotypical image. A mainly American (or Anglophone) tradition of research on southern Italy and Sicily coalesced soon after the end of the second world war. It exhibited two main facets. The earlier one took shape as part of the country’s capitalist reconstruction by the Allies and their efforts to stop a communist expansion. It was thus inspired by modernisation theory, and focused on the transition of peasant societies to market (as opposed to socialist) modernity. The other facet reacted to this one, being mainly leftwing and inspired by Marxian political economy.

Banfield’s (1958) *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* is recognised as the best example of the first trend. The problematic of economy’s embeddedness in culture and society is readily apparent in this work.<sup>10</sup> Banfield developed the infamous concept of ‘amoral familism’ to describe the culture of a rural town in Italy’s *Basilicata* region. He claimed the validity of his findings for all southern Italian peasants, thus contributing the first of a long series of overly monolithic tropes to describe the area. Amoral familism was an all-encompassing ‘way of life’, according to which the maximisation of short-term gains for the benefit of the nuclear family was the main motive driving individual action. Values

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<sup>10</sup> In fact, one could say that Banfield precedes Thompson and Scott in this intellectual debate, though his conclusions are somewhat opposite to those of the other two.

such as honour, cunning and strength, virginity, restraint and obedience were constitutive of amoral familism. This explained the lack of civic sense and cooperation towards the public good in southern Italian culture, which made it impossible to achieve economic modernisation. Banfield emphasised the disjunction between cultural and economic factors in his analysis, and claimed that the former were responsible for the latter. Economic 'backwardness' was a function of the local culture, making southern Italians prisoners of themselves.

Banfield was not the first to argue along such lines, and it is interesting to note how very similar points were made by scholars whose political convictions were entirely different. Before Banfield, Gramsci (1975) had famously used the definition *una disgregazione sociale* ('a social disaggregation') to describe the area in his seminal 'Notes on the Southern Question'. His words pointed to the disunited nature of the social body in the south, which resulted in characteristics akin to those of feudal societies. This exasperated form of individualism, litigiousness and everyday violence, are commonly attributed to Sicilian culture from many quarters (academic and non), and add another element to theories trying to explain the political and economic backwardness of the region.

Banfield's theory was soon discredited, and anthropology played a crucial role in unmasking both the conceptual fallacies and the prejudices inherent in it (see Pizzorno 1967; Silverman 1968). However, the picture he painted remained largely unquestioned even among those scholars who changed frameworks and wanted to avoid negative stereotypes. One of the works that redefined southern Italian studies was *Culture and Political Economy in Western Sicily* (Schneider & Schneider 1976), which also presents many links to the moral economy scholarship. Not only was the volume published the same year as Scott's, it was inspired by the work of Wallerstein and Braudel, the latter one of the key figures of the *Annales* school, and finally, its authors were mentored by Wolf himself.

The Schneiders developed their argument in a totally different theoretical perspective from that of their predecessors: world system theory. They identified three cultural 'codes' as resulting from the transformations of Sicily's economy during the island's long history, relying on the concept of mode of production and the interaction of different modes with particular classes and interest groups as their explanatory framework (see also chapter 2). As the passage below shows, the local context was thus grasped through its changing

relationship with the wider system of market forces, beginning with Spanish (Aragonese-Castilian) rule in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

The code of *furberia* (astuteness, shrewdness) was linked to the specific conditions of dominance under Spain. A loose, manipulable structure of colonial rule, coupled with evolving capitalist markets, was its hypothesized source. The code of friendship, we suspect, originated in the same context ... . An ideology like *amicizia* was most likely to flourish and be critical to business activities where it was the only, or major, basis for trust. In the colonies of the Spanish Empire, with ineffective state power, no market towns, and no hierarchy of settlements through which the circulation of commodities could be articulated and controlled, friendship played this role. (1976: 108)

The authors conclude that “these codes might have been products of the relationships between Sicily and its external environment, rather than inherent attributes of the ‘Sicilian character’”, a reference to the debate generated by Banfield.

However, even if these cultural codes are regarded as effects rather than causes, in the picture painted above they remain all there is to Sicilian culture. Such culture is not represented as immutable or ‘pre-modern’, but it has been in place, purportedly, since the late 14<sup>th</sup> century. The timescale remains immense, and the absence of change exceptional. Also, the treatment of a culture in terms of ‘codes’ appears too rigid. “Our approach to the analysis of culture is guided by the idea that cultural codes are fashioned collectively ... . Our analysis of culture in western Sicily takes particular codes of more or less general salience to the entire population” (Schneider & Schneider 1976: 82). With reference to this work, Filippucci comments instead that “Cultural forms are strategically used in changing circumstances and to express different interests; this kind of approach may require narrower geographical and temporal frames” (1996: 55). She then continues, in reference to the regional scholarship more generally:

Although these [studies] were carried out in years of radical social, economic and cultural transformation, change was rarely built into their descriptions. While authors noted in passing, usually in the conclusion, that things were changing, the body of their texts gave a picture of stability and continuity. (1996: 58)

#### *Towards new epistemologies*

Looking back at the Schneiders’ work, Blim (2006: 5) argues that *Culture and Political Economy in Western Sicily* remains one of the most important analysis to understand the

(under-)development of Sicily and its costs to local people. The work also had a wider impact. As Hann (personal communication) has noted, together with Blok (1974) it is one of the earliest and best examples of historical ethnography, a genre that, though deeply transformed today, continues to produce high-quality works of Mediterranean studies (e.g. Narotzky & Smith 2006). I share these views.

The reason I believe *Culture and Political Economy* is interesting here is that it testifies to the endurance of certain epistemological assumptions, the need to confront them, and to ask new questions beyond simply finding new answers to old ones. That is, if the contemporary complexities of Sicily are to be fully taken into account. Blim acknowledges the underlying problem:

The Schneiders struggle as successfully as anyone to unstuck themselves from the taffy-pull that has come to be the anthropological concept of culture. ... They disassociated themselves from [Banfield's] blaming of underdevelopment on the Southern Italian and Sicilian people and their familist values. However, they did so ambiguously by arguing that ... the cultural values *so nearly the same as Banfield's familist values* were the consequence of as well as the response to powerlessness and economic failure. (Blim 2006: 9, italics added)

Indeed, the Schneiders (who have considerably changed their position; see below) have not been alone in facing these epistemological problems when studying Sicily.

During the 1970s and early '80s, a spate of ethnographic studies were published that exhibited very similar shortcomings to those discussed thus far, all depicting a bleak and homogenous image of the island even when social change was taken—by some—into account (Blok 1974; Chubb 1982; Cronin 1970; Galtung 1971; Hilowitz 1976). I don't mention these works in greater detail only for reasons of space. However, with time many of the early protagonists of Mediterranean studies have considerably changed their position (e.g. Blok 2000; Boissevain 1994; Herzfeld 1980), and a newer body of work now highlights the difficulties intrinsic to conceptualising Europe—be this northern, southern or Mediterranean—beyond facile assumptions (Delamont 1995; Goddard et al. 1994a; Holmes 2000; Llobera 1986; Piña-Cabral 1989).

This critical reappraisal has continued until very recently. Following in the footsteps of many of the authors just mentioned, Albera & Blok for example note that “a spectre is haunting those who write on the Mediterranean area: the trait list” (2001: 18). They

continue: “Two well-known dangers underlie these characterizations. First, by emphasising common features you play down differences ... . A second and perhaps even greater danger ... is presenting an ahistoric, essentialized picture of something that is obviously in a state of flux” (p. 19).<sup>11</sup> Other authors, taking on board suggestions stemming from aspects of post-modernism, have also pointed to the ethnocentric creation of ‘exoticism’ that results from casting in deterministic terms complex places and peoples, and how this represents an exercise of power (see the interesting notion of ‘nesting orientalisms’ applied to southern Italy in Schneider 1998). The problems affecting Mediterranean studies are therefore also the result of crises affecting anthropology more broadly, especially those regarding the concept of culture, as mentioned by Blim above. Burke, a historian of the Mediterranean, notes how “the term ‘culture’ has widened its meanings, possibly so much so that it has lost its usefulness. What is not culture nowadays? Yet it remains difficult to utter more than a few sentences without using the word” (2001: 100).

Alternative paradigms that make analytical space for new approaches are, however, possible. A number of recent monographs have started to explore these possibilities by incorporating novel questions such as immigration, social movements, and homosexuality (Burgio 2007, 2008; Cole 1997; Gunnarson 2008; Schneider & Schneider 2003). The main characteristic of these studies can be broadly understood as a particular attention towards cultural variation and cultural pluralism (Schneider & Schneider 2006). As it spans more than thirty years, the Schneiders’ academic career proves again well-suited to highlight the degree of change that has affected the disciplinary field. Doing research for their second monograph on Sicily (Schneider & Schneider 1996), the two authors realised that artisans were a social group that possessed, at least since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, values contrary to those commonly assigned to the island’s whole population (see also chapter 2). Apropos this realisation, they write in their latest monograph, which is based entirely on fieldwork in Palermo:

To trace the foundations of the cultural codes in question to Sicily’s deep history of conquests and colonisations ... denies agency to the subjects of one’s research, whose practices and values, like any other people’s culture, are an inconsistent and at times conflictual mix. People in Sicily as well as outsiders find elements in this mix to criticise and other elements to praise. And they do not necessarily agree with each

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<sup>11</sup> The already mentioned Sweet & O’Leary (1969) work was a product of the ‘Human Relations Area Files’ project, a typical example of anthropological scholarship based on the cataloguing of cultural traits.

other in their evaluations, in part because different constituencies have authored values and practices at odds with the ‘mainstream’. (2003: 116-117)

The new emphasis of which these words are an indication is not, by any means, linked exclusively to foreign, Anglophone research. From the late 1980s and early 1990s, it has been increasingly promoted also by a group of southern Italian intellectuals known as the *Meridiana* school (from the name of their main journal; see Davis 1996). The focus of the group’s critique has been the so-called ‘Southern Question’: that ideological (academic, political, popular) construct obsessively treating the south as a ‘problem’, almost a social illness. The politico-economic picture of southern Italy is in fact still generally viewed as one of ‘incompleteness’ or ‘late development’ (see Trigilia 1992 for a recent review). In response to this view, the group have shown how it is no longer possible to talk about a homogenous underdeveloped wasteland, and that the south now comprises many different ‘souths’ with pockets of growth, specialised agriculture, urban change, etc.

With their emphasis on plural causality and processual, rather than static phenomena, these theoretical developments speak to the ones discussed in section 1.3 with regards to economic anthropology. They are the ones I build on in this thesis to explain my field-site. I suggest the anthropologist who sets out to study Sicily today needs to adopt as an a-priori the idea that society is never uniform. Different organisational forms are found in it displaying diverse sets of values, which always arise from people’s concrete, everyday experience. Values comprise people’s thoughts and emotions, and are constantly being (re-)created, acted upon and negotiated, which makes them vary not only between but also within social groups. People’s motives are not simply the product of their external environments, though this is a powerful factor shaping social life, for as human events are unique and complex, the processes that affect people are always themselves transformed by the very actions they foster (e.g. Narotzky & Smith 2006: 5-6). It is from this particular positionality that I investigate new aspects of Sicily’s culture, society and history.

## **1.5 Methods, ethics, and structure of thesis**

Long-term, intensive fieldwork based on participant observation, network sampling, and qualitative interviews was the cornerstone of my methodology. I also looked at issues of

resource management in sustainable rural systems (see specifically chapter 7), thanks to postgraduate training I received in ecology from the Anthropology Department at University College London. Fieldwork took place over fifteen months, between October 2006 and December 2007.

Having lived in Palermo for many years prior to fieldwork, I benefited from a number of contacts in the local community when I began my project. These ranged from contacts in associations and informal groups, to those in the University of Palermo, of which I am a graduate (BA in Ethnology). Building on these contacts allowed me to move in different directions for the benefit of my research. My previous experience and my knowledge of the setting were crucial in carrying out effective data collection and providing access to conduct fieldwork. Nevertheless, access was sometimes problematic, as in the case of the organic farmers, for logistical as well as ‘cultural’ reasons.

I started this research by carrying out participant observation, in the form of voluntary work, at two small specialty food stores and a warehouse owned by two worker cooperatives. While based in these locations, I mapped for further in-depth analysis the networks of consumers and organic farmers that played an important role in constructing a local moral economy. Building on the initial set of contacts at the worker coops, I extended fieldwork to these other actors. This made it possible to elicit the different perspectives at play between consumers, traders and producers. Organising my schedule to follow the calendar of seasonal activities carried out by each actor (e.g. peaks of production for the organic farms, peaks in sales for the shops, etc.) proved challenging. However, voluntary working arrangements offered a useful level of flexibility.

Participant observation was integral to the research, as were in-depth (qualitative) interviews, both unstructured and semi-structured. These methods allowed me to investigate the reasons and circumstances leading individuals to occupy their particular social and economic positions, as owners of an alternative trade organisation (ATO), a shop, or a farm, or as workers, volunteers, and customers. Data collected through these means shed light on the symbolic repertoire underpinning individual agency, but also on issues of ownership, labour, household role distribution, markets and political economy. Throughout fieldwork, I let actors define what were their problems and what they most cared about, trying to keep my research agenda as close as possible to their everyday

concerns (though this is not to say the thesis is an ‘objective’ portrayal of the realities in question).

The composition of my sample was the following. 23 consumers with whom I conducted tape-recorded interviews, plus an indefinite number of other consumers whom I met daily at the shops and had informal conversations with. 7 individuals at the worker cooperatives whom I spent a substantial amount of time with doing participant observation, effectively conducting one very long, continuous interview. (There were also other individuals, with ‘minor’ roles, whom I met while staying at the coops’ stores and warehouse.) Finally, 4 organic farmers, plus (sometimes) their family members and also their workers, with whom I carried out both participant observation and interviews. In addition to all the above, I must add an unspecified number of individuals I met outside of the settings just mentioned, on different occasions and for different purposes (e.g. meetings, events, etc.), who nevertheless contributed in important ways to mould my understanding of the objects of inquiry. The people I describe in these pages, then, are not representative of the entirety of western Sicilian and Palermitan ethical consumers, fair-traders and organic farmers; they are a set of these who illustrate one particular way in which such economic practices were shaped by moral concerns and local circumstances.

A few words on terminologies. While ‘fair-traders’ and ‘organic farmers’ (or growers, producers, etc.) require little explanation, the expression ‘ethical consumers’, mentioned above for the first time, can lead the reader to some confusion. My definition of these actors is minimal, for reasons I will explain in a moment: ethical consumers were those who frequented the shops that sold fair-trade and organic foods (or who bought such goods through other means, as I discuss in the thesis) regularly, taking as measure of this a weekly basis. Of course, from a methodological point of view it is problematic to define a priori a sample of consumers as being ethical on the grounds of such frequentation; the category needs to be appropriately justified both for observation and analysis. My definition, then, is not so much a positive appraisal of the people in question, as a neutral description based on the above criterion (weekly purchase). Taking cue from Luetchford (2007: 152), throughout the thesis ‘ethical consumers’ should be understood as “ethically motivated consumers”, or—in my words—as ‘aspiring-to-be ethical consumers’; but these expressions would be cumbersome. Rather than employing the notion as a self-evident one,

my work explores what kind of notion is revealed by the ethnography. A small anticipation of this result might be useful here.

As I will show most clearly in chapter 4, the people I met who purchased the two ethical commodities in question also regularly bought all sorts of mainstream goods. They performed the two actions simultaneously, often even during the same shopping trips, going from a large supermarket to a small specialty food store, and vice-versa. Informants were aware of this fact and reflected on it in various ways, which I will analyse in due course. Contradictions and discrepancies, but also frank assessments, inevitably arose. It is this part of the ethnography that justifies seeing these people as aspiring to be ethical consumers, rather than as already being so. This evidence also raises the question of the different degrees to which individuals bought mainstream and ethical foods (e.g. the proportion purchased through fair-trade/organic or mainstream channels, or the proportion of income spent on the two kinds of food, or just data on absolute quantities). Regrettably, I have no data to clarify the matter quantitatively. Firstly, because I did not collect it (mainly for logistical reasons). Secondly, because I thought that asking people to self-report the amounts of mainstream and organic/fair-trade they consumed would have had little scientific value, given the subjective nature of the exercise. From what I saw in the field, I would say there was little doubt that people bought more mainstream than ethical foods (if anything, because of logistical and price issues, as I analyse in chapter 4).

With regards to the ethics of research, this project was carried out following the UK's Association of Social Anthropologists' (ASA) *Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice* (1999). Particular attention was paid to informed consent (section I, 4), honouring participants' trust and anticipating harms (I, 1-2), respecting rights to confidentiality and providing anonymity (I, 5), and lastly to obligations to employers (II, 2). I am especially keen to ensure that involvement with the 'host communities' does not end with the completion of my PhD, following not only the ASA's recommendations on widening the scope of social research (V, 1), but also my personal feeling. I believe the biggest ethical challenge, though, lies ahead, if this thesis is eventually published, particularly in Italian. As many of my informants had higher education, the possibility that they will read my work is definitely real.

The remainder of the thesis is structured as follows. The next chapter introduces the ethnographic setting and its main actors by making use of one of the events I took part in while in the field (an organic farmer's market). The purpose of the chapter is to provide the reader with a general feel for the work that follows in the main bulk of the thesis. But mostly, the aim is to engage with the complex history of western Sicily and Palermo, and how this explains many of the current features of the two locales (though not all). After chapter 2 comes the ethnographic core of the thesis, which is implicitly divided into three parts that deal in turn with the main actors I studied: ethical consumers (chapters 3 and 4), fair-trade retailers (5 and 6), and organic farmers (chapter 7). Chapter 8 offers my conclusions.

For each actor, the discussion loosely follows a distinction between discourses and values on the one hand, and practices and social institutions on the other, so that a focus on meaning is followed in the subsequent chapter by a discussion of practices. The ethnography of organic farmers occupies a single chapter (7), but the same approach is followed in its component sections. I have found this way of arranging the material to be useful in highlighting the multiple dimensions of identity and agency expressed by informants. Often, it may seem that the analysis of actual behaviours contradicts that of individuals' self-representation. This is not intended to point out contradiction for its own sake, but to enrich my portrayal of moral economies in everyday life.

In chapters 3 and 4, then, I investigate how Palermitan consumers who bought organic and fair-trade foods explained their choice to do so, and what difficulties they faced. By analysing people's constructs of these two foods, I show the many points of reference—body, environment, the past, markets, human nature—that underlie them. I suggest that the consumption of fair-trade and of organic have in common an opposition to different aspects of contemporary economy. In chapters 5 and 6 I look at the retailing activity of those who sold (part of) the ethical foods in question to my informant consumers. These were Palermitan members of two small worker cooperatives, originally founded as fair-trade retailers but now selling also organics, that owned one a shop, and the other a shop and a warehouse. Their social and political commitments; the meaning their work had for them both in itself and compared to that of similar businesses in the north of Italy; and the cultural construction of a 'non-profit economy' are all key issues in these two

chapters. As are the tasks of retailing ethical foods, competing on the relevant markets, and the means adopted to cope with atypical labour requirements.

In chapter 7, the organic farmers who supplied both the fair-trade shops and some of the consumers directly, take centre stage. Their relationship with (organic) agricultural work, food, and nature exhibits a complex reliance on two paradigms—of collaboration and of competition—with the environment. The wider social and ethical understanding of labour is also an important aspect of this chapter’s analysis, with farmers seeing their role as one of innovation in a cultural milieu considered as being hostile to it. However, in a similar fashion to the fair-traders, the demands of market, livelihood, and the sector’s political economy impinged closely on growers’ desired agency. Finally, in chapter 8 I conclude the thesis by discussing some of the themes that run through the previous ethnographic chapters, and what these tell us for the study of contemporary Sicily and its moral economies.

## CHAPTER 2

### WESTERN SICILY AND PALERMO: A BRIEF HISTORY

#### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate what aspects of Palermo's and western Sicily's complex history are still impacting the present. Ethical consumers, fair-trade retailers, and organic farmers inevitably embodied past social relationships as a living sediment. Before looking at the actors themselves and the contemporary world they represent, then, it is necessary to broach the past in question. I discuss history adopting the pluralist epistemology for the study of culture and society that has recently come to characterise Sicilian studies (Schneider & Schneider 2005), discussed in the previous chapter. I will thus pay particular attention to the fault-lines of discontinuity, as much as the paths of continuity. At present, the island exhibits a multiplicity of plots that intersect each other while coming from diverse points of origin.

This heterogeneity makes it hard to work out a common history; perhaps one should not try to do so. But as a grounded practice, ethnography needs to take at least some bearings, and relations can be found also within diversity; the sections of this chapter are devoted to these two efforts. First, though, I will use this introduction to illustrate as clearly as possible the diversity in question. I have chosen to do so by providing a re-worked extract from my field diary that describes my journey through the city of Palermo to reach an organic farmer's market, an occasion in which the three main actors of my ethnography met. I use this extract as a rhetorical artifice to make an important point: many voices appear to push the attention in western Sicily back and forth between different places, social processes, and constituencies.

\* \* \*

Sunday, 5<sup>th</sup> November 2006.

This morning I went to the organic farmer's market to do some fieldwork. My flat in the *Albergheria* neighbourhood—one of Palermo's most ancient areas, settled by the

Phoenicians along a river that now runs underground—is only a ten minute walk from where I had to catch the bus.



Figure 1: *via Albergheria*, where my flat was located (source: Google Maps). During the rainy days of winter, the street became covered with pools of water.

After leaving my damp and narrow street, I passed the remains of a near-by church with no roof and a collapsing perimeter wall adjacent to a shabby apartment block. On the kerb was the usual pile of rubbish; the spot is ideal for fly-tipping as there are no homes or shops on that particular stretch of road (the municipal waste containers are nearby).



Figure 2: the church remains and building in question (source: Google Maps). The street seen disappearing in the background to the right is *via Albergheria* (notice the new-looking building at the start of the *via*)

Though the *Albergheria* was at the heart of Palermo's political, economic and cultural life throughout most of its history, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century it became one of the city's most impoverished and dilapidated neighbourhoods. Clear signs of this are still visible everywhere. But in the last couple of years, a process of regeneration that started in the late 1990s has considerably accelerated. Thanks to public subsidies, many buildings that were once decrepit have been made new. Their facades are painted with colours resembling the old stonework, dark wood is used for outer doors and window frames, and retro-looking lamps are fitted to their perimeters.



Figure 3: past, present, and future in the landscape of Palermo's historic centre (source: the author). The complex in the top-right part of the photograph is a typical example of current renovations.

I walked further on and reached one of the remaining sections of the ancient city walls. This incorporates the stone pipes that were used to distribute water by taking advantage of the ground's natural pressure. The wall's surface—with the broken pipes' now visible, blocked by centuries of sediment—looked almost like the fossilised remains of an ancient organism. Opposite this wall, across a small square, is the city specialist paediatric hospital. The square was, as usual, completely covered by illegally parked cars, a system managed by a few (illegal) parking attendants—*posteggiatori*—who will 'find' a space in return for a fee. The *posteggiatori* are a perfect example of Palermo's vast informal economy.



Figure 4: the ancient water system on the left, the hospital on the right (source: Google Maps).

After crossing a double-carriage road, I reached the metro station named after the adjacent Royal Palace of the Norman kings. After the year 1000, the Normans founded an autonomous Kingdom of Sicily, ruled from Palermo, which extended on mainland Italy up to Naples. Their reign is considered by many the pinnacle of Sicilian civilisation, when the arts and sciences thrived (though a less Catholic-centric perspective would say the same of the previous Arab age).

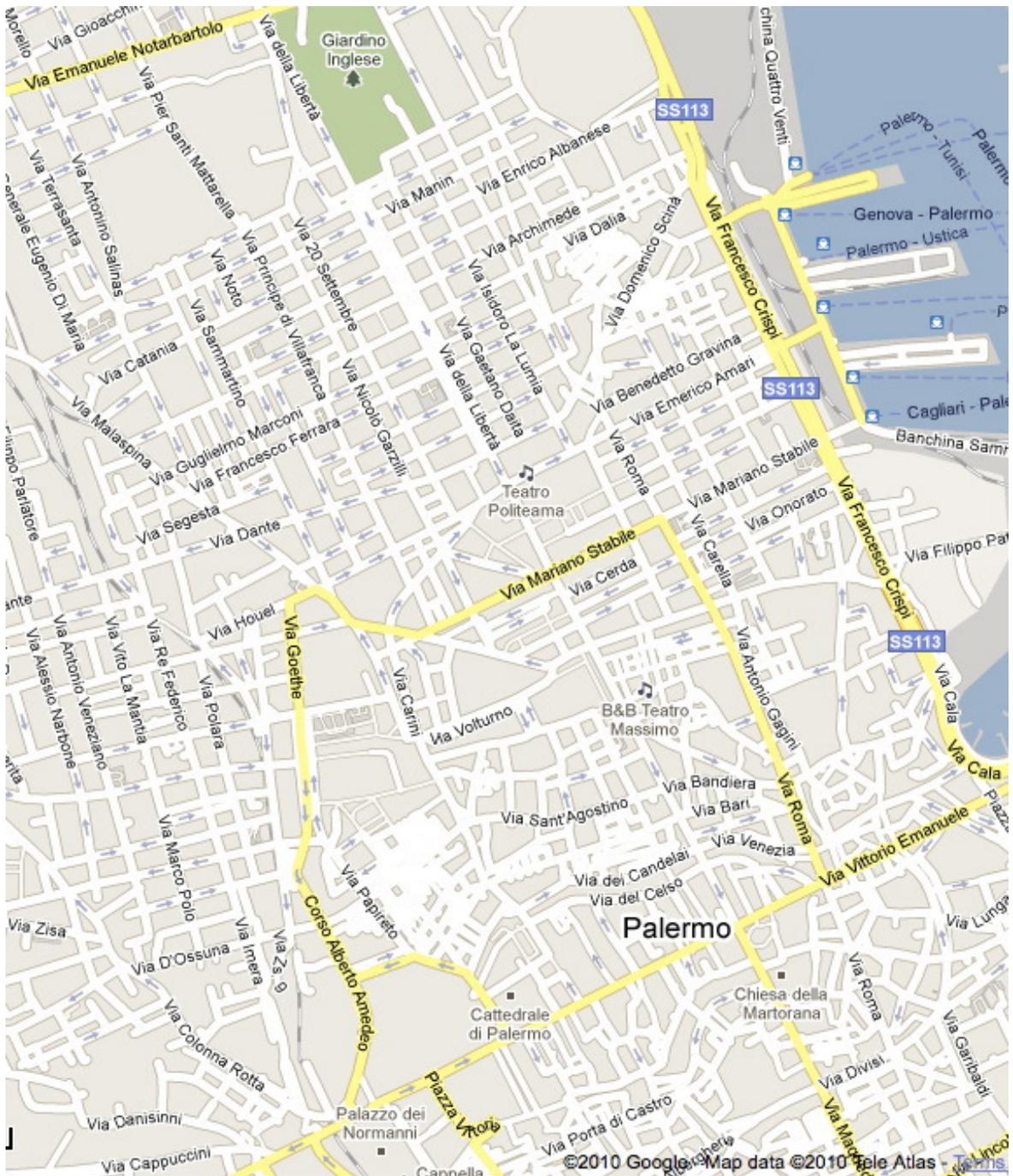
Palermo's metro was initially built as part of Italy's investments for the 1990 football world championship. The station in question is the most recent addition to it. As such, it is both an example of the city's modernising transport system, and of the endurance of problems with urban planning and the political process. Works for the station began in 1996, but in 1999 Palermo's Province rescinded its contract with the original business consortium, as the project had not been finished on time. After a new bid, a different consortium completed the works in 2001. Currently, the metro is part of a major expansion of the city's transport infrastructure, aimed at increasing its very low capacity.



Figure 5: the metro station, with the Norman Palace in the background (source: Google Maps).

Unfortunately, the metro still connects only a handful of spots throughout the city, and runs only every half an hour. This meant I had to take the bus to reach the public garden where the farmer's market took place. The station is located on one side of a large square, *Piazza Indipendenza*, overlooked by the Norman Palace. The square acts as a buffer between the old and the new city, and is one of Palermo's main bus centres. Heavy traffic usually blocks the many roads departing from it, but today was Sunday. The bus I needed was parked, so I got on and waited. I noticed the vehicle was from the new fleet of greener, methane-powered buses. Eventually we set off.

We drove through the stone arch of *Porta Nuova* ('new gate'), one of the old city's entrances, back towards the historic centre along *Corso Vittorio Emanuele*. The *Corso* is Palermo's oldest road, though it was given its current name in honour of the Piedmontese king at the time of Italy's unification (1861). The area surrounding it is still known as the *Cassaro*, from the Arab *al-Qasr*: 'the fort'. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, in fact, Muslim rulers had fortified the town to resist Norman attacks. At the time, Palermo's population was roughly 350.000, making it the second largest city in Europe after Cordoba, the capital of Islamic Spain (De Long & Shleifer 1993).



Map 1: the old city in the lower half, the newer one in the upper half (source: Google Maps).

We passed the *Quattro Canti* ('four corners'), where the *Corso* intersects *via Maqueda* at ninety degrees. The latter road was built by a Spanish nobleman in the early 1600s, which explains the abundance in the area of baroque palaces once owned by the landed aristocracy. We then turned into *Via Roma*, which eventually led us to the northern, newer part of the city. This is where the venue of the organic farmer's market was: the

*Giardino Inglese*, or ‘English Garden’. The garden owes its name to the English Romantic landscape style, which imitated wild spaces through its complicated and patchy design. The whole area dates back to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and to the creation of a local bourgeois industrial class at the time.

The market was organised by two groups. One was the Palermitan branch of a national environmental NGO called ‘Greens, Environment, and Society’ (GES). This organisation, though not formally linked to the Italian Green Party, exhibited all the connotations of left-wing environmental politics and activism. The second group were a number of farmers, mainly from Palermo’s province, some of whom belonged to the regional chapter of the Italian Association for Organic Agriculture (AIAB). Together, the NGO and the farmers had devised the project and set it up.

The weather today was beautiful, which prompted jokes by the organisers that they should put their hopes in global warming for more nice weather the next month. Among the farmers who attended the market to sell their goods were those with whom I developed various degrees of relationship whilst in the field. There was Francesco, in his thirties, who owned a farm of 20 hectares together with his parents. They had converted to organic agriculture sixteen years ago. Then there was Giuseppe. Now in his seventies, he had converted to organic eighteen years ago and owned 17 hectares. His daughter, who was with him at the market, had decided to take on the business and make it her full-time job. Benny, who owned a very small plot on the outskirts of one of the province’s towns, was also there. (Sandro, the president of a producer cooperative that pooled roughly 100 hectares, was the only one missing. He probably didn’t feel enough people would attend the market.)

Many of the ethical consumers I met during my fieldwork in Palermo attended the market and bought the food, in particular fruit and vegetables. They were mainly women, aged between 29 and 53 years, who had thus grown up during the 1970s and 1980s. Many had university degrees, and were now in full-time employment. All in all, these consumers were ordinary individuals, not noticeably interested in markedly alternative ways of life. They were part of new and old couples, often with children, working five days a week, buying household staples and treats from ethical and conventional retailers. Some had come independently, because they knew of the market and were interested in organic agriculture,

while others were part of the clientele of the city's two fair-trade shops, and had been told of the event by these. Still others belonged to two fair-purchase groups (*gruppi di acquisto solidale*).

These groups are grassroots schemes now fairly common in the north of Italy, organised by people to buy and distribute ethical commodities through direct channels (see Valera 2005). In recent years they have increased in number also in the south. Of the two groups I studied, one was linked to local left-wing Catholic constituencies. It actually delegated the running of the scheme to one of the fair-trade shops (see below). They organised a weekly vegetable box for the people involved. The other fair-purchase group originated from members of a far-left-wing party. It was entirely self-managed, dealing directly with wholesalers and producers, and practised a weekly home delivery service. The farmers Giuseppe and Francesco were among the suppliers of these two groups.

Finally, Palermo's two fair-trade retailing cooperatives—Sodalis and Equalis—were both also present at the market, each with their own stand. The organisers had agreed on their presence given that many fair-trade food lines are now also certified organic. The two coops thus offered a useful complement of packaged foods (the only type they were allowed to bring) to the farmers' fresh ones.

Sodalis was the oldest and largest of the two coops present, both of which are legally constituted as worker cooperatives (*cooperative di lavoro*). Sodalis owns a retail outlet and also a warehouse, from where it runs a wholesale business and where its offices are located. Its shop is just off *via Notarbartolo*, the densely-populated bourgeois neighbourhood to the city's north, close to the English Garden itself. The roads outside the Garden are spacious, with concrete kerbs on both sides that manage to accommodate rows of big, leafy trees at regular intervals. The shop has a single entrance and shop-window, which somewhat mask the size of the interior (almost 90m<sup>2</sup>) organised in two adjoined rooms, a big one and a small one. Still, the store's size clearly puts it in the category of 'family shops'. The goods on sale include fair-trade and organic foods, both fresh (fruits and vegetables) and processed ones (e.g. pasta, breakfast items, snacks etc.), and also ecological household goods (such as washing-up liquid and the sort) and items of 'green' personal care (soaps, shower gels, etc.). All these things are presented on shelves, display racks and rails, tables and other purpose built structures.

Sodalis' warehouse and office are situated in a much humbler area compared to that of the shop, close to Palermo's port. The warehouse has no sign identifying it from the outside, and very few people in town are aware of its existence. It comprises five rooms, of which three (a large and two smaller ones) are dedicated to storage proper, another large room is designated as the 'showroom' (where wholesale customers can come to view and sample goods), and another medium-sized one is used as the coops' office. Here the workers sit in front of computer screens and answer the phone.

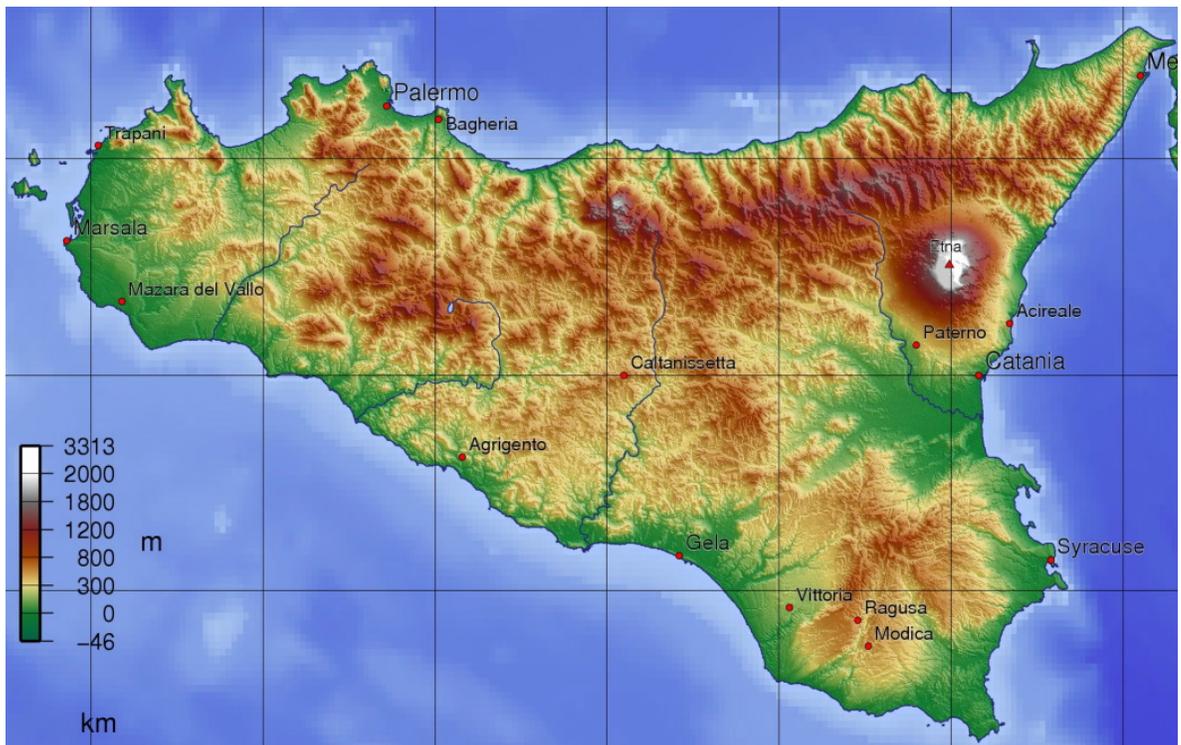
The other coop that was present at the farmer's market was Equalis. This coop deals only in retailing, and thus owns only a shop, close to *via Libertà*, Palermo's most prestigious area. Its store is smaller than Equalis' (roughly 60m<sup>2</sup>), which reflects the enterprise's very young age. But it has two large shop-windows, and is more neatly divided in two similar sized rooms than the other store. Both sell a similar range of foods and goods, and are very similar in appearance. (In Palermo there are currently six other similar shops, excluding the two just mentioned.)



Picture 5: part of the organic farmer's market (source: the author).

## 2.1 From agrarian to capitalist world system

Sicily is the largest island of the Mediterranean Sea and is located almost at the centre of it. With a land mass of 26,000 km<sup>2</sup>, it is the biggest region in Italy, currently inhabited by just over five million people. Since ancient times, Sicily was recognised for its triangular shape, which earned it the toponym *Trinacria*, a word of Greek origin meaning ‘three-pointed’. The island presents a mountainous landscape, especially along its northern and eastern shores, and a tightly-knit system of undulating hills in the interior. Together, these habitats make up roughly 85% of its land mass. The rest is occupied by a few large agricultural plains, the largest of which are those of Marsala in the westernmost part of the island, and of Catania in east. The farms I studied were located on a smaller plain on the north-western shore of the island. Also in this area is Palermo, Sicily’s largest city (and Italy’s fifth) with a population of about 700.000. The city overlooks a wide natural harbour, a location to which it owes its name, ‘Palermo’ meaning ‘all-port’ in ancient Greek.



Map 2: Sicily and its geography. The farms I studied were located on the coastal plain of the large gulf that separates Palermo from the town of Trapani to the west (top-left).

Climatically, Sicily broadly follows the Mediterranean type: mild to warm, wet winters, and hot, dry summers. For many centuries in the past, these conditions have been

one of the key factors determining the island's productive base, especially of its western half (see below). However, as a result of the territory's complex morphology, and of the altitudinal differences present in it, the micro-climate can change considerably from one locale to another. The north-western half of the island, where my field site was found, is usually colder and wetter, while the southern half is milder and prone to droughts.

Sicily and Palermo have a millennial history.<sup>12</sup> Humans inhabited the island around 8000 BC, while the city was founded by Phoenicians around 1100 BC (e.g. Leighton 1999). After the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, the island was colonised by the Greeks and their city-states, and five hundred years later conquered by Rome, of which it remained a province for the next six centuries. Since the Roman conquest, throughout much of its history, Sicily was controlled by 'foreign' powers—Roman, Byzantine, Hohenstaufen, Spanish—experiencing only brief periods of independence as an Arab Emirate and a Norman Kingdom.

#### *1300s-1700s: a semi-colony in the world system*

As I have already begun to show in the previous chapter (section 1.4), the area of Palermo's province, especially to the west and south of the city, has been the object of much interest both in anthropology and history. This interest has been devoted to the agriculture carried out in the hilly interior, and to its very small rural towns, with populations of just a few thousand. The coastal area, the plains (small and few but nevertheless present), and the larger towns (including Palermo), have received comparatively little attention until recently.

The ethical consumers and fair-traders I met during fieldwork were Palermitans; the organic farmers belonged to the coastal plains, as they were mostly producers of fruits and vegetables, not of wheat, which still predominates in the interior (e.g. D'Amico & Sturiale 2002). These characteristics render the older anthropological scholarship on Sicily of limited use to this study. But such a view must be kept in check. Space, in fact, is not the only factor one must take into account; there is also time. Agriculture changes like any other part of the social world. Until the post-war period, there was very little fruit and vegetables growing for the market, as this was traditionally an aspect of the household

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<sup>12</sup> In addition to the works cited in the following paragraphs, see the classics: Finley 1986; Mack Smith 1968a and 1968b.

economy and its production was aimed at own-consumption (for exceptions, see Lupo 1990). Where today there is extensive cultivation of fruit and vegetables, thirty or forty years ago an entirely different ecosystem and agrarian structure was present. This explains, at least in part, the emphasis of the older literature. More importantly, it indicates that too little time has passed for the once dominant politico-economic relations of the grain producing estates of the interior to be considered entirely irrelevant. Their impact was clearly felt in the lifetimes of my informant farmers.

Wheat production on the island has a long history. Under Rome, in fact, Sicily acquired a strategic role as the granary of the burgeoning power. In particular, the establishment of vast estates was an enduring legacy of Roman colonisation on the island's agriculture and economy. *Latifundia* (from the Latin words for 'wide' and 'farm') were usually owned by distant senators and noblemen. They grew in number and size as Rome changed from a Republic based on household production to an Empire with colonies all over Mediterranean Europe. In the first two centuries AD, landed estates were present in northern Africa, Spain, Greece and eastern Europe, exporting goods across wide scales. These estates were well adapted to the local environment and the level of technology available. But throughout the middle ages, their presence on the Sicilian territory remained patchy, as a result of low population densities and of the economy's contraction after the end of Roman rule.

It was under the Spanish that estates, now a part of feudal structures, developed anew and in more complex form. Throughout the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Crown of Aragon ruled Sicily. Towards the end of the 1400s, the kingdoms of Aragon and Castile united, and the island thus found itself under direct Spanish control, which was exercised by local viceroys. During this period, which lasted until the early 1700s, Sicily became part of the Atlantic world system (see Braudel 1975; Wallerstein 1974, 1980). It did so as a semi-colony of the Spanish empire, a core area, and was relegated to producing grains for export. A structure of economic, political and cultural relationships developed in this period that influenced the history of western Sicily up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see Schneider & Schneider 1976). The Schneiders, who have studied extensively the consequences of Spanish rule on western Sicily, describe estates thus in a recent publication:

A regime of far-flung properties characterized in Sicily not only by their vast size but by the extensive way they were farmed. Dedicated to wheat, they also supported large herds of sheep and cattle, which were driven from pasture to pasture according to season. ... This practice of transhumant pastoralism required deforestation, its legacy a landscape of forbidding desolation. (2003: 24-25)

The nobles resided in Palermo, in their Baroque palaces that still characterise the city's historic centre, even though the source of their wealth was in the massive landholdings of the interior. The institution of feudalism allowed in fact a complicated hierarchy of middlemen to grow between the absentee landlords and the thousands of landless day-labourers, whom the middlemen controlled. The most powerful among such intermediaries were the *gabelloti*, who rented the estates for a fixed number of years, and were in charge of its main compound, the *masseria*. Their primary function was to allocate the land yearly to the peasantry. They also owned valuable means of production, such as ploughs and animals (draft and dairy), and commanded the routes of transhumance for herders. This in turn allowed them to control itinerant animal fairs and the transportation of grains to port cities by mule and cart (Schneider & Schneider 1976: 61-72). Such dynamics were facilitated by the pattern of human settlement typical of Sicily, in which peasants concentrate in towns from where they travel daily to work, instead of living on the land they cultivate (Blok 1969).

*Latifundia* were, in a sense, complete social systems that incorporated a specific culture and structure of values. The Schneiders found three cultural 'codes' resulting from Sicily's economy: *furberia* (cunning), *amicizia* (friendship), and *onore* (honour). The code of 'cunning' referred to the "expectation that it is likely, indeed proper, that each person will pursue his own interests to the detriment of others if necessary" (Schneider & Schneider 1976: 83). Thus the cunning person "uses his astuteness to serve his own interests, to manipulate others" (*ibidem*). The code of friendship was closely linked to the latter one: "Friendship was the critical relation which defined the networks of exchange in Western Sicily, and the operative social structure was (and is) the coalition of friends". Therefore, "coalitions are temporary, ad hoc, and task specific ... . Since the coalition is fluid and task specific, it does not ask too much of its participants. Rarely does one commit all of one's energy to a given coalition" (1976: 103).

Honour was largely a result of gender relations within the household, and of the family's relation to the community; specifically, of the public reputation of men, which was based on their ability to manage the domestic space and the women in it (see Chapman 1971; Schneider J. 1969, 1971; Schneider & Schneider 1976: 89-94). Female presence on a landed estate was highly limited by family prestige, as only the very poor resorted to sending women in the fields. The home was the quintessential female domain, which allowed for the control of women's sexuality. Honour, in fact, depended foremost on a man's capacity to assure his wife's faithfulness, and the premarital virginity of his daughters. The latter element was key in guaranteeing a family's capacity to arrange marriages within the community, and thus to access the property 'market'. However, even if these values were supposed to be "rigorous, [they were] in fact rather flexible" (Schneider & Schneider 1989: 126; see also Fazio 2004).

In their homes, mothers and daughters were engaged in the work of household reproduction in the company of other female relatives. These kin formed the domestic group, which could also often include other women from the neighbourhood. Regardless of the domestic group's size, though, the Sicilian family was conjugal—or 'nuclear' with many offspring—and not the complex, extended-patriarchal type that has been often proposed for the area in the past. The nuclear nature of the Sicilian family makes it consistent with views about the origins of the modern family, such as those proposed by the Cambridge Group of historical demography (e.g. Laslett & Wall 1972). At the same time, though, Sicily's broader, quasi-feudal political economy contradicts such views. (Age at marriage was also relatively late on the island, which contradicts Hajnal's hypothesis of northern Europe's distinctiveness in this domain [see Engelen & Wolf 2005].) According to Schneider & Schneider (1976: 96-98), the origins of codes of honour in Sicily can be found in the efforts of local kinship groups to resist the encroachment of empires, the church and eventually the state on livelihoods, and to defend themselves from threats by slave merchants.

In western Sicily, this moral system would remain in place, under various political regimes, until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, as I discuss below, it did not persist completely unchanged, and was not the only system present in the area.

*1800s-1920s: modernity and the birth of the Italian nation-state*

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Bourbons, who had conquered Sicily a century before, dismantled the old (Spanish) institutions of feudalism and laid out new ones akin to those of northern Europe's capitalist powers. Feudal privileges were abolished and a true land market created. A new class of non-aristocratic owners emerged from this process—the *civili* (gentry)—who infiltrated the bureaucracy created at the time, to manipulate the new land market. Landowners of significant plots thus rose from roughly 2.000 to 20.000 between 1812 and 1865 (Mack Smith 1968b: 203). However, though part of this change was due to a small reduction in the extension of estates, it mainly resulted from the partitioning and selling off of common land. This process of enclosures diverted public resources into private hands. Customary use rights were abolished. After having been oppressed for centuries under feudalism and Spanish law, peasants saw their condition worsen as a result of the incipient development of capitalism, in a process reminiscent of that described by Polanyi in TGT.

After unification (1860), the politics of the new state exacerbated this situation. The government put more land on sale, especially belonging to the Church, which again left concentration unaltered and increased inequalities. Insurrections, which had often taken place in the past, rose exponentially throughout the 1800s (see Riall 1998). The protagonists were peasants and artisans. These common folk protested not only the corruption and land grabs, but also the abolition of guilds and religious orders (with their charity towards the poor), and the competition from goods produced in the industrialising north (Riall 1998: 205-220).

At the turn of the century, artisans became involved in a process of social change that mystifies, once recognised, all images of Sicilian society as irredeemably homogenous (see Schneider & Schneider 1996). The people in question were rural families of small-scale shoemakers, tailors, seamstresses, cabinetmakers, stonemasons, blacksmiths, etc. Their main role in the economy was to provide the landed classes with the objects that symbolised aristocratic wealth. Because their livelihood required it, these artisans learnt to read and write; they were thus exposed to continental (particularly French) culture. They read newspapers and discussed national and international politics, and were among the first left-wing classes, embracing socialist ideas. Marital relations among them were open to

mutual cooperation and trust, as the wife was often involved in parts of the artisan work. This last characteristic was exemplified by the adoption of *coitus interruptus* as a birth-control strategy, a practice which made birth rates decline in this group from the 1920s. The phenomenon was part of the island's demographic transition from large to small conjugal nuclei, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It contrasts views of Sicilian families as large and male-dominated regardless of class differences, and as bound by 'traditions' up until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (e.g. the monograph on Italy of the Princeton Project on European Fertility Decline: Livi Bacci 1977).

Meanwhile, in Palermo, the social landscape was also rapidly changing. Throughout the years of Spanish rule, the city had been centred on the intersection of two main axes: the older east-west one, the *Cassaro*, and a newer south-north one, *via Maqueda* (see Map 1, page 52). Towards the end of the 1700s, the local nobility began developing land outside the historic centre, erecting villas with citrus orchards and groves. This process gave rise to a lush green landscape all around the old city, which filled the surrounding valley. As a result, the area became known as the 'golden shell' (*la Conca d'Oro*), in reference to the abundance of lemons, oranges and other citrus trees (e.g. La Duca 1994).

During the 1800s, Palermo witnessed the development of its bourgeois class. Heavy industry and manufacturing were pioneered by the Florio and Guli families, the former opening a shipyard and the latter a textile factory. The Florio also organised a tuna fishing monopoly. Other manufactures at the time included glassworks, furniture (owned by the French Ducrot), and ironworks. These buildings opened in the new neighbourhoods that were coming to life just outside the old city, as a result of natural population increase and migration from the interior by peasants disillusioned with rural life. In the plains to the west of Palermo, the Florio set up a wine export business together with the Whitakers and the Inghams, two English families that had come to Sicily at the turn of the century to develop theirs and the British Empire's fortunes. The English also played an important role in developing Sicily's mining sector, especially through the Anglo-Sicilian Sulphur Company.

Palermo's built environment changed to accommodate the growth of capitalist forces. In 1885 this resulted in the city's first urban plan, a vast programme of re-development that created, among other works, two new major streets. The first one, *via Notarbartolo*, was a wide east-west boulevard to the north of the historic city. It intersected the older south-

north track that led deep into the verdant area opened up by the nobility during the previous century, where the bourgeoisie now also started residing. This track was remodelled, and named *via Libertà* (Freedom Road); it is now the city's most prestigious boulevard. The wealthy neighbourhoods that arose along these streets are still known today as *Palermo bene*, the 'best' or 'good' Palermo.

It is important to appreciate that the social and economic developments of the time divided Palermo's core urban body into an older, southern half, and the newer northern one just described. This is a rough distinction, as the sprawl that followed World War II to accommodate internal migration created a very composite social landscape in the valley occupied by the contemporary city (see below). Still, this geographical distinction is useful as it reflects (again, roughly) a socio-economic one that sees the northern half inhabited by considerably richer Palermitans than the southern one. The ethical consumers and the fair-trade shops I introduced earlier were all located in this area, as was the English Garden where the farmer's market took place (see Map 1, page 52).



Figure 6: the 'good' Palermo today (source: Google Maps).

The heart of the old city also changed in the late 1800s. Due to the population increase mentioned above, and the changing social relations between the nobility and the

bourgeoisie, the historic centre became progressively more crowded and complex. Very poor dwellings were created with makeshift materials to accommodate newcomers. At the same time, aristocratic families left their palaces, dividing them up and renting them out, or selling them, sometimes each room individually. These trends, coupled with later events, would see the *centro storico* become a ruined shadow of its glorious past.

An island-wide process involving poorer Sicilians also gathered pace around the same years. With the shift of the world system's core from southern to northern Europe after the onset of industrialisation, the role of Sicily was recast, and the island began exporting unskilled labour. Between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, hundreds of thousands of men left each year for the United States, Latin America and Australia. Such a process lasted until the establishment of the fascist regime in 1922, which for reasons of economic policy and propaganda did not want Italian citizens emigrating.

Mass migration impacted on the fabric of Sicilian society in important ways, especially on gender relations in the family and the larger community (see Reeder 2003). The women whose husbands were away began to take on new roles in order to make their family's hopes of success and mobility come true. Rural women had to manage the remittances sent by their spouses, which made them enter the real estate market and the trades. To do so, they had to be literate, and thus began attending school in greater numbers (Reeder 2003: 142-167). This is not to say that these trends resolved immediately into greater equality between the sexes. Parallel to this movement towards the 'public', in fact, was one of renewed strength towards the 'private' (pp. 102-141).

As men were absent, wives were burdened with greater responsibility for the moral behaviour of the family. Also, the way changes in the world economy impacted on Sicilian society led to transformations of the gendered work in which women had been traditionally involved. Commodities began entering the home, especially mass-produced cloth from the north of Italy, which made certain householding labours diminish for many but the poorest. This process not only took away sources of female income that were linked to 'cottage' textile activity, but was also particularly significant for the formation of class cultures, as illustrated by Fiume's example about embroidery:

As women of the middle-class began to embroider ... the appellation 'casalinga', housewife, appeared in the municipal records; they aspired to a bourgeois lifestyle, in which they delegated poorer girls to perform heavy domestic tasks. ... They began to choose industrially produced fabrics in preference to those woven at home. (2006: 53)

These are all changes (especially the construction of the *casalinga* ideal) that set the stage for the world inhabited by my informants, particularly the consumers' (see chapter 4).

## 2.2 Modernisation without development

In many respects, fascism was a period of limbo for Sicily. Because of heavily nationalist policies, new industry and export agriculture suffered, and emigration was strongly discouraged. The landed estates were left in place, as they could be said to embody the ideal of rural life cherished by Mussolini, and stymie new peasant communist activity.

In 1945, the island was still overwhelmingly devoted to agriculture, with industry being almost inexistent; the *latifondo* was still the dominant socio-economic arrangement in its western half. But although adapted to local conditions, and relatively flexible (see Petrusiewicz 1996), the estates could not survive the combined onset of capitalism, the welfare state, and mass party politics. Thus a number of prevailing factors—local, national, and global—made latifundism disappear in the course of the 1950s. These dynamics are of crucial importance to understand the Sicilian present.

Immediately after the end of the war, peasant unrest flared up again in the whole of southern Italy, this time being clearly connoted as a communist mass movement (Renda 1979). Women had an important role in the occupations of unused lands that were crucial to the movement (see Modica 2000). As a result of this political pressure, in 1950 the ruling Christian Democratic Party (DC) passed a land reform. An almost millennial history came to an end, though the social, economic, and ecological consequences of the transformation of latifundism still impact negatively on the life of Sicilians and Palermitans today (Sabetti 2002: xxiv-xxv; Schneider & Schneider 1976: 209-10, 2006: 64-5).

The intent of the reform was to improve the condition of agriculture in the south by transforming poorly cultivated land and bringing new one in production. (In fact, the

reform was as much the result of pressure from the bourgeoisie, who wanted to modernise the country, as it was from the communist land squatters.) Expropriations could take place only for holdings of more than 200 hectares, which would be redistributed. The owners of farms between 200 and 100 hectares were required to submit projects for their improvement. If farms were deemed ‘advanced’, in fact, they could not be broken up. Smaller farms were left intact. New plots were thus created either from farms larger than 200 hectares, or from the few farms that could be proven to be ‘backward’. The newly created plots could not exceed 6 hectares, and should not be smaller than 3; their division among living persons was forbidden for twenty years (though transmission at death was permitted—see below).

As often happens with vested interests, the letter of the law was rarely upheld during the reform (e.g. Blok 1966). First, the selling of holdings was not forbidden. Given the wider transformations occurring simultaneously in the local and national economies, this practice took place quite often. Many of those who received land simply sold it on and took up employment in the new local industrial sector, which was being developed with funds from the central state. Others sought employment in the public sector, though fewer were able to obtain this given its educational requirements. Two elements that reinforced this trend were the insufficient amount of expropriated land compared to the huge number of peasants, and its poor quality. Both were obvious shortcomings of the way in which the legislation had been designed. (Many big landowners were also able to divide their land between family members thanks to the law’s ambiguities and to corruption.)

Inheritance laws complicated this difficult moment of transition. The early anthropological work on western Sicily is helpful here, as it was based on the observation of the dying latifundist system and can thus be used today as a form of direct historical record. Schneider & Schneider write of the mid-1960s:

Sicilian peasants (but not the nobility) practiced partible inheritance of land, for males and females in theory, at least for males in practice. The result was to accelerate the fragmentation of land and with it of families. Given that agricultural technology placed no limit on the minimum size or the shape of holdings, the overriding consideration in property divisions was (and is) the mutual satisfaction of all the heirs. In partitions involving more than one holding, each plot of land in each location was divided, usually among all the legitimate claimants. (1976: 63)

The combination of shortcomings in the land reform, changes in Italy's economy and society, and customary law, all contributed to the progressive fragmentation of agricultural land. As I show in chapter 7, this is one of the key factors that constrains also the new organic farming sector. Davis (1973: 109) distinguishes two aspects in the temporal process of fragmentation: division (decrease in size) of plots, and geographical scattering of these. (For the issue of customary inheritance and agricultural fragmentation in other parts of southern Italy, see also Brögger 1971; Davis 1973: 107-145.)

The historical fragmentation, which rendered many peasants' property economically unviable, is still active today. According to the most recent agricultural census (Istat 2000), the average size of a conventional farm in Sicily is 3.5 hectares, down from 3,97 hectares in 1990. 31% of farmers on the island own less than one hectare, while 48% own between one and five. (The national average is 5 hectares.) Data for the area where the organic growers discussed in this thesis were located confirms the presence of very small farm sizes. The agricultural census for 1970 shows that 79% of farms around the agro-town of Partinico in north-western Sicily were of extensions of 3 hectares or less (and 43% were less than 1 hectare). In the area of Alcamo, close to Partinico, the census shows the modal farm size to be 1 hectare.

The land reform also testified to the endurance of patriarchal structures in Sicilian society, as virtually no women were assigned expropriated land, even though they had fought for it alongside their husbands (Modica 2000). At the time, Cronin (1970) looked at issues of kinship organisation, especially marital and familial relationships, in Partinico. She noted the persistent social bond between children (particularly sons) and mothers, and the role paternal authority had on both. Children and women were often considered incapable of regulating their own behaviour, and of being in constant need of supervision by more responsible individuals (men). A positive development that took place in those years was the decline of birth rates also among peasant families, who were the last class to exhibit this trend after the artisans and aristocrats.

Though the reform of 1950 was one of the most ambitious pieces of legislation ever implemented in Italy, it failed to achieve significant positive results. Cronin's (1970) description of Partinico, though somewhat biased towards an exoticised and negative image of Sicily (see chapter 1), is all in all a faithful account of the life of poverty and

despondency at the time (see also Galtung 1971).

In a sense, the reform came out of time, both economically and culturally. On the one hand, Italy was funding industrial reconstruction through the Marshall plan, which made the importance of agriculture secondary. On the other, this same process of industrialisation would shift the old desire for land to new consumerist expectations, which demanded a whole new economic base. Generational change was expressed in the lack of interest in agricultural work shown by the children of peasants. The end result of these trends was renewed mass migration: external, towards the recovering economies of northern Italy and Europe (Foot 2003), and this time also internal, from the old agro-towns towards the main city centres of the coast. The post-war economic boom was a major factor in modifying Sicily's economy.

This is not to say, by far, that agriculture remained unchanged. It moved away from cereal cultivation, and became more intensive thanks to the spread of mechanization, the use of chemical inputs, and water irrigation. One effect of these changes was the establishment of vegetable and fruit growing especially in the coastal areas (see Schneider & Schneider 1976: 131-133). This was the case in the small plain to the west of Palermo where my informants grew their food, where a dam was built as a result of peasant demands. However, this transformation compounded the fragmentation problem, because fruits and vegetables, given their highly perishable nature, require good degrees of coordination to act profitably on the market (e.g. Simeti 1984). Additionally, the combined production of the island's small farms often exceeded local demands, while export channels required capitals that were scarce. Thus two incompatible developmental trajectories of fragmentation and agronomic conversion took place at the same time.

Internal migration, in Sicily as elsewhere, was mainly triggered by hopes for a job in the newly built 'poles of development' (*poli di sviluppo*). These were large-scale industries located in the vicinity of the main coastal cities (Palermo, Gela, Priolo), funded in part by the State through the 'extraordinary intervention' (*intervento straordinario*) of its purpose-specific 'Bank for the South' (*Cassa per il Mezzogiorno*). In Palermo and its surroundings, for example, car manufacturing and petro-chemical processing were both present. However, because of the tendency of these capital-intensive industries to absorb relatively small amounts of labour, the creation of an industrial sector was unable to absorb the

massive outflow of people from agriculture. In addition, industrialisation in the south always remained patchy and fragile: not even twenty years in its making, the sector had to cope with the worldwide economic crises of the 1970s and the subsequent, progressive decline of the Fordist model of production. Also, because industrialisation in the south never had enough propulsive power to stimulate the creation of a supportive network of small-medium enterprises, its regions did not partake in the ‘Third Italy’ phenomenon after the 1970s (Bagnasco 1977; Blim 1990; see Goddard 1996 for the uneven consequences of outsourcing in Naples).

The only industrial sector that enjoyed considerable growth rates, particularly in Palermo, was the building sector. The island’s huge internal migration inevitably caused a demand for new housing. The construction boom that ensued was taken over by the dominant Christian Democratic Party and by the Mafia, for electoral purposes and money laundering respectively (with frequent overlaps—see below). This perverted alliance was the basis for the colonisation of the city’s environment in the first three post-war decades, a process described as ‘hyper-urbanization’ (Guarrasi 1981). The agricultural belt surrounding Palermo was almost completely cemented over without regard for planning regulations. Repeated violations of building permits, zoning instruments, height limits and restrictions on the conversion of public land to private property, all gave rise to a chaotic city (La Duca 1994). This was characterised by the fourth highest population density in Italy, inadequate services and infrastructures, and a lack of green spaces. In 2007, the annual report on Italy’s urban ecosystems compiled by the environmentalist organisation *Legambiente* placed Palermo 85 out of 103 cities on various sustainability indicators (Legambiente 2007). Another report on sustainable urban mobility judged it 39 out of 50 large centres (Euromobility 2008). At the same time, the old city and its inhabitants were left to decay, especially after the earthquake of 1968. Palermitans express their view of these changes with two common expressions: *lo scempio* (the disgrace), and *il sacco* (the sack of the city).



Figure 7: contemporary lower-middle-class dwellings, and the remnants of the city's outskirts (source: the author).

The other reason for migrating towards the larger cities was to search for a job in the public sector, which was expanding rapidly due to the development of the welfare state. Accommodating the agricultural exodus from rural areas proved impossible for this sector as it had for the industrial one. The social pressure put on it, together with its (mis)management by the city's political parties of the time, gave rise to the city's capillary but infamously inefficient bureaucracy (see Crisantino 1990, especially chapter 5).

The trends in industry and public employment that took place in Sicily led to an idiosyncratic combination of the social strata characteristic of advanced capitalist societies. In 1970s Palermo, the bourgeoisie comprised mainly entrepreneurs from local construction firms, high-ranking officials in banks, the professions (doctors, lawyers), and high-level politicians, reflecting the local weakness of 'true' industry. The middle class encompassed both public sector employees, the majority of Palermo's active population, and so-called 'independent' or self-employed individuals (*lavoratori indipendenti*): small-scale artisans,

small shopkeepers, farmers, etc. The working class were a markedly heterogeneous group, referred to locally as *classi popolari*: 'popular classes'. They included the small number of blue-collar workers still employed by heavy industries (which might thus be termed proletariat); the poorest among the self-employed, like petty traders and vendors; and the very poor who fell outside the former two types having no significant formal employment (in Marxian terms, the lumpenproletariat; see Chubb 1982; Cole 1997: 27–32; Guarrasi 1978; Mingione 1988). What distinguishes the *popolari* from the middle class is their very low and discontinuous income.

The relationship between these different social strata developed in the form of a patronage or clientelistic system (see Chubb 1982; for the Sicilian case more generally, Boissevain 1966). Clientelistic systems are based on forms of highly unequal exchange between two parties linked by strong dyadic ties. The relations are often symbolically characterised by the idioms of friendship and fictive kinship, and can take place between two individuals and/or between two groups (Gellner & Waterbury 1977).<sup>13</sup> Inequality, both economic and cultural, is key in explaining how the system works in Palermo: particular individuals, because of their position in the local social milieu, are able to activate or (crucially) not activate those particular resources to which they can make claims: economic, social, cultural ones, etc.

Interestingly, it is not simply the powerful who are able to exploit the system in such way; nor is the phenomenon dependent on a culture of poverty. It results from the structural characteristics of the economy and of regional and national politics. The ability to participate in it depends on the relative position one occupies in the class structure: everyone can at the same time be patron to some and client to others. (Obviously, rich individuals will almost never be clients, but always patrons, while the opposite is true of the very poor).

The way in which inequality, different resource bases (thus different client groups), and power acted together in patronage to influence the middle class is of particular relevance to this study. As just noted, two main groups developed: public employees and the self-employed. Many among the ethical consumers I met belonged to the former

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<sup>13</sup> In industrialised societies, where a complex division of labour is the norm, the former case is usually a function of the latter: an individual client is dependent on an individual patron on the basis of class.

category, while the fair-traders and (arguably) organic farmers belonged to the latter. Their class positionality impacted on the way they experienced morality in economy (see especially chapters 4 and 5).

The city's post-war economy was highly fragile and unstable, locally resource-constrained and thus dependant on external capital flows. As a result, the sheer volume of requests for public jobs far surpassed the capacity for job creation. So in order to get a place in a 'public competition' (*concorso*), but also for career advancement, pay rises, getting a licence or a certificate of any sort, not paying a fine, passing an exam, even getting into university, middle-class people had to compete constantly to obtain recommendations, 'advice', or 'incentives'. Independent and self-employed individuals also became firmly integrated in the general picture of clientelism. The case of retailing is a good example.

Small commercial activities acted as a safety net for the unemployed, with people turning to the hope of opening their 'own shop' as a last resort. (This phenomenon is exemplified by census figures showing simultaneously a decrease in employment and firm size, and an increase in firm numbers; see Chubb 1982.) Thousands of tiny outlets thus spread all over the city, struggling not only to stay in business, but also to open in the first place. According to the law of the time, in fact, licences to new shops were granted on the basis of the 'need' for the kind of enterprise in question in the given area. But as Chubb noted: "Application of the law would mean not only a ban on all new licences but the exit from the sector of a significant proportion of those persons already exercising commercial activity" (1982: 124). Hence the competition to obtain such licences, the corruption in granting them, and the clientele bonding owners to various power groups.

The local Christian Democratic Party (DC) was the political core of Palermo's system of patronage (as was the case in southern Italy more generally; see Gribaudi 1980). The DC built upon its administration of national development funds and legislative power to heavily influence the job prospects of local people, which in turn allowed it to secure large electoral followings. During the post-war decades, the party was extensively infiltrated by the Mafia. Rural *mafiosi* had regained power after the period of fascist dictatorship, when the island was liberated by the Allies. Their comeback was proven by the numerous murders of communist peasants and trade union activists in the countryside at the time of the 1950 land reform. But it was the development of the urban economies that allowed the transformation

of the rural mafia into an organisation that controlled Palermo's expansion, its political life, and transnational flows of commodities (mainly heroin) and capital.

This was the picture of north-western Sicily and Palermo until the 1970s.

## **Conclusion**

I conclude this chapter briefly, as I intend to leave the discussion brought forward in it open. In the past thirty years, in fact, western Sicily and Palermo have changed considerably. The images that early anthropologists constructed of them can only go so far in unravelling the latest decades. Also, these years are numerous enough to constitute an historical period in their own right, but from my informants' perspective, they represent first of all the time in which they grew up. So what for an outsider is history, for them is a trajectory still open in the present. As I believe this personal dimension to be more important for a work of ethnography, I leave considerations about the most recent period for after the analysis of my data. Rather than using history only as 'context', I have chosen to let it emerge from the ethnography. I now therefore enter the core chapters of the thesis, where I set out the major findings of my research. I will return to a reflection on north-west Sicily's historical development in the concluding chapter 8, where I discuss social change in light of the trajectories of the three main actors.

# CHAPTER 3

## ETHICAL CONSUMPTION AND THE VALUES OF ORGANIC AND FAIR-TRADE FOODS

### **Introduction**

Why did people in Palermo purchase and consume organic and fair-trade foods? In this chapter I explore the answer(s) to this question, both at the ethnographic and theoretical level. In doing so, I start to sketch one key aspect of the moral economies I am interested in uncovering throughout the thesis: how the symbols and meanings attached by Palermitans to the two kinds of food mediated their relations to economy, society and—as we shall see—also to body and nature.

In the chapter's first two sections (3.1 and 3.2), I analyse the value constructs that ethical consumers used to explain their consumption of organic foods. The ethnography highlights the importance of the idea of 'healthy eating' in the symbolic construction of organic.<sup>14</sup> Such idea was manifest in individuals' desire to avoid normal foodstuffs, which they saw as contaminated and polluted. This attitude was justified by attributing to these foods the cause of certain health problems experienced first-hand by ethical consumers, or simply by their fear of them. Anthropologically, the theme that underlies section one and two is thus how people, as cultural beings, define certain materials fit for ingestion. Scholars of food studies have come to recognise this as an increasingly crucial issue in the contemporary, late-industrial world (e.g. Beardsworth & Keil 1992: 290; Caplan 1997: 9; Pratt 2008: 67; Tulloch & Lupton 2003: 11).

Intersecting this latter issue was another reason often voiced by Palermitan ethical consumers: that eating organic helped nature. Informants usually held various combinations of the 'health' and the 'nature-environment' motive, which thus appeared to partially overlap. The most common position was one in which ethical shoppers connected organic

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<sup>14</sup> In the thesis, this term refers only to views of eating organic food as a healthy food, not other popular concerns found in anthropological studies of food and identity, such as those for the consumption of fat, sugar, meat, and salt.

consumption as a desire to take care of their body's health to concerns for nature and constructs of rurality. Food was the object that made this connection possible. Some individuals did expressed only one motive, but these cases were less common.

In the chapter's third and fourth sections, I look at consumers' views about their fair-trade shopping. Notwithstanding sometimes diverse socio-cultural characteristics, all those I met exhibited strong similarities in how they conceptualised this domain of the moral economy: as an opposition to market and trade. This opposition broadly followed left-wing political contours, but these were expressed in two rather distinct ways: a religious and a secular one. (Interestingly, the same mix applied to Palermitans engaged in fair-trade as a livelihood; see chapter 5.) The religious and secular expression shared numerous elements, and it is this common ground that I analyse. Central to it were feelings of the need for justice to rule the process of globalisation, and for worker rights to be upheld in it. Here the underlying emphasis is on food as an object that conveys meanings of right, wrong, and more generally of normative value (see Caplan 1997: 1-8; Murcott 1998: 168-9; Wilk 2006: 21-22).

Ethical consumers emphasised two aspects of the fair-trade relationship: the one where the producer acted to make her goods reach the market, and that between the producer and consumer herself, created by the latter's act of buying. With regards to the former type, middlemen were blamed for taking the lion's share of profits in transactions, thus robbing producers of an equitable (and rightful) work remuneration. Fair-trade's morality was thus inspired by an idea of transnational redistributive justice, a value aimed especially at reducing the inequities of international commodity trade. The worker's right to a fair pay ran deep through consumers' discussion of globalisation, its injustices, and their idea of justice as embodied in fair-trade. It ultimately justified shortening the social distance in the market, and made the physical one irrelevant, thus enabling the application of a fair-trade discourse also to the Sicilian *organic* producers from whom consumers bought food. The concept of just pay/price is a theme with very ancient origins (e.g. Baldwin 1959). In these two sections I show how Palermitan consumers currently articulate it, making fair-trade foods a hybrid of commodity and gift.

In the chapter's conclusion I begin to address the question of why the same people bought both organic and fair-trade foods, though the full extent of my answer can be more

thoroughly investigated only in the thesis' final chapter. For the time being, I will argue that the common motive driving both kinds of consumption is the expression of a desire for oppositional politics (broadly understood). This raises an important point about the ethnographic material presented in the following pages.

Below, I show that the same individuals purchased both fair-trade and organic foods, and that they did so for what were apparently different reasons (though overlaps were present, for example in consumers' transfer of a fair-trade 'attitude' to organic purchases—see section 3.4). At a minimum, this evidence raises two questions. The first one concerns the degree to which my sample consumed either fair-trade or organic foods: which type prevailed, if any? (This is a similar though distinct point from the one discussed in chapter 1.5, regarding the proportion of mainstream to 'ethical' consumption.) The second question pertains to the reasons behind the possible different extent of consumption of the two commodities. Unfortunately, I have no evidence to answer such questions quantitatively. On the one hand, I did not collect the necessary data. On the other, I decided that asking people to self-report the amounts of organic/fair-trade they purchased would have had little scientific value, because of the entirely subjective nature of the exercise. I can, however, broach these issues to some degree, and thus offer a partial answer.

In choosing my sample of consumers, I tried to include as much as possible people who bought *both* the two foods in question regularly, i.e. on a weekly basis. I purposively avoided those individuals whom I had reason to believe consumed only very occasionally either fair-trade, for example during Christmas as formal gifts, or organic, for example people fixated on one particular item (organic soy milk, etc.). Imagining a continuum of purchase frequency, with 100% fair-trade at one end and 100% organic at the other, my informants were located on a range in the middle of the continuum. Also, one has to keep in mind that increasingly, the same type of item is certified both as being grown organically and as being traded fairly, which makes a distinction even more difficult (one would have to separate not only the fair-trade and the organic, but also the latter two from the fair-trade-organic).

This, however, still leaves open the question of why some individuals bought more of one kind than the other, as was undoubtedly the case even within the middle of the continuum mentioned above. I do not know how one might answer such a question, beyond

simply making the case for personal preference. I suggest it is more important to focus attention on the possible reasons for informants' consumption of both commodities, rather than on the different degrees of fair-trade/organic consumption.

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The ethical consumers I met in Palermo were similar to ethical consumers in the rest of Italy. The only considerable difference was that the Palermitans were clearly a minority in the city, compared to the higher proportions of such consumers in northern cities. Recent national data (ISMEA 2005, 2007) show that the typical organic shopper lives in Italy's north-west (41%; 9% in the south), is a woman (83%) aged between 35 and 44 (26%), with secondary or university education in almost two thirds of cases. With regard to income (Berardini 2006), 35% get between €1680 and €2480 per month (about £1100-£1700 at the time), and 40% get more. With regards to fair-trade, the typical shopper lives in the north of Italy (53%), is a woman (55%) between 35 and 44 years old, and has secondary (46%) or university (43%) education; she works as an employee, teacher or researcher (49%), and has a monthly income of €1501-€4000 (about £1200-£2700) (61%) (Manca & Vargiu 2007: 52).

In Palermo, a set of four surveys of organic shoppers shows these have a median age of 41-45 years; a median education of high school in two of the surveys and university in the other two; a household size of three; and median household income of €1500 (about £1000) in two surveys and of €3500 (about £2400) in the other two (Asciuto et al. 2003) (this difference probably reflects that in the socio-demographic characteristics of the neighbourhoods from which the shop sample was drawn). Unfortunately, there is no detailed information on fair-trade consumers' in Sicily or Palermo.

### 3.1 Health and nature between self-reflexivity and culture

[Certain] belief systems ... seek to ‘recover’ a purity held to be under threat by the artificiality of over-civilised modern urban life [expressed through] an association between health and the consumption of minimally processed foodstuffs.

(Mennell et al. 1992: 45)

The linking of diet and body through physical health was the most common explanation given by the consumers I met of their purchases of organic food. Gabriella’s case provides an excellent starting point for this section’s discussion. She was a fifty years old medical doctor, married with two children, whom I became slowly familiar with whilst volunteering at Sodalis’ fair-trade shop. Eventually, I arranged to see her for a tape-recorded interview.

We met outside her workplace around noon, in the heart of Palermo’s historic centre, close to the famous ‘Four Corners’ where two of the city’s oldest arteries—*Corso Vittorio Emanuele* and *via Maqueda*—intersect at ninety degrees. The morning was humid and quite warm; an autumnal storm had swept the city the day before and the sky was still overcast. We walked along the *Corso*’s narrow kerb, avoiding puddles and looking for a place to talk. We finally decided to sit in a rather trendy bistro-café, which had an upper level converted from the high ceilings of the old building it occupied; we sat there to have some peace and quiet from the busy city life just outside. During a conversation often interrupted by her work-related phone calls, Gabriella elaborated on her motives for eating organic. She began by saying she did it “because it’s healthier”, and continued talking about some of her health problems, which she connected in a detailed way to various foods, mostly vegetables.

At my age I’ve understood through actual bodily experience [*esperienza corporea*]—without any kind of theorization—that when I eat certain vegetables I get sick [*mi fanno male*]. I suffer from colitis, like many stressed people. For example: I didn’t eat artichokes for years because they made me ill. It was impossible. I’ve started eating [organic] artichokes again. Cauliflowers [the same story]. Once I got food poisoning from an aubergine.

Gabriella was typical of my sample. Martina, a forty-one years old social worker, divorced and with two children, spoke in a very similar way to her. I met Martina weekly at the shop of the Equalis coop, where she collected her vegetable-box. I interviewed her, like

Gabriella, at her workplace during lunch-break. “Organic foods are good for you, they’re cleaner. With time I’ve understood the link between diet and health—when I started having the first aches, like colitis. But really, Hippocrates said the same thing how long ago?”.

Not everyone among the organic consumers I met was necessarily preoccupied for their own health. Some feared most for the bodies of their significant others, usually their children. (And there were those who were concerned equally for both.) Ethical consumers who were parents manifested a strong desire to protect their children from ingesting food they considered unhealthy. The third main reason given by Palermitan ethical consumers to eat organic was that of ‘helping nature’. Gabriella remarked also on this aspect: “My choice is also linked to an aspect of environmental politics, environmental sustainability. And of course by noting a difference personally [in my body], it reinforces this aspect”.

By tracing ‘issues’ in their bodies to their diet, individuals defined two opposed kinds of food: an unhealthy one, represented by conventionally grown foods, and a healthy one, the organic kind. In consumers’ eyes (or rather, bodies), the latter’s nature as a safe food was proved by the *absence* of syndromes when they switched to it after eating conventional products. Gabriella’s remark on how she had approached organic not as result of premeditated choice or curiosity (“theorization”), but through the experience of sickness, points precisely to this line of reasoning. She continued:

When I began actually registering the difference—because it happens: “I haven’t got time, I’ll buy whatever’s available”—I saw the same symptoms. I’m not a hypochondriac; I’m someone who observes a lot what happens to her. And having again and again the same pains [*fastidi*], the same troubles [*disturbi*].

Though Gabriella was a doctor, which must have influenced her tendency to compare symptoms under different circumstances, her thoughts on the matter were by no means unique. (Gabriella’s field of medical expertise was not related to food.) Martina’s argument recalled Gabriella’s very closely: “I realised that if I didn’t eat properly, I fell ill. I verified it”.

Both examples reveal the importance that assessments of the self had for participants, a process identified by Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) as one of the cornerstones of what they define ‘reflexive modernity’. Both authors have tended to emphasise the rational, cognitive aspects of personal reflexivity. But anthropologists interested in reflexive

modernity point to how individuals speak more frequently of “my body and what’s good for it”, and exhibit a general attitude of ‘listening to the body’ (e.g. Willetts 1997, Caplan 2000a). Embodied forms of knowledge such as those above act to link concerns about one’s health to food consumption. They shed light on how illness and diet become central *everyday* concerns of the self in late-industrial societies. Writing about an English case study, Keane, for example, notes:

[People] judged the healthiness of their diets in terms of ... how often they experienced minor illnesses. Participants’ own *embodied knowledge*, i.e. how patterns of food consumption affected them personally, was therefore crucial to their understanding of the relationship between food and health. (1997: 181)

The body was not the only basis on which Palermitan organic consumers built a relation between food and illness, though it was probably the most personal.<sup>15</sup> It would be impossible to overlook the influence in this domain of discourses from the media, the scientific community, and popular culture. Even though participants’ reflexivity and embodied health knowledge were unique, sometimes intimate, manifestations of individuality, they were not asocial constructs. Morris (1994) notes how early authors like Mauss (2006) had already shown, long before the current emphasis on the ‘person’ and the ‘self’, that these concepts are never far removed from the influence of cultural discourses (see also Pidgeon et al. 2006: 98). More recently, Foucault’s (1988) idea of the ‘technologies of the self’—close to Mauss’ (2006) ‘techniques of the body’—has drawn attention to how bodies, and what affects them, can be used to mediate powerful social pressures (see Lupton 1996; Warde 1997).

The main discourse at play among those I spoke with was one linking the properties of food-diet to physical health and illness. This narrative was juxtaposed to direct experience. Martina, for example, lamented illness, but she also mentioned ancient Hippocratic ‘lore’ to back her interpretation. In the following section (on people’s ideas of food risk), Annamaria is quoted referring the term ‘organic’ to “what’s written in books”, and Brigida is quoted mentioning the “studies” that trace the origin of diseases to food. On the one hand, then, personal reflexivity is what allowed people to mediate these types of information through the lived experience of their bodies. If these ‘body talks’ were absent,

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<sup>15</sup> Also, body and health were not necessarily *constantly* reflected on in a project to build self-identity. In the next chapter I suggest this was due to the routinised nature of organic purchases, part of family shopping, an everyday activity not easily reconcilable with high levels of reflexivity.

health discourses made little sense.<sup>16</sup> On the other, the opposite was very probably also true: bodily episodes were clarified by the available narratives.

The fact that some of the participants with whom I spoke had *nothing* to say about their bodies but still ate organic, strongly points to ‘outside’ socio-cultural factors. This applied, for example, to those parents who were more worried for their children than for themselves. While the case of the consumers who were more worried about nature reveals the presence of discourses about food, nature and rurality.

### *Lay food taxonomies*

Alongside their health, another important corporeal form of evidence in people’s belief of the existence of two food types was what they actually ate. For consumers, organic and conventional foods differed considerably also because they looked, tasted, and smelled differently, and were available in shops at different times. Drawing on these sensory perceptions, they defined more closely their ideas of organic as a healthy food, and conventional as an unsafe one. In this process, the latter type was characterised as ‘industrial’ food.<sup>17</sup>

One of the most important elements in people’s understanding of industrial food was the idea of standardisation: food that is “all the same” (*tutto uguale*). Rita, a thirty-four years old university researcher, talked in the following way of her shopping experiences: “We’re used to seeing good-looking produce. When you go to a shop you find a product that is all in one piece, all the same, standard. While the organic one is half-broken, squashed, dried up on one side”. Standardisation was thought to be manifest not only in shapes, but also in the year-round availability of conventional food (a criterion that applied specifically to fruit and vegetables). Seasonality was thus another theme at play. In the words of Simona, a twenty-nine years old lawyer: “This idea of seasonality [*stagionalità*] should be brought back, knowing that you’re eating something the earth produces at that

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<sup>16</sup> This problem has been extensively documented, for example, in people’s attitudes towards meat and fat consumption (see Davison et al. 1991; Macintyre et al. 1998).

<sup>17</sup> The adjective ‘industrial’ was used only by some participants to describe conventionally grown food. Consumers did not appear to possess a shared term for such foods. I adopt ‘industrial’ as a general descriptor because it aptly conveys the various beliefs and sentiments discussed in the following paragraphs. ‘Healthy food’, in contrast, was the almost unanimous term of choice for organic.

particular moment. A tomato during winter tastes like water, there's nothing to do about it!"

Simona's final words point to a third characteristic in participants' constructs of organic: healthy food was supposed to taste and smell (see below) nice—or as Simona noted, simply taste of *anything at all*. In contrast, food bought at supermarkets was thought to fail on both criteria, with this type of retailer usually being identified as the quintessential purveyor of industrial food. Adriana, a thirty-five years old junior-high schoolteacher, told me: "If you take organic fruit and fruit from the supermarket or greengrocer, they taste differently. A pear tastes of pear, a plum of plum. You go to the supermarket, they all taste the same: horrible, like medicine. And the smell!"

Industrial food's all-year availability was blamed on the erasure of nature's 'rhythm' as factor in food production. In the words of Paola, a thirty-two years old woman, who after working had enrolled at university: "One thing I like about the vegetable box scheme is that you learn to understand nature's rhythms". These rhythms were the cause of *organic's* seasonal nature. This data, therefore, highlights how ideas of foodstuffs drew upon much broader ones of the relation between 'Man and Nature', as participants themselves often said. Adriana was again an interesting example of this process:

I presume organic is healthier. Then if growing techniques respect nature, it helps. Now we're completely destroying nature, if we continue like this we won't have a future. It's important to respect cultivation times [*i tempi di coltura*], the soil, the life that surrounds it, the biodiversity, insects, animals. To avoid exploiting the earth too much.

Perceptions of the shape, taste, and smell of the two food types, often gained further relevance from wider aspects of consumers' lives. The act of shopping itself constituted an element in participants' view of different food types. This was the case with various direct channels to farmers, thanks to which some participants obtained part of their daily supplies (see also next chapter).

Whenever it's possible I also go to the growers. For example, I get oranges from a direct contact. (Brigida, 48, teacher)

We also buy directly in the field, from farms near Galatea Avenue, and in Partanna [semi-rural areas close to Palermo]. (Adriana, 35, teacher)

I have a small house in the country, where we produce ourselves. They're either things from our piece of land, where my father always forbid to put any weed-killer, or from someone who grows food nearby. (Lorenzo, 36, salesman)

These experiences of rural spaces, though often not initially connected to it, added an important layer of significance to ethical consumers' choice of organic food; the examples above were simply the result of people's life in a Mediterranean region like Sicily, still strongly characterised by agriculture. Also, the perception of 'rural(ity) food' was compounded for some by their participation in the fair-purchase groups, which strived to offer only local organic produce.

Consumers' lay food taxonomies were based on individual sensory perception in a similar way to their embodied health knowledge.<sup>18</sup> But as was the case for the latter, such taxonomies were also deeply social constructs. Levi-Strauss (1966) and Douglas (1970) both looked at food to explain specifically its symbolism. They stressed how food always possesses patterns of meaning for people beyond its simple nutritional value (though they differed considerably in their explanation of this fact).<sup>19</sup> Participants' taxonomies of organic food construed, and at the same time required, images of nature as one of their main symbolic repertoires.

The idea of seasonality in particular shows this side of organic as a 'natural food' when people started talking about it as 'healthy', then qualified it as 'seasonal', thus moving to concepts of nature and its rhythm. Paola and Adriana especially illustrate this aspect in the quotes above. Similar views to theirs among the ethical consumers I met were influenced by a powerful discourse of nature as a 'Whole', made of numerous life forms constantly working together towards equilibrium. Mattia, a thirty-four years old engineer and Paola's partner, felt that: "Organic pays attention to the whole system, to what surrounds it, to the waste, what is put back in and what is taken away". Organic foods, especially packaged ones, often convey bits of information that draw from this perspective. Adriana's words were an example of ethical consumers' idea of the kinds of landscapes they thought produced organic food. Organic agriculture was thought to work *as* nature. Hence, descriptions of the latter also functioned as description of organic as a natural food.

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<sup>18</sup> The term 'lay taxonomy' is borrowed from social science studies of food and illness (e.g. Davison et al. 1991).

<sup>19</sup> Douglas stressed cultural variation in the symbolic content of foods as a result of different social structures (see next chapter, where Bourdieu's work on issues of taste, quality and structure is also addressed).

This explains one of the answers given by participants to my initial question ‘why do you eat organic?’: to help nature. As Adriana said, in fact: “I think it’s right [*è giusto*] that we respect ourselves but also nature, which gives us what to live off”. From this angle, the subject’s apprehension for her body was juxtaposed to that for nature.

Finally, consumers’ experiences of obtaining food from outside Palermo proper are also of relevance. One has to consider here the wider historical and economic trajectories that participants lived through, which are reflected in their perceptions of food obtained from more rural areas. Such trajectories were part of the rapid and profound shift away from an overwhelmingly agricultural economy, underwent by Sicily in the post-war years, which I discussed in chapter 2. Many middle-aged participants had been exposed to this shift as children. In fact, it was their childhood experience of rurality that led many urban organic consumers to try and get less risky food from outside the city. This was especially the case for those who were not originally from Palermo, but from much smaller towns in the province. The temporal dimension in question, that of past-time, added a further layer of significance in people’s construct of organic food (see also section 3.5 and chapter 4 for further analysis).

The following section explores in detail what exactly consumers thought caused most contemporary foodstuffs to be risky.

### **3.2 On bio-technological risk: eating organic to ‘lower the dose of poisons’**

First, there is the idea that ingredients are ‘natural’ products that have been grown under ‘natural’ conditions (e.g. grown organically, without recourse to chemical, synthetic fertilisers). Secondly, they are naturally ‘pure’ in the sense that their nutritional values and ‘goodness’ has not been processed and refined away.

(Atkinson 1980: 84)

At one point during my conversation with Gabriella (see above), she said: “So I discovered that colitis—sure, it’s linked to stress—but it’s also linked to certain substances found in vegetables”. All participants believed conventional food could potentially make them sick

because it harboured contaminants that rendered it dangerous. The ‘substances’ mentioned as having this effect varied according to different individuals. They included: pesticides, which were by far the most often cited culprit, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), animal steroids, and also non-descript ‘horrible stuff’. Not surprisingly, these pollutants were referred to by individuals through negative reasoning, i.e. by referring to their *absence* in organic food.

The lawyer Simona, for example, explained to me (linking her point to the issue of shape in food taxonomies, discussed previously): “Organic vegetables are often all nibbled because there aren’t any pesticides and stuff like that [*pesticidi o roba del genere*]”. Then there was Annamaria, a fifty-three years old doctor married with two children, who, referring to ‘outside’ knowledge, said: “Organic means what’s written in books: the absolute absence of pesticides, of horrible stuff [*schifezze*], possibly of GMOs”. Some people also manifested concerns for products of animal origin, and thus for animal welfare. This was shown by Mattia and his partner Paola (see above):

Mattia: “Sometimes we buy fruit from the greengrocer but we are wary of where they got it from.”

Paola: “What they put in it.”

Mattia: “Or take milk. A cow milked with a milking machine gets chronic mastitis, all sorts of diseases. It’s full of anabolic steroids.”

Concerns similar to these were raised time and again by almost all participants. Overall, their beliefs appeared not to be too distant from actual organic production regimes (see chapter 7). This fact is interesting because the same could not be said of their beliefs regarding the link between organic and individual health, on which evidence available in the public domain is still highly controversial, but in which consumers also strongly believed.

Palermitan ethical consumers, then, saw the conventional agri-food system as responsible for the unnatural and unsafe state of the majority of contemporary foods. The techniques employed in this system to deal with living organisms in rural productive spaces were the cause of food risk for humans, but the same reasoning extended also to the spaces along which food travels. The element of ‘standardisation’ in lay food taxonomies, for example, was articulated by participants with those of risk and mass retailing.

If you see footage of the supermarkets screening their fruit and vegetables, it's incredible. These are distortions that we refute. You become suspicious when everything looks the same. (Mattia, 34, engineer—see also Simona's words above)

Taste and seasonality were other characteristics that called negatively into question supermarkets and, to a lesser extent, normal greengrocers (see for example Adriana's quotes in the previous section).

Consumers therefore described eating organic as a coping strategy for the perils of modern food. To borrow from the teacher Brigida, who stated explicitly this view, eating organic was a strategy of 'risk minimisation', or 'lowering the dose of poisons'.

My philosophy is that of risk minimisation [*riduzione del rischio*]. I try to lower the dose of poisons [*abbassare la dose dei veleni*]. Because I'm convinced that half of all diseases originate in food—I'm not saying it, there are studies. So if you control the food quality, you lower the risk of a whole series of problems.<sup>20</sup>

Such health 'problems' were usually short-term (but recurrent) syndromes, as the personal experiences discussed in section 3.1 show (Gabriella's and Martina's colitis, food poisoning, the rashes and allergies mentioned by others). Sometimes, though, concerns for more serious, longer-term diseases also surfaced. Cancer was probably the most common of these. Brigida, for example, talked of "people dying of cancer at fifty because they can't eat well". While Lorenzo, a thirty-six years old salesman, stated: "I'm against GMOs because we still have to study what happens. If I gave you something now and you didn't know if it was poisoned, would you eat it? But what's the difference if I get cancer after thirty years? I just don't see it immediately".

### *Out-of-place food*

Through the sicknesses it caused, or was believed to potentially cause, then, dangerous food was what ultimately 'forced' consumers to be self-reflective about their personal health (section 3.1). Risk and reflexivity were thus firmly tied together. Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) both make a similar point: personal reflexivity has been caused, among other factors, by the negative impacts of 'the exponentially growing productive forces in the modernization process' (Beck 1992: 19). For Beck, this growth has ultimately resulted in

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<sup>20</sup> Brigida was the only other person in my sample, together with Rita, who had formal 'scientific' knowledge of food production. She held a degree from the Agricultural College of Palermo's University. But in her job as a high school teacher she made little use of this expertise, as she herself admitted.

industrial overproduction, which now threatens all human life. He notes that compared to the environmental dangers of the past, which “assaulted the nose or the eyes and were thus perceptible to the senses”, the “risks of civilization today escape perception and are localized in the sphere of physical and chemical formulas (e.g. toxins in food-stuffs)” (1992: 21).<sup>21</sup> (See also Taylor-Gooby & Zinn 2006.)

The invisible nature of poisons raises a conundrum for the analysis. Writing about industrial food, Adam says: “Sight, touch, smell, even taste ... are of no help in establishing whether or not ... hazards are present” (1998: 128). Thus, even when one accepts the link between physical health and illness analysed previously, the question remains of exactly what, inside food, is causing such illness. The explanation for this second causal relation must come entirely from outside the body, and can thus differ.<sup>22</sup> Macintyre et al. (1998) illustrate these points in a study of English mainstream consumers. They (1998: 244) found that when people experienced food poisoning as a result of ‘eating out’, the majority blamed this either on themselves, for having chosen the wrong food, or on the venue’s poor hygiene. Only 10% of their sample blamed unnatural substances in conventional food. These results show how different narratives can be called upon to explain the same bodily evidence.<sup>23</sup> The organic consumers I met all believed in the presence of such substances as the cause of health problems with conventional foods, which reveals an ‘outside’ discourse linking food and risk (alongside that linking food and body). Contra Adams, I thus suggest that when this discourse is accepted, individuals do rely on sight, taste and smell to ‘detect’ risks in food; they simply do so by looking for the (perceivable) ‘healthy’ traits. This happens precisely *because* risks are invisible, at least prior to their manifestation as illness, which people obviously want to prevent. Lorenzo clearly stated above how the problem with getting ill was that ‘you just don’t see it immediately’.

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<sup>21</sup> Following this line of argument, some authors distinguish analytically between dangers and risks (e.g. Renn 1992). I do not adopt this distinction. Another alleged difference between the two is that we are threatened by danger irrespective of our will, but we choose to take (or not) risks. Brigida’s example shows how this argument is tenuous: she was exposed to poisons irrespective of her personal choice (as dangers), but she decided how to face them (dangers have become risks).

<sup>22</sup> Embodied knowledge provides a link between diet and health. The issue of food’s internal properties therefore remains: in any one particular food, a variety of factors may be causing harm to the body.

<sup>23</sup> The non-domestic setting of consumption and the nature of the food—already processed—will have probably skewed informants’ response in Macintyre et al.’s study. If consumers deal with raw foodstuffs and basic ingredients, and cook these themselves, as in my case study, it is harder to blame one’s cooking for any health problems. (Though in theory one could blame the poor hygiene of where s/he bought conventional food. Interestingly, this also never happened in my sample.)

In Beck's (1992) view, the necessary discourse is usually provided by experts and their 'facts' (the knowledge systems they create). Though this is certainly a process at play, more 'public', social and cultural factors must also be taken into account, which both transform expert knowledge and provide their own contents. Douglas' work (1985, 1992, Douglas & Wildavsky 1982) is seminal in this domain (e.g. Renn 1992: 67-76; Pidgeon et al. 2006: 98-99). From one perspective, she notes similar dynamics to Beck's. Focusing on the United States as the quintessentially 'modern' culture, Douglas & Wildavsky, for example, write: "What are Americans afraid of? Nothing much except the food they eat, the water they drink, the air they breathe, the land they live on, and the energy they use" (1982: 10). But there are also important differences between these two bodies of work, as Tulloch & Lupton point out (see also Caplan 2000a: 24-5):

The emphasis in Beck's writings [is] on cognitive judgement, that which is based on the considered and supposedly objective evaluation of 'facts' of risk. [Douglas] emphasize[s] that risk judgements can never be neutral or individualistic, but rather are always shaped through shared understandings and anxieties about phenomena which extend beyond the rubric of 'risk'. (2003: 7)

Lash (1993), drawing on Douglas' research on risk, suggests that risk reflexivity becomes a form of 'aesthetic judgement' when it is embodied in acts linked to taste, style, leisure and popular culture. This process means that risk is mediated through consumption and commodity cultures.

A central theme in the commodity culture of this case-study was the application of excessive degrees of technology to natural processes (hence a bio-technological risk—see Adam 1999; Mennell et al. 1992: 71-73; Tulloch & Lupton 2002: 365-6). Rural productive spaces, together with their associated technologies and retail structures, were considered to be 'industrial' and thus un-natural. Participants focused on two main issues. First, chemical cultivation: foods grown from the earth with synthetic material that did not 'belong'. Second, factory-farming: farming in ways that resembled more the manufacturing of objects than the rearing of living organisms (see Willetts 1997: 123-124), a view also applied to fruit and vegetables (e.g. the selective procedures of mass retailers).

Bio-technology, then, was seen as causing pollution because it trespassed domains, putting things 'out of place' (Douglas 1966). Synthetic material inside organic one, manufacturing instead of animal husbandry. It was thus considered wrong and feared.

Douglas explains how the idea of pollution “is compounded of two things, care for hygiene and respect for conventions” (1966: 7). Perceiving contamination therefore always requires drawing from certain systems of order and from the possibility of contravening that order (p. 35). Fiddes (1991: 139) noted of the first BSE (‘mad cow’ disease) outbreak, that much of people’s negative reaction to it was due to the fact that cows, which are herbivores, had been fed dead sheep, effectively turning them into carnivores. Also, that as a consequence of this the English public had eaten carnivores, a practice which has been absent from their cuisine for centuries. He concludes, drawing on Douglas’ insights, that: “The invocation of environmental pollution, as with personal health, is indicative of wider social concerns” (1991: 190).

Categorical misplacement was evident in views like those of Simona, “Today you can produce everything all the time, but Man can manage to make up for what nature does only up to a certain point. You can tell when food comes from a greenhouse”, and Paola: “We’re used to having food all year round, because they put it in refrigerators”. In both these quotes, there is a sense that activities (cultivation, animal rearing) and/or things (food items) are being dealt with in a way counter to the one prescribed for them. The theme of boundary crossing can also be applied to aspects of participants’ lives other than their diet, but which I have shown were relevant to their engagement with organic consumption. For example, their past and present experiences of rurality. As Atkinson writes: “‘Factory-farming’ is a contradiction in terms. For the factory is pre-eminently *urban, modern*, and a source of synthetic (manufactured) articles. Farming is pre-eminently rural, and is the home of natural categories. Their combination is thus a confusion” (1983: 16, italics added). Thus foods coming from rural sources people knew, or (thought they) had experience of, were trusted (see Caplan 2000b: 192-193 for a similar conclusion).

In a Dutch case study, Halkier (2001) proposes four categories of organic consumers depending on how they approached the issue of risky foods and the ambivalence generated by having to cope with them. Drawing on her typology, Palermitan ethical shoppers tended to exhibit a mixture of two types of ambivalence, ‘legitimate’ and ‘tensed’. In the former case, individuals perceive the difficulty in confronting food-related risks as an inevitable condition of modern life (Halkier 2001: 214-5). In the latter one, they perceive the

healthy/risky food dilemma as an internal conflict and respond to it with anxiety, or just irritation (pp. 212-4).

These attitudes co-existed in Palermo. Martina offered this reply to an imaginary critic of organic agriculture, who believes that pollution, being omnipresent, is inevitable: “It’s always less [pollution] than what you consume. Of course, you haven’t grown them [organic foods] in Heaven, we all belong to this world. But it’s always better”. But others, like Giorgio, a thirty-nine year old public employee, saw trying to diminish risk quite differently: “The health discourse [*il discorso salutista*] is secondary for me. I don’t think it’s valid. Eating organic broccoli doesn’t make much of a difference in my daily life, compared to the smog, the things I’m exposed to”. (Giorgio supported in particular small, local organic producers, on grounds that could be loosely characterised as ‘anti-globalization’; see next two sections.) In a related piece of work, Halkier also writes:

Neither the practices nor the understandings of risk handling can be conveniently categorized according to either–or distinctions. Polyvalent interpretations, social dilemmas and network negotiations have their roots in some of the characteristics of modern everyday life. (2004: 208)

### **3.3 Fair-trade, ‘bloodsucker’ globalisation, and ‘just returns’**

A consistent refrain of some on the Left is that international trading practices are exploitative and unjust. The concept of justice referred to here is a concept of justice as requital, or the belief that a fair day’s work is deserving of a fair day’s pay.

Corbridge (1993: 465)

As I already mentioned in this chapter’s introduction, the following two sections will show that the same ethical consumers who bought organic foods also purchased fair-trade ones. They did so to different degrees, and with different motivations (but see the transfer of fair-trade values to organic in section 3.4), raising methodological issues I discussed above. Here I will start the analysis of consumers’ beliefs about fair-trade by introducing Lorenzo, who was mentioned only in passing in the previous sections on organic consumption.

Lorenzo was thirty-six, and worked as a salesman for a company that installed solar panels, though he was actually a lawyer by training. I had met him through the fair-

purchase group that received weekly organic and fair-trade goods from the shop of the Equalis cooperative. The organisation of the scheme had been commissioned to Equalis by a number of individuals from a Catholic reading group.<sup>24</sup> These individuals formed a small informal section of it, which they called ‘the peace group’, as it had been active in Palermo’s anti-war movement during the events in Afghanistan and Iraq. For our interview, Lorenzo received me in a room on the second floor of a well-kept building located along *via Libertà*, Palermo’s most prestigious avenue. The building appeared to be entirely occupied by various kinds of offices.

When we began talking, Lorenzo outlined the main reason behind his fair-trade shopping with the following words: “Consuming fair-trade is simply a question of respect. It’s not just an issue of rights. I mean actual respect for the person herself”. I asked him if there was a link between his purchases and his participation in the religious group. If there was, in other words, a link between the Bible’s values and those of fair-trade, as he thought of them. He answered: “A believer who stands on a pedestal while those next to him are killed is mistaken. We can’t save everyone, but at least those for whom salvation depends on us”. When I met with Simona (see section 3.2) I asked her the same question, given she also belonged to Lorenzo’s group. Her reply was: “Not directly. As an abstract criterion of justice that should lead to re-evaluate one’s life in every aspect. So if one discovers that by shopping she can respect workers, that’s welcome”. Lorenzo continued:

Obviously we *are* talking about rights. I try to help the cooperatives that respect workers’ rights, that don’t spray poison onto growers from an aeroplane without even making them leave the field. Respect for the producer; the person who makes me eat. Me, a Westerner, who’s responsible for eighty-five percent of the world’s consumption.

During our conversation, Lorenzo also told me how he volunteered in civil society associations active on Palermo’s anti-globalisation scene. (One of these was the ‘Lilliput Network’, see chapters 1 and 5.) This latter aspect, together with the pacifist one mentioned above, clearly indicated that Lorenzo’s religious identity was also a leftwing one.

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<sup>24</sup> This group met weekly at the parish church of a charismatic priest, where they read and discussed the scriptures under his guidance. Someone once described him to me as “the priest of Palermo’s intellectual bourgeoisie”, which is a rough but informative portrayal of the kind of people who frequented the group.

Other fair-trade consumers I met were not religious, at least in the obvious way that Lorenzo and Simona were. But they possessed very similar values to those expressed in the previous quote. Gianni, a thirty-four years old university researcher, is a good example of this group. From what he told me, I gathered that he actively participated in leftwing politics. In the following passage he explains why he bought fair-trade:

My point is basically that of giving a tiny contribution towards a better global distribution of wealth. A just return [*giusto corrispettivo*, also 'just compensation'] that as wealthy Westerners we have to correspond for a product which isn't the result of the multinationals' predatory practices of production and distribution. If you need a certain product, its price can be a little higher as a result of the just return paid to the producer.

Lorenzo's words above conjured an image of farmers in developing countries toiling to ship food to the inhabitants of industrialised nations. Gianni, on his part, confirmed international trade—'globalisation'—was the main emotional construct to which participants referred. Notwithstanding diverse individual creeds and allegiances, then, consumers made use of similar elements when talking about fair-trade.

Opposition to capitalism, and globalisation in particular, was their shared common ground (though the ultimate impulse at its centre was probably very different; see Collier 2001 for this interesting problematic). Individuals deemed exploitation and injustice integral to the international economy, and they built on this reality to motivate their fair-trade consumption. De Neve et al. note the presence of "mounting moral dissatisfaction with the spread of socially and politically dis-embedded exchange relationships. This moral unease is widely felt among northern consumers and is a driving force behind a rising number of ethical trade initiatives" (2008a: 7). In Palermo, this picture revealed itself in a conception of 'respect' for Southern producers inspired by ideals of worker rights and redistributive justice. A number of politico-economic paradigms were thus drawn into the discussion.

Gianni spoke of the need to correspond a 'just return' when purchasing goods. This idea represents one of the main values imbuing consumers' beliefs of fair-trade's merit. Giorgio and his partner Ilenia, whom I introduced in section 3.2, called attention to this element in a similar way to Gianni's. Both had taken part in anti-globalisation protests, and they belonged to the other fair-purchase group, the one created by members of the

Palermitan branch of an Italian far-leftwing political party around 2000-2001 (but the group's membership had changed, and at the time of my fieldwork it was entirely separate from the party.) With emphasis, Giorgio told me:

Who produces must have his just return [*giusto ritorno*], because he's the one who does the work. I'm old school: you earn by working. Someone who doesn't do anything has no right to make a profit. The majority of profits are due to the person who actually made the good.

While Gianni stressed the relation between consumer and producer, here Giorgio focuses more on the right of the worker to be fairly remunerated. These two dimensions were joined in the deeply critical opinion participants had of middlemen in international trade. Giorgio remarked how “nowadays producers' earnings are the least relevant percentage in the economy”. He continued:

Middlemen [*gli intermediari*], that's what makes an economy unfair in my opinion. The fact that those who don't produce anything, who don't put up any kind of resource for society's benefit, make big profits. Jumping the middle steps is a fundamental element of solidarity.

Mattia (see section 3.2) also commented on this problem when we met: “The producer is stuck in a chain of vultures and blood-suckers [*avvoltoi e sanguisughe*, literally ‘leaches’] that make a lot more money than him simply thanks to their intermediation”.

In making these points, participants implicated a class of four closely related terms: pay, (just) return, profit, and price. Pay and return appeared to be used interchangeably, though interestingly the latter more often than the former. Profit was considered as one portion of the different monetary values that made up a price, and was sometimes seen as separate from pay-return, others as a synonym for it. Finally, price contained profit and pay-return.

### *The importance of labour-value in economic exchange*

Gianni, Giorgio, and Ilenia referred to the question of how to allocate justly different amounts of monetary value along the chain that linked producers to consumers. At a general level, and not necessarily in relation to exploitative practices, the price problem results from having to commensurate incommensurate things on the market, both in theory and practice (see Gudeman 2008: 51-58). But here we are dealing specifically with the

problem of fair prices and the role of trade intermediation in their origin, issues that have long been debated within, and beyond, economic anthropology (e.g. Alexander & Alexander 1991; Finan 1988; Middleton 2003). In first instance, the Medieval notion of a 'just price' appears of particular relevance to the ethnography because of the mixture of Catholic and social ('progressive') values; the notion also links in other interesting ways to the data itself and to theoretical debates in political economy, as we shall see further below.

During the Middle Ages there were several different discourses centred on the just price. I employ the term 'discourse' to signal that just price was always part of broader systems of beliefs normatively regulating the interaction between individuals, and between people and the established powers of the time (namely, Kings and God). For example: the idea of usury, the mutual relationship of laity and clergy, the intersection between a legal and a religious domain, the difference between the practice of selling and that of trading, and finally the role of 'natural' hierarchies, are all factors implicated in any Medieval notion of just price. In his seminal treatise on the subject, Baldwin (1959) identifies four schools as having contributed to these debates: ancient Roman law, Medieval Roman law, Canon law, and Scholastic theology. The latter is the one that speaks most closely to the ethnography, though this relation is in fact highly problematic.

The Scholastic theologians of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, such as Thomas Aquinas, inherited the idea of a *iustum pretium* from a long trajectory of scholarly elaboration. During the Roman Republic and most of the Empire, 'just price' is documented in a variety of legal cases with little systematisation (Baldwin 1959: 20). This changed in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, when the concept was fixed in a legal device that regulated specifically land transactions, preventing only sales that went for less than half a just price; normal exchange of goods fell outside this remit (pp. 16-18). Also, the just price was calculated by referring to the (land) market price of a particular time and place (pp. 20-21). Afterwards, the Medieval Romanists and the Canonists (i.e. the lawmen of the monarchies and the Church) extended the same legal device to all economic transactions, while keeping half-the-just-price as the threshold for classifying a transaction as unfair; freedom of bargaining was allowed within that threshold. They also retained the prices of local markets as the usual point of reference for fairness (pp. 26-27, 42-46).

Baldwin noted that “The theologians of the thirteenth century directly opposed their clerical colleagues, the Canonists, and insisted that the just price of a sale should be enforced” (1959: 69). It is under this particular respect that the Scholastics come closest, among the Medieval schools of the just price, to the data presented above. They denied that freedom of bargaining and price variations of up to half-the-just-price could be considered moral, and held that fair prices should always be reached in sales. Clearly, the consumers in this case study felt the same. Effectively, though, there appears to be little in common between the two apart from a demand to enforce fairness strictly. The biggest discrepancy lies in the fact that the Theologians accepted the rest of the Romanist and Canonist framework, including the idea that prices in local markets were, at any given time, fair.

The equation of the just price with the ‘current market’ price achieved through bargaining should not be seen as an indication of laissez-faire doctrine in Medieval thought (see Barrera 1997: 20-26 for the differences between the medieval and modern economy). Still, when one translates this belief into the contemporary world of informants, the contradiction is inevitable. For the ethical consumers, current market prices *were* invariably unjust and exploitative because of the way that capitalist markets (notably international ones) and intermediaries worked. In contrast the Scholastics (and also the Romanists and Canonists) viewed traders overall positively. This position was a reaction to the long tradition of suspicion towards merchants dating to the Bible and the Church Fathers. Of the numerous factors that explain this stance, I will list here two that shed light on the intersection between data and theory. The first one is that, since ancient Roman law and throughout the Middle Ages, contracts of sale were seen as belonging to the human domain of *bona fides* (‘good faith’) contracts, where *dolus* (‘damage’ or ‘mischief’) did not normally take place (e.g. Baldwin 1959: 17-18). This view of economic exchange is hardly applicable to the picture of trade painted above by informants.

The second reason that made the Scholastics see merchants positively was Aristotle’s body of thought. In both the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1984) and the *Politics* (1984), Aristotle put forward an idea of society as based on a natural hierarchy and division of labour among human beings, which explained the need for these to trade the different things they produced. The selling performed by farmers and artisans was never considered particularly problematic. Some people, though, would make selling their sole job without actually

making the goods they sold. These traders were those who attracted considerable suspicion. Building on Aristotle and his natural division of labour, the Theologians believed that merchants were a necessary, and therefore just-ified, component of society, as long as they only charged prices that reflected their ‘labour and expenses’ (Baldwin 1959: 15, 66-67). This issue is of particular significance for the complex relation between the evidence and Scholastic just price. In the latter, a trader’s (higher) price was just when it included the cost of his labour, and nothing more. The problem with this argument is that it constitutes, in effect, an alternative definition of just price: not the prices that can be observed in a market, but the labour costs of the person selling a good.

This alternative notion is much closer to the one held by informants. Giorgio, for example, thought the proper criterion to fairly determine a price within commodity exchange was to give chief importance to the workers’ productive labour.<sup>25</sup> It is also reminiscent of the classical politico-economic theories of exchange-value determination, especially the cost-of-production ones of Ricardo and Marx (see Barrera 1997: 86-87). Baldwin notes that “the addition by ... Thomas of the new factors of labor and expenses to the former Aristotelian factor of need has prompted a lively controversy in modern studies” (1959: 75). According to an early line of interpretation, “no longer were goods evaluated subjectively by need, but by means of an objective cost-of-production theory. Labor was the prime factor in producing economic value, and Thomas Aquinas was a precursor of Karl Marx” (ibidem).

However, Baldwin (1959: 76-79) himself and many more recent commentators (see Barrera 1997: 91) suggest another interpretation, which I share: ‘labour and expenses’ were employed as a measure of fairness exclusively in the merchants’ case. Following the Aristotelian view that all parties in the natural hierarchy of society were due their just dues, otherwise they would not perform their function and orderly life would collapse, the Theologians were keen to emphasise that *even* traders needed to be fairly compensated. They considered labour and expenses—and this is crucial—to be subsumed in the current market (the just) price, that is: normal market prices usually included labour costs. One

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<sup>25</sup> In practice, participants’ opinions on the question remained vague; no one offered insights on how to actually calculate a fair price. When I broached the issue, consumers would usually answer that it wasn’t up to them to do so because they didn’t possess the ‘necessary knowledge’ (see Gudeman & Rivera 1990: 144-149 on various possible definitions of ‘fair trade’ and ‘just price’ in Latin American peasant contexts).

must not forget here that this was a religious, and highly normative, worldview. If dogma dictates that goods will not be permanently produced and traded below cost without society coming to an end, then logically market prices must include labour costs *because* there are people producing and trading, i.e. because society continues to exist. Ethical consumers reached significantly different conclusions from this, as we saw previously, because they reasoned from significantly different premises, not normative but ‘empirical’. They believed there was ample evidence that (actual) middlemen and trade intermediation was exploitative because it denied workers a fair share of their goods’ value.

Informants’ voices spoke indeed more closely to Marx’s (1999) labour theory of value. Commensuration by labour, in fact, is central to such theory: as the value of every commodity consists of the amount of time involved in producing it, what is exchanged in trade is this measure of productive labor. Fair-trade consumers’ position, then, can be interpreted as an effort to de-fetishize commodities, or ‘lift the veil’ obscuring capitalism’s inherent exploitation. Through countless means—from the actual packets of tea and coffee, to newspaper advertisements—fair-trade’s imagery offers a space for the reappearance Southern producers’ lives. As Bryant & Goodman comment:

The aim is to peel away hidden layers of information about the commodity to reveal the social and environmental conditions of its production that are ‘fair’. Value in solidarity-based exchange is created through the de-fetishizing of commodity cultures *precisely* to allow consumers, it is hoped, to make moral and economic connections to the producers. (2004: 359)

Ethnographic research has shown the fit between fair-trade marketing strategies and the material conditions of producers to be far from perfect (e.g. Hudson & Hudson 2003). Still, one cannot underestimate the importance of this move to de-fetishize in a global system of trade that usually completely obliterates producers from view.

Participants’ beliefs seemed to reflect this effort at re-personalising production. For them, it went hand in hand with that to re-personalise also exchange. Valuing labour in the Marxian sense made consumers focus on trade intermediation insofar as they thought the latter made a fair pay for workers impossible. De Neve et al. (2008a: 14) say that:

One important consequence of such a labour-based theory of value is that it allows one to critique intermediaries. If value is created in the act of production rather than

exchange, then the activities of intermediaries, who effectively make a living off other people's labour, become potentially illicit and morally ambiguous.

Informants thus appeared to call also upon the old mercantilist view of trade as a zero-sum game (Heckscher 1935). (See chapter 8 for a discussion of the contradictions raised by this simultaneous reliance on labour-value and mercantilism.)

Ethical consumers emphasised two aspects of the fair-trade relationship: that in which the producer was involved to make her goods reach the consumer (the domain of trade intermediation proper, see above), and second, the relation between producer and consumer created by the latter's act of buying (a virtual domain of 'direct' sales, see below). While consumers thought middlemen and normal economic actors took from producers more than they gave back, they believed fair-trade provided a just return and was thus a form of *equal exchange*. For them, this was the specific meaning of 'justice' embodied in the food they purchased. The moral emphasis here is on restoring a kind of reciprocal balance. In a phrase cited above, Gianni put this aspect nicely: "If you need a certain product [i.e. you buy it], its price can be a little higher as a result of the just return paid to the producer".

Firth (1959) and Malinowski (1962) both drew attention to the different logics underpinning reciprocity in 'archaic' economies. They did so in critical response to Mauss' depiction of the *hau* as the key motive behind exchange (see Firth 1959: 419-420; Malinowski 1926 chapters 3, 4, 8, 9). Firth (1959: 412), in particular, writes that the Maori assigned great importance to notions of 'equivalent return' and 'compensation'. Palermitan consumers' constructs of the nature of fair-trade commodities and exchange, then, seem anchored in the logics of reciprocity, especially negative and balanced. Sahlins, who also criticised Mauss' rendering of the *hau*, defines the former type as "the attempt to get something for nothing" and remarks that it "is the most impersonal sort of exchange . ... The participants confront each other as opposed interests, each looking to maximise utility at the other's expense. Approaching the transaction ... the aim of ... both parties is the unearned increment" (1972: 192). If international trade can be interpreted as an attempt to impose negative reciprocity, for ethical consumers fair-trade was the result of balanced reciprocity (1972: 194-195, also 219-230). Aside from perfectly balanced exchanges, where the same kinds of good are swapped in equal amounts, according to Sahlins balanced reciprocity includes "many 'payments', much that goes under the ethnographic head of

‘trade’ and plenty that is called ‘buying-selling’ and involves ‘primitive money’” (p. 195).<sup>26</sup> The aspect of ‘direct exchange’ (p. 194) of balanced reciprocity is particularly consonant with participants’ picture of the relation linking them to producers.

### 3.4 Workers first

Current fair trade ... and ethical consumption initiatives ... disclose a different view of commodity exchange: one in which commodities are *not* thought of as morally neutral or separable from the people who produce them.

(De Neve et al. 2008a: 10)

At this point in the analysis, a number of questions are raised. Sahlins’ threefold scheme of exchange rests on the articulation of variables of sociability, generosity, and kinship distance. Assuming that Palermitan fair-trade consumers possessed the necessary levels of sociability and generosity, where does this leave kinship distance? The reciprocity ‘school’ itself has been criticised for hiding an essentially Western reductionism of all exchange forms to what can seem very much like dyadic transactions between quasi self-interested individuals (see MacCormack 1976; Weiner 1992: 28-32). Finally, there is the problem of applying a gift perspective to the fair-trade commodity *within* the market, and not after it leaves this domain and enters the social one of the household. Doing so appears in fact antithetical to an established body of scholarship on commodity exchange and gift-giving (e.g. Carrier 1995: 20, 27; Yan 2005: 254).

*From reciprocity...*

During my conversation with Mattia, I was left uncertain as to whether his words (‘The producer is stuck in a chain of vultures and bloodsuckers...’) referred to fair-trade producers or organic ones, or both. This potential overlap parallels the non-descript use of ‘economy’ made by Giorgio (‘Middlemen, that’s what makes an economy unfair...’) in a discussion

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<sup>26</sup> It is worth noting here that the Scholastic notion of the just price was based on an idea of justice as the exchange of proportional and equal values (the Latin *contrapassum*, used to translate Aristotle’s [1984] third type of particular justice: reciprocation). However, this notion of reciprocation seems as distant from the data as the Scholastic just price, given both share the premise of natural social hierarchies and the sufficiency of current market prices.

that had largely focused on international trade and globalisation as the boundaries in which fair-trade's discourses operate. These occurrences appear to show a breaking down of such boundaries. Consumers held the same beliefs about workers' rights and intermediation whether these applied to distant actors or close-by ones. This explains why they talked of Sicilian organic farmers as if they were involved in fair-trade.

Simona, for example, felt strongly that "the need to shop ethically is not simply born out of a desire to eat healthily [eat organic]. But also out of an attention that food is produced respecting workers' rights". When I met Davide, a thirty years old teacher, and his partner Filipa, they mentioned an article from a well-known Italian weekly magazine that had caused a sensation sometime before we met. It was a piece of investigative journalism on the appalling living conditions of seasonal migrant labourers in Italy's agricultural sector. Davide and Filipa then told me: "The coops from which we buy [organic] have ethical values that make us feel safe from stories like the one published by *L'espresso* [the magazine], of migrants enslaved to pick cherry tomatoes". Gianni, talking of a Sicilian brand of organic pasta that he bought, said this kind of purchase "has to do with something that is closer to us and relates to our social equilibriums. So there's a different motivation, the reason isn't always of a global type". Adriana (see section 3.1) conveyed nicely this insight that emerges from the ethnography, when she said: "Apart from paying attention to trade with faraway nations, it's important to do something with local realities".

For the consumers who belonged to the Equalis shop's fair-purchase group, it was this particular arrangement that mostly justified their views. People saw a *local* trade in organics being conducted by a fair-trade shop. When talking with me, then, they naturally tried to find an explanation for this arrangement. However, for the other fair-purchase group, which was entirely self-managed, this was not the case. The presence in that group of the sentiments described above shows that it was the actual principle of purchasing organic directly which reminded participants of fair-trade's core values, even when fair-trade organisations were not involved (see Markowitz 2008 for another interesting study of the parallels between local food initiatives and the fair-trade movement). The tendency to broaden the scope of fair-trade's critique of international trade to include parts of the domestic economy (organic agriculture), was premised on consumers' refusal of the *social*

‘distance’ that far-away economic producers and close-by ones *share* in the market. Exploitation ensued from this kind of distance for Latin American and Sicilian farmers alike. Individuals were thus aware that physical distance is by definition irrelevant in markets.

Indeed, Palermitan fair-trade consumers saw the farmers from whom they obtained their food as subjects that were close to them. Though Lorenzo (see above) talked about the rights of southern producers, in his example of the believer on the pedestal the ‘others’ were described as those ‘next to him’. Also, he said that we had to act on ‘what depends on us.’ The same logic applied to another example, in which he described, again through metaphor, how he saw the exploitative globalisation between North and South of the planet. Crucially, this metaphor involved a hypothetical household: “Say one day I invite you to my place, and prepare for you something really nice. Then you want to go to the toilet, but you wander by mistake into the kitchen, where you see someone in chains. What you ate doesn’t taste good anymore.”

Sahlins says that “social distance between those who exchange conditions the mode of exchange. ... It follows that close kin tend to share, to enter into generalized exchanges, and distant and nonkin to deal in equivalents and in guile” (1972: 196). He then notes—a little rigidly—that “among ourselves, ‘nonkin’ denotes specialized status relations”, in which he includes for example doctor-patient or employer-employee relations, or those between colleagues. “The economic relation tends to be a simple negation of kinship reciprocities” (p. 197).<sup>27</sup> The relation of producer-consumer can be added to this grouping, and participants’ beliefs seen as the result of an attempt to shift such relation from the domain of ‘nonkin’, or maximum social distance (created by the market), to that of kin, albeit one not as close as the household realm. It was this perspective that led ethical consumers to conceptualise fair-trade as a form of balanced reciprocity and to feel compelled to return justly.

However, there obviously wasn’t a true kinship link between southern farmers and Palermitan fair-trade consumers. What explains the latter’s sentiment for a reduction in

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<sup>27</sup> Perhaps Sahlins’ way of putting this risks a circularity of argument and needs to be reversed: it is the negation of kinship that *constitutes* what Western society usually understands as economic exchange, and this explains commodity transactions as negative reciprocity.

social distance was their belief that producers possess basic rights, first and foremost as persons. As Graeber suggests in regard to balanced reciprocity: “Standards of equivalence between objects ... can emerge from the need to establish social equality” (2001: 222). Participants interpreted the rights in question to be those of workers, chief among which was that to a just pay for labour(-value, see previous discussion).

Just pay was seen as embodied in fair-trade’s higher price than the equivalent non-fair-trade food. This is a point that should be stressed, as it allows to capture a subtle yet important shift in emphasis that might otherwise go unnoticed. In a sense, the just price of the fair-trade commodity was, for informants, nothing else than the just wage of the workers who made the commodity. Though this is a legitimate position, equating the two is not at all automatic and represents in fact a quite modern development. This can be seen by referring back for a moment to the Scholastic just price debate.

In the words of Barrera: “In spite of the claim that equity in distribution and exchange was the primary focus of scholastic economic teachings ... scholars agree that the question of a just price and the issue of the living wage ... were never linked together as a single problem in medieval thinking” (1997: 100). Effectively, the Theologians were preoccupied *exclusively* with fairness in exchange, or to use a modern economic vocabulary, with fairness in the product market. Informants, on the other hand, were concerned with exchange *as a result* of their preoccupations for the labour market. I suggest Marx’s influence is felt also here, something that is proved indirectly by modern Catholic social thought. This, in fact, originates with the *Rerum Novarum* encyclical of 1891, which was an explicit reply to the initial spread of Marxist ideas in Europe and in which the Church began transforming its economic teachings from just prices to just wages, a process that is still active today (for example in John Paul II’s encyclical *Centesimus Annus*; see Barrera 1997, also Hernández Castillo & Nigh 1998 for an analysis of how Catholic and Enlightenment values of social justice have been combined by Mayan fair-trade coffee farmers).

Agreeing to pay fair-trade’s higher price was an action that fell outside classic economic rationality—the maximisation of an individual’s benefits—and rendered the producer-consumer relation something different from a simple exchange of commodities. Anti-maximisation was an important part of informants’ commitment. However, it should

also be noticed how such moral-economic attitude existed alongside formal-economic decision making. One can see the latter at play in the case of goods that were considered excessively expensive. There were many instances of this, all more or less similar to each other. Basically, people regularly refused to purchase a fair-trade (or for that matter, also an organic) good because they thought its price was too high. Usually, their motivation for doing so was that they had to look after their money, be thrifty, and get a better bargain for the same amount (see also chapter 4.1 for this issue).

In addition to a (circumscribed) anti-maximising mentality, participants' belief in just pay as a universal right further located their construct of the fair-trade commodity in the realm of gift exchange. According to Carrier, the things transacted in gift relations "are in important ways bound to people. The gift is inalienably linked to the giver, and therefore it is important in regenerating the relationship between giver and recipient" (1995: 24). In contrast to this situation, continues Carrier: "In a commodity transaction the object is alienated from the person who gave it. The bottle of wine that I buy at Safeway is not linked to them in any significant way" (p. 27). This absence of association between transactors in market relationships constitutes the latter type's alienation.

Of course, the key issue here is exactly what type of associations we are assuming, what are the 'important ways' in which people and objects are linked. In capitalist societies, property is alienated in market exchange (Carrier 1995: 27). However, to reduce all forms of connection within this domain to changes in ownership seems unnecessary. The fair-trade food bought by consumers in Palermo was alienated in that it changed hands irrevocably, thus making it a commodity. But this left untouched the object's labour-value and, crucially, the ensuing right of the person who made it to a just retribution. The *recognition* of this fact was the dimension of non-alienation, of association, between producers and consumers.

*...to the inalienability of the fair-trade commodity-gift*

Because the producer's right to a fair pay, which is embodied in food that is bought and sold, is inalienable, it has to be returned by the consumer. The inalienability of gifts and their qualities is the cornerstone of Weiner's (1992) theory of giving. Weiner criticises the emphasis of previous scholars on the principle of reciprocity as a reifying attitude, and the

result of a Western epistemology (1992: 28-30). She argues that certain objects hold inherent qualities that make separating them from their owners or creators impossible.

The fair-trade food bought by Palermitan consumers was not returned to its creators, money was. (To reiterate, food *was* physically alienated.) I am suggesting we need to understand inalienability at two levels. One closer to Weiner's original argument, which incorporates both objects and their qualities. A second one, that of market societies where most objects of exchange are purchased, in which some qualities remain inalienable even though property changes hands irrevocably.

My ethnographic analysis finds the concepts of reciprocity and inalienability to be both relevant, even though the two are, at face value, strongly opposed (especially in Weiner's reading). Their opposition holds true if one thinks that reciprocity is an autonomous 'principle', as—admittedly—did Malinowski, Firth and Sahlins. However, if one accepts the possibility that reciprocity may be *caused* by other elements, perhaps certain (inalienable) qualities of objects and people, then the two approaches begin to look more compatible. The reception of Mauss' *hau* argument as the explanation of reciprocity is illuminating here.

As I said before, Malinowski, Firth and Sahlins all retracted the argument in various ways. In hindsight, their mistake in rejecting Mauss' thesis was missing that the *hau* was just one particular 'spirit', which he emphasised on the basis of the ethnographies that were available to him at the time. Yan writes in this regard: "This is the empirical evidence upon which Mauss based his argument, but as an empirical observation it may not be true in other societies" (2005: 254). Significantly, Weiner (1992: 63) thought that Mauss was correct in his view of the *hau*, not necessarily as the only inalienable quality but as one among many possible others. For the Palermitan consumers of this case study, universal worker rights, and just pay in particular, were the ethnographically relevant gift 'spirits' inside fair-trade foods.<sup>28</sup> Writing about reciprocal exchanges based on ideas of equality, Graeber notes that by "declaring two things equivalent ... one is not stating that they are the

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<sup>28</sup> De Neve et al. (2008a: 10) also reach the conclusion that contemporary commodities possess spirits in a Maussian sense, though they emphasise a more 'magical' dimension. Taking as their example the withdrawal, by the fashion corporation Gap, of clothes that had been manufactured in a recently exposed sweatshop, the authors conclude the reason for this was that such clothes had been permanently 'stained'.

same in every way: one is simply stating they are the same along those dimensions one considers important in that context” (2001: 223).

There seems to be sufficient evidence to claim that, for the consumers I met, fair-trade commodities shared certain features with gifts *inside* the market. More precisely, this case study of fair-trade consumption in Palermo tells us of a disarticulation of Mauss’ model,<sup>29</sup> or at least of some of its influential lines of interpretation. Not only that which sharply divides whole economies according to the gift/commodity dualism (see discussion in chapter 1), but also that which points out the continuing presence of gifts in industrial societies only *outside* the market-economic sphere (e.g. Carrier 1995; Miller 1995). (I don’t refute that the process of transforming commodities into gifts outside of economy takes place. See the next chapter for this aspect in particular.)

Thus far, my analysis highlighted possible gift aspects in the fair-trade commodity. I conclude this section by highlighting instead those aspects according to which fair-trade foods were *not* Maussian gifts.

In Mauss’ (2002) version, actors are under the obligation to give, receive, and reciprocate gifts. In purchasing fair-trade, though, consumers cannot be said to be under an ‘obligation to give’ (nor to receive), because the consumer doesn’t *have* to buy the food in question, she wants it. Here, then, fair-trade appears not to be a gift, at least in the Maussian sense. Carrier (1995: 22), however, notes that in Western societies there are gifts which are autonomously initiated. Building on this fact, some authors (see examples in De Neve et al. 2008a: 6) argue that consumers shopping for fair-trade perceive this act as a form of charity. A very specific type of gift, the ‘free’ or ‘pure’ one, is central to these analyses. A common definition of this type of gift is that it is something given voluntarily, and for which there is no expectation of return. Admittedly, the charitable transaction is initiated freely and thus, from this angle, fair-trade does appear to be a gift. Still, Mauss’ emphasis was on the *obligation* to give, so this interpretation appears slightly misplaced. Interestingly, Palermitan consumers also rejected it. They did so by focusing on the latter

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<sup>29</sup> This is akin to what Parry (1986) concludes for India, but in a different way. Whereas Parry notes that there is obligation to accept but not reciprocate (because of the gift’s ‘evil spirit’), in my case there is no obligation to give from the perspective of the ethical consumer (see above), receiving is irrelevant (the consumer *wants* the good), but there is obligation to repay (because of a ‘moral spirit’ of justice).

half of the free gift concept: that in charity the giver receives nothing from the other part. The transaction is unidirectional, ending immediately.

Below is how Lorenzo replied to a question on the possible connections between fair-trade and charity: “It isn’t a form of charity, it’s a form of justice. Charity means: ‘I feel sorry for you, I give you this’ [he puts something into an imaginary person’s hand]. Justice means: ‘I want to do this because it’s correct [*é corretto*]’. People in fair-trade are working, they’re providing a service.” Gianni, on his part, linked these same elements to those already mentioned about globalisation:

No, it’s a contribution to a more just economy, to a more equitable distribution within the global society. Charity isn’t a return. The word ‘trade’ in fair-trade means something—it means exchange of goods. Charity doesn’t imply exchange. I give a penny to the beggar at the traffic lights because I feel like it, but I get nothing in return. There is already a difference with the person who wipes your windscreen, for which there isn’t a standard price, but at least, in my view, you pay because he’s offering a service. Charity is for its own sake [*é fine a se stessa*].

Martina (see sections 3.1 and 3.2) used the same words of Gianni’s final point: “Fair-trade is a way of achieving a benefit for both parties. I see charity as an act done for its own sake [*fine a se stesso*], which doesn’t actually create a possibility”.

Consumers’ beliefs reflected the “idea of securing for distant strangers their basic needs not as alms but as of right” (Corbridge 1993: 465).<sup>30</sup> Participants were keen to point out that what they were doing was not ‘helping the poor’ without receiving (or demanding) something in return. Their purchases involved a monetary remuneration for work, albeit inspired by criteria of justice and solidarity. The critique of conventional trade intermediation supported their rejection of charity insofar as both were ‘imbalanced’ forms of exchange, but in different ways. Middlemen gave something but not enough, taking more than was just (as in negative reciprocity). Charity, on the other hand, gave something, perhaps even a fair amount, but in such a way that negated the other’s possibility of reciprocating. Premised on a relation of superiority-inferiority, it was, then, still a form of

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<sup>30</sup> Consumers rejection of fair-trade as charity makes their position somewhat contradictory, given they did, after all, buy fair-trade foods willingly, thus simultaneously invalidating Mauss’ original emphasis on obligation. The evidence is therefore not conclusive. One explanation might be that my asking explicitly about charity triggered a version of social desirability response bias, given the kinds of people in question. Informants perhaps disassociated themselves from charity in the interview context, but at a more ‘private’ level this distinction might not have been so neat. There is also the question of similarities between fair-trade and charity in terms of the kinds of organisation involved.

negative reciprocity, only in reverse: through the act of giving instead of taking (recall Graeber's [2001: 222] point about balanced reciprocity and equality.) Both Gianni and Martina used the Italian expression "*fine a se stessa*", which colloquially means 'pointless', but literally means something whose 'end is in itself', a clear indication that consumers saw charity as being not reciprocated/able.

As participants were keen to point out, when the consumer initiates the fair-trade transaction (by 'accepting' the foods on offer), she does receive something (the food), which triggers her obligation to repay in the manner already discussed. This further transaction is compatible with Mauss' scheme. (As I have shown, this obligation to repay, stemming from productive work's inalienable right to a just remuneration, cannot be likened to commodity exchange.) However, after the fair payment takes place, the relation *is* discharged, in that the producer has no further need to reciprocate. This latter aspect contradicts Mauss and his emphasis on continuing relations, especially those entailed in more generalised forms of reciprocity. As Graeber notes somewhat pessimistically: "Insofar as [balanced reciprocity] is about 'creating social relations', it is really about creating relations of the most minimal, temporary kind" (2001: 219).

Considerably diverse facets, then, were inseparably bound together within participants' construct of fair-trade as a commodity-gift.

## **Conclusion**

In the introduction to this chapter I stated my belief in the importance of trying to understand the reasons behind people's combined consumption of fair-trade and organic, rather than focusing on what might explain the different degrees to which they bought one or the other food. What elements, then, link the ethnography discussed in sections one and two to that of sections three and four? Here I start to offer an answer to this question, showing how discourses about organic and fair-trade consumption in Palermo shared a common underlying meaning. As I want to avoid unnecessarily separating theoretical elaboration from ethnography at this stage in the thesis, I will pick up again the main threads of this discussion in the final chapter (8). The wider role fair-trade and organic

consumption had in the moral economy I encountered can be addressed to a fuller extent there. After all, the next chapter also deals entirely with commonalities between organic and fair-trade, but does so at a different level from the one I adopt at present. While here I maintain the chapter's focus on discourses and on value as meaning, in the next chapter I will emphasise practices: what the *lives* of the people making these discourses about organic and fair-trade had in common.

When looked at as a whole, one of the most striking features of the data analysed in this chapter is its oppositional nature: the fact that the constructs in question always appear to be articulated through the coupling of opposing meanings, or, in one word, as a dualism. Consumers opposed organic and conventional foods to each other as, respectively, healthy and industrial, natural and risky. They also called upon two other dualisms. The first one, that between the rural and the urban. The second one, stemming from the previous, between past and present time (see also next chapter). These spatial and temporal dimensions were symmetrically mapped onto, and thus sustained by, each other. At the same time, consumers also distinguished between a just trade, fair-trade, and an unjust one, constituted by globalisation and international exchanges between nations, but also more broadly by all trading that involved multiple, 'normal' economic actors.

The next step in analysing the moral economy's food imaginaries would therefore be to explore what this chapter's various binary constructs *themselves* shared. What is the deeper meaning and origin of the consumers' desire for oppositional values? As I mentioned above, this thread is picked up again in chapter 8.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONSUMING ETHICALLY AND EVERYDAY LIFE: HOUSEHOLDS, COMMUNITY, AND CLASS

#### **Introduction**

At the end of the previous chapter I argued that ethical shoppers' understandings of organic and fair-trade foods, though composed of somewhat different elements, nevertheless shared a series of binary oppositions (e.g. risky/healthy, industrial/natural, just/unjust, etc). This commonality is in my view key to an anthropology of ethical consumption, even keeping in mind the presence of partially diverging values. However, on its own this approach is not sufficient to grasp the phenomenon in question, which is not only expressed through discourse but also performed in concrete behaviour. Such concrete dimension is also key to the argument of this thesis, as it brings to light another whole set of common elements at play in the relation between informants and the two commodities in question. The present chapters deals entirely with what the lives of those purchasing organic and fair-trade had in common.

Avoiding a view of meanings as somehow 'guiding' individuals, I relate these, which undoubtedly people draw from, to the complexity of their everyday lives. Culture, values and symbols can only always be lived entities, acted out daily through people's practical engagements with the materiality of the 'real world'. It is therefore important to take into account the actual behaviours involved in consuming ethically. As the following ethnography shows, the consumers I spoke with engaged in the purchasing of fair-trade and organic goods at the end-points of different local systems of provision, some of which were structured (supermarkets and specialised shops), while others were quite informal (the purchase groups). This variety of micro commodity networks, approached through the use of participant observation and semi-structured interviews, allows to reconstruct a rich ethnographic picture of ethical consumption *in practice*.

This is an important aspect of any study of shopping, given that “there are at least three points from which one could extract something called ‘an opinion’ [from the shopper] and these are by no means consistent. These are: what people say in public, what people say in private, and what they actually do irrespective of what they say” (Miller et al. 1998: 79). The practice of ethical consumption is here thought of as constituted by consumers’ discourses about their shopping, by their lived, everyday reality of buying the ethical goods in question, and by the various possible intersections between the former two elements.

Such an extended notion of practice easily creates a space for tensions and discrepancies to become visible. Those between shoppers’ description of their actions and the actions themselves is an obvious possibility, while other contradictions might be situated entirely at the discursive level. In both cases, people may be conscious of discrepancy and tension, or unaware of it. The material analysed below, for example, shows informants were aware of the contradiction between their desire to shop ethically and their frequent failures to do so. At the same time, though, they appeared not to consider (at least openly) a discrepancy between their desire for fresh-local food and for high produce variety (see section 4.1). Another lack of awareness regarded how to reconcile the universality of the values seen embodied in ethical commodities with the quite limited scope of a ‘political’ strategy based on their purchase (see section 4.4).

The chapter is organised in the following way. In the first section I discuss the ethnography of people’s actual shopping behaviour. This includes the part dedicated to pursuing ethical consumption—buying organic and fair-trade foods—and also that devoted to normal foods, which inevitably constituted the majority of people’s shopping. By looking at how people bought food for their families, and why conventional shopping overshadowed the ethical version, one is able to gain access to the level at which ethical consumption interacts with various social institutions, such as households and workplaces, and retail structures. This in turn opens the analysis to the understanding of a series of meanings attached to the phenomenon, which are not readily expressed by individuals when they are initially asked to give their thoughts about it. As Tulloch & Lupton suggest, “interviewees, consciously or otherwise, choose to present themselves and their thoughts and experiences in certain ways that inevitably access a set of pre-established discourses” (2003: 14). What this analytical operation shows, then, is that people tried to make the practice of consuming ethically compatible with—rather than opposed to—their everyday

life. This was particularly true in regards to the demands placed on informants by their work and family life.

The majority of informants were women, often married, with children and jobs. In the chapter's second section, then, I address the significance of this fact. It is clear from the data that female gender, the social activities attached to it, and their meanings, were all important factors in determining ethical consumption in practice. For the women I spoke to, such practice was firmly inserted into the fabric of their roles as housewives, mothers, and generally care-takers of the family. The stressful nature of juggling work and family commitments therefore extended to cover also shopping for organic and fair-trade foods. What I suggest to make sense of women's prevalence as ethical consumers is that it is a consequence of society's historical assignment of domestic work primarily to women, both practically and symbolically (see Murcott 2001; Ungerson 1990). When looked at from this perspective, the acts of purchasing, preparing, and distributing among family members fair-trade and organic foods were one instance of the socialisation of sexual roles (e.g. Oakley 1972; Reiter 1975; Rosaldo & Lamphere 1974). Section two thus shows how ethical consumption fitted into the social work of household reproduction (Harris & Young 1981; Mackintosh 1981: 9-11).

In the third section, I look at ethical shoppers' relation not only to family, but also to the local community. Adopting a Maussian (2002) approach to exchange, fair-trade and organic shopping in Palermo can be interpreted as a current way for middle-class citizens to widen the circle of their desired society through the circulation of these ethical commodities. When they exchanged these objects among family through household provisioning, and among friends through formal gifts, these people's moral concerns, attached to those objects, circulated with them. In this sense, buying 'ethically' made their polity, largely conceived of as 'the city' (which they thought of in strongly negative terms), a better place. During conversations, in fact, they consistently set the values they perceived to be embodied in fair-trade and organic foods against the negative ones they considered to be dominant in Palermo's social, political and economic life (see chapters 1 and 2).

In the last section, I interpret the comparisons expressed by Palermo's ethical shoppers between their own consumption choices and those of other people as complex processes of distinction (Bourdieu 1984). On the one hand, their shopping habits were set apart from those of people perceived as belonging to one's own class, in which case there

was a shared opinion that ethical consumption is ‘a matter of choice’ that ‘everyone’ simply ‘has to make’. On the other hand, when people described the shopping habits of those who were perceived as belonging to a lower class, some saw economic status as a limiting factor, while others saw ethical consumption among poor people the same way that they saw it among those higher up the social scale, as a matter of personal or ‘cultural’ choice.

#### **4.1 Ethical shopping as family shopping**

Throughout my fieldwork, the Equalis cooperative distributed a weekly vegetable box to its customers. This was done on Tuesday afternoons, as the coop received its supplies in the morning, or on Monday afternoon. I usually went to the shop to help out with the scheme. One of the consumers who regularly showed up for it was Martina, the forty-one years old social worker, divorced with two small daughters introduced in chapter 3. I became familiar with her thanks to our Tuesday routines—volunteering at the store in my case, family shopping in hers—which were so different, but were brought together by the act of trade. She usually came to Equalis after leaving her office inside Palermo’s prefecture. Sometimes her older daughter would also be with her, if she had been picked up en route to the shop from somewhere else.

Martina was a ‘customer-friend’, in the sense that she didn’t just pay for her box and leave, but usually also bought other goods while spending a little time chatting with Gabriele and Antonella, the shop’s owners (if they could manage it in-between serving other customers). In addition to her fresh produce, she often bought a large variety of packaged organic and fair-trade foods, including masses of chocolate bars, giving into her daughter’s requests to get almost all the flavours available. After finalising her purchases she left, headed to the shops of her neighbourhood, and then home. Many of Martina’s thoughts about shopping at Equalis were related to this routine: “Obviously I complicate my life a little bit from a logistical point of view. The shop is far away. There are few outlets of this kind in town, while you can find hundreds of greengrocers and supermarkets”.

The ‘logistical point of view’ was an important one for the consumers I met. Different factors rendered *practising* ethical shopping problematic. Two of the most important ones

were the availability of goods, and their price. Gabriella (see chapter 3), for example, who subscribed to the fair-purchase group with home delivery, explained to me:

The group isn't enough, because they don't have all the products you like. It's the same with organic shops. Or maybe these shops have what you like, but the price isn't compatible with buying everything organic. So I go to supermarkets. Nowadays there's the possibility of choosing organic in larger supermarkets. For example, the Coop has a whole range of organic products. One always tries to select, to mediate with respect to everyday life [*c'è una mediazione rispetto alla vita quotidiana che si fa*].

The poor range of goods offered by the purchase group forced Gabriella to look for ethical commodities in specialised stores. This raised the issue of prices. Gabriella admitted, in fact, that buying everything in such stores was not conceivable due to their high prices, which made her look around again, this time in the larger supermarkets that had ethical product lines. As I mentioned already in chapter 3.4, informants' refusal to purchase certain items because of prices they judged excessive was a strong indication that formal-economic decision making—the classic utilitarian rationality of Economic [Wo]Man—was at play in the ethnography together with attitudes inspired by moral-economic (i.e. anti-maximising) values.

The issue of availability also had another facet: the lack of variety. Participants lamented not only the absence of a particular good, but also the unchanging presence of those—rather few, in their eyes—which were available. This applied both to organic and fair-trade foods, fresh and processed ones. The schoolteacher Adriana, for example (see chapter 3), complained about the box scheme saying: “They put lettuce every week! Other vegetables do exist... There's a need for more variety”. While Brigida remarked, matter-of-factly: “I've got a small son. He doesn't only eat vegetables, he also wants Ferrero snacks!”. These elements contributed further to ethical consumers' multiple shopping trips, which were a common occurrence among them.

Participants moved regularly through numerous retail spaces, not all of which were directly related to the practice of ethical shopping, or even exclusively (see below). Desires and personal tastes, therefore, interacted with availability and price as the three main factors determining how consumers shopped. But a fourth element appeared to be the most important one in this sense: the limited time available to actually shop.

Martina said she complicated her daily life by coming to Equalis, and concluded by telling me, with slight resignation: “Amongst my various chores, I put this as important, as a priority”. Gabriella told me that, in addition to the numerous shopping locations mentioned above, she would have also liked “to have a direct relationship with producers, but an easy one, compatible with our lives”.

G.O.: “Not like going to Partinico [a rural town in Palermo’s province, where one of the fair-purchase group’s suppliers was located]?”

Gabriella: “No! How can you manage that? On a weekend you often have to squeeze in all the things you couldn’t attend to during the week. If on top of that you add having to go to Partinico! You can’t make it [*non ce la fai*]...”

The teacher Brigida (who subscribed to Gabriella’s same group) also talked of time as a constraint that was inextricably woven with her personal life: “Ordering via email was important for me because it allowed to cut down on time. Home-delivery is very convenient—I know you pay for it—but for me it’s a wonderful thing”.

The element of time is of crucial importance because it helps reveal the nuances and contours of ‘everyday life’, and grasp the implications of references to this construct made by participants. Brigida continued:

I also go to outdoor markets [in Palermo] when I can, the problem is time. Apart from that, I’ve got my favourite greengrocer down the road [*sotto casa*]. In terms of supermarkets, there’s the one near my school, then a *Conad* [large Italian retail chain] also down the road. Here [down the road] there’s also a small, independent supermarket.

Martina felt that “it would be a lot easier for me if I could buy these goods near my home or my office, during a lunch break”. While Gabriella told me: “The Coop is actually complicated, I go there only when I can. There’s a supermarket near home that does have some of these products”. Finally Rita, the university researcher, described her routine thus:

Me and my husband usually use motorbikes to get around, which makes it doable. But on a rainy day, I can’t take the bike because I would get completely wet, and the car is impossible because of the traffic. I come from work, and the university is really far away from the shop, so it would take me ages. Actually it’s closer if I’m at home. So sometimes we collect the box the next day, with the fresh food already a little stale.

It is not surprising, then, that she concluded by saying, apologetically: “I go to normal greengrocers, I confess I’m really happy with one down the road [*sotto casa*]. One is always rushing and running around...”.

### *Buying groceries between home and workplace*

Participants considered the home and the workplace as the two most important dimensions of everyday life in relation to family shopping. References to time (or rather, its insufficiency) exposed the role of what Hochschild (1996) calls the contemporary ‘emotional geography’ integrating labour and family life. Hochschild (1996: 14, 17-18) says that a lack of time increasingly characterises the life of upper and middle-class workers in late capitalist societies, a ‘speed-up’ that is largely an effect of the greater demands put on individuals by capital (see also Zedek et al. 1992). This trend impacts on all aspects of a person’s life-world, from the most ‘sacred’ ones to those located at the periphery of one’s social and moral commitments. In regards particularly to the latter domain, Hochschild notes:

Emotional cultures stand back-to-back with ideas about time. In the context of the work family speed-up, many people speak of actively ‘managing time, finding time, making time, guarding time, or fighting for time’. ... In the intermediate and peripheral zones of family life ... we feel we can give up time, because it matters less. (1996: 21)

In this case study, home and workplace transformed an anonymous urban geography of random retail spaces into a landscape of *places*, by linking consumption to economic production and household reproduction (see section 4.2). For the majority of Palermo’s ethical consumers, the linkage in question fell, materially and socially, under the remit of ‘household provisioning’. DeVault (1991: 58-76) defines household provisioning as the obtainment of supplies for the family, largely food and other cupboard items, through networks that lead outside of the domestic space. It involves mainly shopping at stores, but also forms of exchange among relatives and friends, and sometimes still, for a small minority of people in industrialised nations, own-production. (As I mentioned in chapter 3.3, the latter option applied to selected individuals in my sample.) This analytical concept, then, encompasses the popular one of ‘family shopping’, usually referred to in Italy as *fare la spesa* (roughly: ‘doing the shopping’).

Consumers had to mediate the rest of the demands of everyday life with those raised by purchasing groceries and other goods. DeVault writes:

Stores and services ... are organizations that operate on the basis of abstract, conceptual categories designed to be applicable in a broad range of situations. On the other side are a multiplicity of households, each a local and particular setting inhabited by a unique combination of specific individuals. In this context, making any single household work properly takes a particular kind of knowledge and effort. (1991: 77)

Accommodating ethical consumption in these tensed circumstances was rendered difficult by the patchy availability of the commodities in question (or by the high prices of those available). The further balancing act required by such difficulty often failed, with participants being unable to fulfil their desire to include ethicality in their shopping practice. “In the end I’ve got so little time, that I buy whatever I can get my hands on.” (Brigida, 48, schoolteacher) “When I don’t manage to follow all my—let’s call them ‘alternative’—channels, I go to nearby greengrocers. It happens, yes” (Gabriella, 50, doctor).<sup>31</sup>

The behaviour of these individuals may appear idiosyncratic and unnecessarily inconvenient, but it actually reflects family shopping as it takes place for large sections of the population in industrialised nations. In fact, participants harboured negative feelings *also* towards their conventional shopping. Looking at the North-American case, DeVault describes detours from a main area of provisioning made by mainstream consumers:

Most people use several stores for different purposes ... . Even when people get most of their groceries at a single favourite supermarket, there are ... special stores where they purchase items that cannot be bought elsewhere ... . Some people use supermarkets for canned goods and get meat or produce at small markets they believe have better food ... . Decisions to shop or not, at particular places and times are part of a larger strategy for managing to fit necessary shopping chores—that is, those that support a household routine—in among the other activities of everyday life. (1991: 67-68)

DeVault’s last sentence echoes Gabriella’s previous remark about having to ‘mediate’ everyday life. Case studies from other nations across the industrialised North show similar

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<sup>31</sup> Gabriella also pointed out how sometimes, since she began eating healthy food, her troubles were indirectly caused by difficulties she experienced in provisioning daily for organic. Gabriella thus pictured her body as the ‘place’ where different aspects of her life met, especially emotions regarding wage work, the household, and the need to adapt to the available system of food distribution.

dynamics, though important regional difference clearly remain (e.g. de Certeau 1998, especially chapters. 4, 6 and 7; Counihan 2004, especially pp. 127-131; Miller et al. 1998). The cross-cultural validity of the picture in question is also dependent on class positionality. It is middle-class consumers especially who can afford to behave in the way just described, lacking the constraints of less well-off families (e.g. absence of neighbourhood shops, transportation, and even storage space; see DeVault 1991: 167-202; Macintyre et al. 1998: 231).

Ethical consumption practices can therefore be considered one particular example of secondary shopping forays aimed at satisfying households needs. But the phenomenon should not be confused with leisure. Even within the spectrum of possible retail choices seen above, food shopping was almost never described by those I spoke with in terms of the leisurely ideal sometimes referred to as ‘browsing’ or ‘window shopping’. In this regard, Miller et al. note how

in day-to-day shopping this [ideal view] is matched by a very common feeling that people don't have enough time ... . One effect of this is that shopping is very rarely experienced as an unrestricted activity that can be undertaken as an act of either leisure or pleasure. In practice, informants generally shopped because they felt they needed to and with respect to particular items designated in advance. (1998: 94)

Interestingly, shoppers were quite conscious of the impossibility of firmly separating ethical from mainstream consumption in the practice of everyday life. They did not try to gloss over this difficulty, but expressed it openly, and said it represented for them a source of anxiety. Virtually all participants wanted to be able to shop near their homes and workplaces. Tensions thus arose as a result of not being able to do so when pursuing ethicality. They also arose when individuals had (inevitably) to rely on normal foods and retailers instead of ‘following their alternative channels’.

Another example of this lack of separation took the form of ethical consumers’ desire for food variety and availability. Individuals held at the same time a desire for ‘natural foods’, constituted in opposition to industrial ones (see chapter 3), and one for food variety and the choices it offered, two characteristics that are closely related to industrial food supply. What was particularly striking was that they called for variety and choice when talking about *organic*, thus doing so alongside their discourses about seasonality. To the

outsider's eye, this was probably the starkest site of contradiction between what participants said and what they did (and also between different aspects of what they said).

## 4.2 The gender of ethical consumption

Middle-class women are the focus group for all new consumerist efforts. They are seen as the people with the interest and means for this kind of political involvement.

(Micheletti 2004: 245)

The shops of the Equalis and Sodalis cooperatives, where I carried out participant observation of shopping, were frequented almost entirely by women. It was not uncommon for the only men there to be one of the coop's members and the author, sometimes for hours at length. Male customers visited the shops usually as part of two scenarios. Men on their own were often shopping under the (in)direct guidance of a woman. This was typically revealed when the man, consulting a list, asked on what shelf he could find a certain item that his wife had written down for him. Or a man would actually accompany his female partner, literally following her like a robot while she collected the food and other items and, often in these cases, paying for them at the end. (There *were* some cases in which men were the main actors of their family ethical shopping; see below for a discussion of this.)

These shops, then, which were one of the main settings I drew my sample from, were clearly places highly sensitive to sexual difference. Another part of my sample comprised the respondents to emails I sent via the contact lists of various groups. In this latter case also, those who replied were overwhelmingly female, even though the (self-)sampling technique used was in no discernible way gender-sensitive. The women I met—like Martina, Brigida, Gabriella and Rita above—didn't only work busily, they were also all mothers of infants and teenagers, some of them married, others divorced. The demands of parenthood and/or wifehood were thus a major component of the relationship between family shopping and the home that was so important in framing ethical consumption in Palermo.

Talking about weekly home deliveries, Gabriella told me:

Now—as you can imagine—my presence at home doesn't follow a constant rhythm [*non ho un ritmo costante nella mia presenza in famiglia*]. So I'm not going to buy fresh vegetables that then go bad quickly 'cause they're organic, and throw them away. My orders are directly proportional to my chances of cooking, of better scheduling my maternal activity of domestic management [*la mia attività materna di gestione familiare*].

Rita recounted an almost identical story:

Sometimes the veg-box is difficult. Having all your shopping arrive on one day of the week and having to use it, necessarily, otherwise it's a pity to throw things away. So in terms of organizing yourself it's more inconvenient, because one thing is being able to say: 'Today I want to cook this, I'll go and get it'. With the veg-box that's what there is and that's what you have to use.

As shown in the previous section, women's references to the constraining role of time was often an indication of important aspects in their everyday life. In these quotes, Gabriella and Rita made explicit connections not only between their family shopping and time strictures, but also between the latter two aspects and their role as the individual responsible for preparing food and, more generally, managing their homes. The demands placed on them as mothers and wives by the domestic context of (ethical) consumption, and the activities of care normally associated with it, came to fore.

There were also a few cases in which a female customer purchased the ethical goods, but was not the person involved in the activities that transformed such goods in the household (this usually happened with younger participants). But the person in question appeared to be a woman also in these cases. For example, the lawyer Simona, who had just passed her bar examination and still lived with her parents, closely associated ethical consumption, women, and the domestic activities *that ensued from being a woman*. Apparently, Simona had problems at home convincing her family of the usefulness of her ethical purchases, especially in terms of prices and availability. Her mother was the main source of these complaints, something on which Simona commented thus: "My mother is a housewife, so of course, she pays particular attention to everything that concerns family shopping and cooking [*tutto ciò che è la spesa e la cucina*]".

Parental love, particularly for mothers, was a strong factor motivating ethical consumers to engage with organic consumption. All the female shoppers I met who were mothers expressed a strong desire that their children should eat only natural foods. Rita was

probably the best example of this, given she had a newborn child. She bought organic for the following reason:

Basically, since our daughter was ready to be weaned, I thought: ‘Well it could be useful, rather than buying the normal stuff’. Yes, for the baby; not really for myself or my husband. I thought: ‘Given that now we’ll start giving the little puppet [*la pupa*] fruit and veg, why not think of organic?’ For the healthiness [*salubrità*] of the product.

Concerns for her newborn baby’s health, and her motherly feelings, overlapped in Rita’s words to construe eating organic food as a family affair, rather than simply as an individual act. Brigida, on her part, had this story:

I am interested in food education. One day I realised a whole series of foods has become inedible, and I have a small son. What triggered my desire to buy organic was the idea that by shopping at supermarkets he had no chance of a healthy diet.

While Gabriella once remarked: “The problem of eating healthily sometimes leads me to extremes. I mean, I’m very careful also with my children’s diet”.

The part seemingly played in ethical consumption by women also had another facet in the domestic context, diachronic rather than synchronic. As I discussed in the previous chapter, participants consumed organic foods because they were used, in varying degrees, to eat food purchased directly in rural settings, outside of the urban retailing system. Such purchases were often also linked to their past experiences of actually living outside Palermo, in a more rural context. The character of childhood memory possessed by such experiences acted as a powerful lens to reveal once again the role of gender roles and household reproduction. For example, Gabriella spoke of the following experience:

The organic meat I get from a farmer in Sicily’s interior really has another taste. I rediscover forgotten flavours. Take organic eggs. When I buy them, I remember the taste of eggs from when I was a child. If you consider that I’m fifty, we’re talking of the eggs from my grandmother’s time. There was a difference.

Similarly, Brigida pointed out how she was not born in Palermo, and thus had been used to eating differently from ‘today’. She explained:

“A healthy diet is something we were guaranteed. I wasn’t born in Palermo. My father was a fan of the home allotment [*orto casalingo*], so I almost always ate and drank stuff that was produced by ourselves. My brother and sister have gardens where they produce for their family. I haven’t got an allotment, so I developed this desire to

eat good things. I don't belong to this generation, who don't recognise the difference between fresh and frozen fruit. But at one point in my life I lost the flavours. I had a previous experience of a period in which food was less tasteless and odourless and industrialised. Were you born in Palermo?"

G.O.: "I was, yes."

Brigida: "Then you can't tell the difference."

Various lines of arguments have been put forward to explain women's predominance as ethical consumers, drawn from profoundly different paradigms of social life and human agency (see review in Micheletti 2004). One of these centres on the supposedly key role played by 'women's nature' in making ethical consumption a gendered practice. According to this argument, wifeness/motherhood and the day-to-day activities of care linked to these conditions form an integral part of what it means to be a woman. Women, therefore, naturally practise an 'ethics of care', which today makes them particularly responsive to those consumer initiatives that rely on ideals of helping other people, or animals, nature, etc. (Flammang 1997). They thus get involved in these initiatives more often than men, who, in contrast, possess a different moral outlook (e.g. Baier 1994; Benhabib 1992). Several aspects of the ethical consumption phenomenon may lend themselves to this interpretation.

For example, the ethics of care argument sees women's organic purchases as resulting from their greater concern for pollutants and contaminants in food: "Not because they know less, but because they care more. In particular, women appear to care more about the potentially serious if often empirically undetermined threats to the health and safety of their communities and families" (Davidson & Freudenburg 1996: 328). As I discussed above, parents in Palermo did see their children's body as vulnerable and, as a result of this preoccupation, bought organic food for them. This act was often articulated explicitly as a manifestation of familial love. Thus the love that linked the giver and the receiver of organic food—the parent and the child—would be a fractal of the love which holds together the household, given that practices of domestic management (cooking, family shopping) also rely on feelings of care. This interpretation, though, begins to look less solid when one turns to the evidence of fair-trade consumption.

Goodman (2004: 903; also Bryant & Goodman 2004), for example, writes that fair-trade is premised on “the consumers’ sense of caring beyond the ‘here’ and ‘now’ to include the ‘there’ and ‘then’ of producers’ placed-based livelihoods”. He refers to Smith, who notes such sense of caring is akin to “the expectation that familial and community bonds ensure beneficence” (1998: 20). However, the type of non-commodification implied by familial bonds appears distant from how Palermitan ethical consumers thought of fair-trade. As we saw in chapter 3, participants, the majority of them women, felt these purchases were primarily a rightful monetary remuneration for commodified labour. (This is the case even when taking into account the contradictions shown in regard to the charitable nature of fair-trade consumption.) Purchasing fair-trade was an indication of ‘caring’ insofar as participants felt a responsibility towards disadvantaged people: they cared, as opposed to not cared, for them. But this shouldn’t be equated with acting on the basis of a domestic ethic of care such as the one suggested by Smith.<sup>32</sup>

#### *Sexual roles and the household division labour*

Two further issues start to delineate the possible contours of an alternative framework. In a study of conventional shopping in London, Miller (1998) notes an “obsessional concern” in the consumption practices that take place as part of the mother-child relation. He says this concern regards

what foods, clothing and other materials infants should be allowed to consume or be prevented from consuming. The ideal consumption pattern of the infant was closely embedded in a concept of nature which implied that everything the infant does ... is an expression of its naturalness ... . Underlying this pattern seems to be the use of consumption to assert a continuity between mother and infant that retains the quality of biological link [and] a stress upon natural foods and an abhorrence of foods that include artificial ingredients. (Miller 1998: 124)

Though not drawn from ethical consumption, this picture bears considerable resemblance with the Palermitan data (similar results have been reached by other studies of food and

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<sup>32</sup> I thus suggest that an ‘ethic of responsibility’, rather than one of care, is underlying fair-trade’s expanded moral community. This is still by definition a relational ethic, in that it posits the need for the individual to reach out to the other, but one based on a responsibility which does not necessarily require a relation taking place outside the market domain. (Fair-trade’s relationality would be a ‘one-way’ construct, not a ‘two-way’ one. Although this point raises interesting questions, its remit falls beyond the scope of this work.)

eating, e.g. Caplan 2000b: 188; Murphy et al. 1998: 263).<sup>33</sup> It would seem, then, that the nature of women's relation to ethical and to conventional food shopping is not always that different.<sup>34</sup> This suggests one should again look, as in the previous section, to commonalities between ethical and mainstream consumption at the level of household practices, rather than look solely to oppositions at the level of discourses and ideals.

The second issue is that *male* ethical consumers, though small in number, were present in Palermo. Not only did they express much the same beliefs as their female counterparts, they also frequently seemed to be the person responsible for their households' shopping (though perhaps not for the cooking, this was unclear). Gianni's case (see chapter 3) illustrates this point. Gianni was married and had a newborn child. His everyday provisioning took place along similar lines to those of the women participants discussed in section 4.1 (I met Gianni at Equalis' shop, but never saw his wife there.) He argued:

Even though the fair-trade shop is near my home, often for daily restocking [*rifornimento quotidiano*] you go to the shop down the road [*sotto casa*], because you can't plan your shopping at the fair-trade shop, as if it was a supermarket. You can't say 'I'll do my weekly shopping there'. There are certain things they haven't got. (Gianni, 34, university researcher)

This fact cannot be easily accommodated by the ethics of care model. Rather than on sexual difference (male/female), ethical consumption seems to be dependent on the sexes' different social roles or, in one word, on gender. Miller (1998: 125) notes how a discourse of shopping that frames gender as the continuation of 'natural links' between mother and child expresses an "essentialist conceptualization of gender ... since it reinforces that aspect of mothering which pertains to gender as a biological difference".

Individuals learn to behave according to the cultural roles that each society attributes to their sex (e.g. Ardener 1975; Stolcke 1981). In industrial, capitalist societies, one of the most enduring patterns of socialisation of sexuality is the close association between women and the material and symbolic contexts of domestic care (Lamphere 2000). These contexts

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<sup>33</sup> I am not suggesting that parental love is the only basis of such concerns. Feelings of love and perceptions of vulnerability are not necessarily linked. One can have strong feelings for a person and nevertheless not perceive her as in need of being taken care of, and vice versa. My argument is one of contingency based on non-determinism: the two aspects happen to overlap and give rise to parents' organic consumption for their children.

<sup>34</sup> Though of course one could simply argue that the ethics of care hypothesis applies also to the case of conventional foods.

encompass everyday activities such as the rearing of children, the buying and cooking of food, washing clothes, cleaning the house, etc. Together, they amount to a work of household reproduction, themselves acting as processes of socialisation to re-create those gender models from which they also originate (see Pahl 1984: 105-109).

Ethical consumption, then, is performed mostly by women not because they are naturally inclined towards it, but because it is part of domestic work, which society assigns primarily to women (e.g. Finch 1989; Morris 1990, especially chapter 6). Women for the most part learn to act and think in a caring way, to believe that helping others is their duty and not someone else's. Also, this socialisation process is not uniform and stable, but varies according to a woman's age, class, marital status, whether or not she has any offspring, and the latter's age (Comas d'Argemir 1994: 214-215).

The ethics of care argument does not consider the material aspects that make domestic care a form of *social* work comparable to economic productive activities (Comas d'Argemir 1994: 212, 221). It focuses primarily on psychology, feelings and values, with behaviours only considered as *resulting* from them. Miller et al. talk of the need to be

suspicious of arguments that downplay the extent to which the work of consumption is as active an exchange as the labour of production ... . The idea of shopping as recreation is currently over-drawn. Once the sexual division of labour and the gendered nature of shopping are recognised, the notion of shopping as leisure is much harder to sustain. (1998: 94)

The household reproduction argument says the opposite of the ethics of care one: that certain discourses are learnt from the behaviours society imposes on the individual (though the process itself is recursive, not deterministic).<sup>35</sup>

The evidence from Palermo can thus be considered simply a local example of women's long-standing association, as wives and mothers, with the home and the family. This association largely persists even when, as happens increasingly today, women participate fully in the market economy as working wives and mothers. Such was the case in my field site. The difficulties of which women complained were a manifestation of the strain they faced because of this dual role (e.g. Hochschild 1989). For women who

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<sup>35</sup> This reversal of the causal relation means that, to a certain extent, seeing women as more 'caring' than men is not entirely incorrect as long as one does not believe this trait to be the result of some innate nature, but of a process of enculturation.

participate in formal employment traditional labours in the home have not diminished by being equally distributed with male partners. This dynamic has been well documented across a variety of locales in the Western world (see Counihan 1999, especially chapter 3, also 2004 87-90; Morris 1990: 88-96).

The fact that those *male* ethical consumers whom I met also appeared to be their household's provisioners confirms that individuals who engage in certain domestic activities are more likely to become ethical shoppers, irrespective of their sex (provided they are also interested in the 'politics' behind ethical consumption). This perspective holds not only at the level of practices, but also at the discursive one, for example regarding organic purchases for children. Following are some words spoken on the issue by Gianni:

Well, first of all I have to say I consume them [organic foods] less than my son. I try to make sure that my son, who's seventeen months old, eats a lot of them, especially milk. Obviously I trust the healthiness of the product, or at least its non-harmful nature.

Even though ample cross-cultural data exists showing that "food and health issues [are] widely perceived as part of a feminine rather than masculine remit" (Keane 1997: 183), no deterministic reading can be warranted (e.g. also Macintyre et al. 1998: 239; Murphy et al. 1998: 250-251; Tulloch & Lupton 2003: 21).

If the link between household reproduction and ethical consumption is correct, then perhaps the latter is not just 'dependent' on the former. Because domestic practices, to a large extent, *are* the processes of socialisation from which such practices gain social significance, then ethical consumption might represent a contemporary version of the old unequal socialisation of gender just discussed. I have shown how this might be true practically (with women shopping, cooking, and feeding ethical goods). Now I will briefly look at some symbolic aspects.

For Douglas (1975), social structures can be expressed through the meanings attached to food (the same is true of the meanings attached to risk, Douglas & Wildavsky 1982). One example of this process is the cultural 'position' occupied by certain foods in a given temporal frame, be this a day, week, year, or a life. These positions 'send messages' to individuals, which reflect certain aspects of social structure and its boundaries. A discourse that prescribes to mothers the treatment of their children according to all things 'natural'

(including the consumption of organic foods), then, might be reinforcing women's *social* position through their *biological role* as child-bearers and thus family care-givers.<sup>36</sup>

Foods, ethical or not, may also play this role across generations (Counihan 1999, especially chapter 9, and 2004, chapter 8). As Comas d'Argemir writes: "Age and generation are important dimensions in the organization of support and care" (1994: 215), and thus of the current unequal division of household labour. Amongst Palermitan ethical consumers, food appeared to be used also to re-live childhood memories, rekindle and perpetuate the experiences from which they were drawn, and thus 'inherit' the familial traditions in question. The latter were inevitably based on traditional gender domestic types. Gabriella, who wanted her children to have a diet that included organic, also said that this food reminded her of what her grandmother had fed her and her family. Organic thus embodied a female genealogy. Brigida depicted a very similar scenario (her reference to her father pointed to the person in the family who *cultivated* the land). In the following passage, Bourdieu links the issues of childhood tastes and maternal love.

[Food tastes are] the strongest and most indelible mark of infant learning, the lessons which longest withstand the distancing or collapse of the native world and most durably maintain nostalgia for it. The native world is, above all, the maternal world, the world of primordial tastes and basic foods ... in which pleasure giving is an integral part of pleasure. (Bourdieu 1984: 79)<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> The importance of organic foods vis-à-vis the individual's stage in her lifecycle applies also to adults. My data shows clearly how organic sometimes marked the shift from the age of youth-adulthood to that of 'getting old'. The theme of traversing cultural boundaries resurfaces (though one must not forget the embodied origin of these perceptions: illnesses, aches and pains). The issue of lifecycle in adults is also important because it links to that of gender. Men and women react to the problem of their food intake's impact on health in different ways, the former usually more through engaging in sports, the latter in 'diets' (i.e. weight-loss regimes; see Macintyre et al. 1998). Both strategies are largely aimed at 'appearance'. But this is true of younger adults. Beyond a certain age, in fact, emphasis in dietary issues tends to shift from appearance to 'well-being', as my data exemplifies.

<sup>37</sup> Appadurai (1996) has also talked about nostalgia in the context of the *patina* of objects, that subtle transference of meanings from particular commodities to their owners. He argues that *patina* involves 'imagined nostalgia', "nostalgia without lived experience or collective historical memory" (1996: 78). This was not (necessarily) true of participants in my case study. Seremetakis' (1994: 12) approach is more relevant. Talking about her childhood memories of eating peaches, she suggests that sensory memories of particular foods may constitute moments of 'stillness' which interrupt the flow of present-time, thus potentially making space for the development of alternatives to our everyday reliance on a given agricultural system.

### **4.3 Power, place, and consumption as tool**

During fieldwork, I attended an event on ‘alternative economies’ hosted on the premises of the School of Politics, a modern, purpose-built two-storey complex with a pleasant garden around it. The School, a kind of research centre, had been originally founded by the Sicilian Jesuit order, and its head was still a priest. The event itself was organised by members of a civil society Catholic association made up by, and aimed at, families. The meeting should have begun around 9:30 am, and an email had been circulated to recommend punctuality. But it was Sunday, so we ended up taking our seats more than an hour after the scheduled opening time (that the organisers kept offering coffee and biscuits to the new arrivals did not help). Fifty-five people were initially counted in the room, though a slow trickle of late-comers raised the final number to around seventy. The vast majority were middle-aged couples, in their forties and fifties, with a few other younger and older individuals. There were no teenagers, though some children were present. Overall, I received a strong impression this was the sort of ‘family event’ that only parents attended.

There were initial welcoming remarks by the head of the School, and by the organisers. Then a couple of invited speakers talked about various issues, many of which had to do with ethical consumption. Afterwards, we broke up for lunch, and eventually reconvened in smaller groups to discuss informally the issues raised in the morning. It was during this session that a woman in my group began talking of her personal experience of trying to practise ethical consumption at home. Everyone had been emphasising the need to “take action”, and the “potential” of alternative economies. This woman, however, visibly distressed, said that one could indeed try to do so, that one could believe strongly in the need to change things through concrete actions, but “if you clash with a hostile context, there’s little you can do about it”.

She continued by describing her personal situation. She was married and had two children, a boy and a girl. She said that her family cared absolutely nothing for the sorts of issues we had been debating. This explained why she had come on her own, while the vast majority of people there were (at least) couples. At home she was mocked, if not insulted, for being an idealist dupe who was so stupid as to think she could change the world. It was impossible not to buy Coca Cola for her family, or she would have been “killed”. Every

week she bought one packet of fair-trade biscuits for herself, and five packets of Barilla ones (Italy's most famous pasta maker) for the rest of her household. While she spoke, tears filled her eyes, and she kept repeating that there was nothing she could do against such a unreceptive domestic milieu.

Many of the ethical consumers I met stressed how they felt alone in their shopping choices, surrounded by people who were indifferent to their values, not only friends and colleagues, but often also family members. Martina too said she didn't get much support from her family. Talking of eating organic, she once told me how she tried to

develop this habit at home, not always with good results. Because maybe you have to eat two organic apples instead of a single [conventional] one to eat the same amount. So you have to do the peeling twice, cut out two centres instead of one, which sounds ridiculous—I know—but with time these days being measured for everything. Sometimes my daughters complain, they say: 'Oh, I have to eat twice as many!' Sometimes it's a problem.

It is little wonder, then, that Martina also felt that

this thing [ethical consumption] is something that appears to make you very modern, very informed, very intellectual, but that's nonsense! We've got the kids, we have to feed them, we have to eat ourselves, we're already stressed with the life we have.

Margherita, a forty years old journalist with Italy's public broadcaster, mother of one, explicitly linked ethical consumption with the socialisation that happens in the household. Commenting on what she considered the current lack of sensitivity towards the issues in question, she explained:

It's probably because we carry with us our parents' teachings. I see it a bit like I see the issue of children who have experiences of animals and those who don't. A child is drawn towards an animal, he likes a puppy, he wants to take care of it. Those who don't, usually have parents who taught them as their first reaction to be afraid, because they themselves had parents who did the same, and so on. The same goes with environmental issues. If a child sees his parent throwing rubbish on the street, he will never be able to realise the importance of respecting the environment. He would need a stronger pressure from the school, which isn't there. Because those are the role models: the family first of all, then the school [*I modelli sono quelli, la famiglia prima di tutto, e poi la scuola*].

This evidence points to a key function of household reproduction: to perpetuate the culture of the particular society in which said reproduction takes place. Food, for the reasons discussed in the previous sections, inevitably acquires special significance in this

domain. Counihan, for example, writes: “The ingestion of food is ... a metaphor and vehicle for the ingestion of parental—particularly maternal—culture” (1999: 58). Parents, through their roles as care-givers, have great power over the processes of socialisation that set the stage for how their children will feel, think and act later in life. Giving food to others in the domestic space means giving them also certain values and a worldview. This is a powerful process. Counihan describes it as “accru[ing] not through force and the ability to deny but through giving, through the obligations created by giving, and through the influence wielded in the act of giving. This is the power that Mauss described in his masterpiece *The Gift*” (1999: 46).

### *Widening the circle of society*

Spreading their ethical values was important for participants but also difficult. This was true in reference to their households, as I just showed, but also to the wider local context (Margherita’s point about schools. In our conversations, in fact, ethical consumers’ actions often appeared as islands in a city—Palermo—marked by competition, corruption, inefficiency and resignation. Their sense of being alone was also often illustrated by statements like: “If people know about it they say ‘good, you’re doing a good thing’, but then they don’t modify their behaviour and keep buying as usual” or “When I talk about my experience, they tell me ‘well done, it’s a good thing’, and then they change the subject of the conversation”. The same feeling was illustrated also by the ways people used “difficult” when they talked about Palermo itself (*Palermo è difficile*), living in the city (*vivere qui è difficile*), or the general “context” (*questo è un contesto difficile*). Often, these references conflated experiences of the social environment with that of the material one, many people seeing the deterioration of the latter as a function of the deterioration of the former.

There’s no idea of what environmental sustainability is. I’ve got the impression that by now the only thing that guides processes in our society in Palermo is the logic of profit, period. I mean there isn’t even that capacity, which I believe in other places, in other cities of the north [of Italy] there’s been: the logic of profit can also include paths that don’t destroy, don’t cut the branch on which you’re sitting. This idea just doesn’t exist here: everyone is intent on cutting the branch on which they’re sitting. (Gabriella, 50, doctor)

Given their age, education and political affiliation, the people in question were acutely conscious of the history that brought about the radical transformation of Palermo’s

social, economic and built environments, discussed in chapter 2. In their comparisons between the traits they saw in the local polity and the values they perceived in fair-trade and organic goods, the consumers I met often referred to such environments. For example, clientelism and local urban party politics were a common topic. In the words of Giorgio (see chapter 3), who was well-placed to comment:

My experience of working in the public administration is devastating. Because all the bad things you can think of from the outside, all the stereotypes, are nothing compared to what these places are in reality, where nothing exists which isn't—I don't mean meritocracy, that's science fiction—but not even the saving of human and economic resources. There are no rules, no laws that govern the functioning of these places. They are left to the initiative of the single councillor or director and are without any logic, sense of purpose, or medium-term outlook, long-term would again be science fiction. It's really depressing.

Brigida also told me: “We suffer an administration that's what it is, which instead of making things better makes them difficult—we're already difficult in ourselves—I reach the point where I think: there's no hope!””. While Gianni explained:

Superficially one would say the city has what it deserves, and what it wants after all, because what it wants is to satisfy certain personal interests it gives priority to, not giving any priority to the common interest. Why? Because the common interest isn't perceived as useful to one's personal benefit. Quite often this reason is linked to the knowledge that this type of political class and of administration can guarantee you, in the future, certain things, which in the end are mainly individual privileges.

It is from these beliefs that ethical shoppers' conviction in the 'political' role of consumption gained its relevance.

Participants viewed consumer power as a tool for social change, albeit in varying degrees. Some were very positive about it, others quite disillusioned. Overall, though, they saw the purchasing of fair-trade and organic goods as an action 'that can change things'. Key to this argument were those instances in which such a general position was couched directly in terms of everyday political engagement. Two examples will illustrate this.

If we all made these purchases the world would change. Today the only power we have left is that of purchasing, we can't believe anymore that the world will change with a revolution. We're only consumers, this is the only thing we can do in our small daily lives. (Paola, 32, university student)

I think today consumption is one of the things in which you can involve people who perhaps aren't available to go to meetings anymore, or to do the revolution, but who

with their choices can make a difference. Individual choices are choices that weigh on everyone's reality. Consumer choices are among these, and you can do politics also in this way. (Gabriella, 50, doctor)

Still, participants thought themselves surrounded by people who did not see this potential, and who were largely uninterested in all things ethical. Giorgio commented: "I see the *palermitano* [inhabitant of Palermo], he's the kind used to being the colonised, he's really colonised from all point of views, cultural, economic. He's got no freedom of thought. He's strong with the weak and weak with the strong". While his partner Ilenia integrated his line of reasoning thus:

Yes, the *palermitano* is a colonised sort, but in a distinctive way. He has a strange receptivity, only for the worst that the coloniser can give him. If you see the behaviour on the street, in the traffic, at the Regional Government headquarters, et cetera, he has taken up precisely everything bad that can exist in a modern reality.

In some instances, though not that often, this feeling of disillusionment was contrasted with how people thought things were in the north of Italy:

This summer I went on holiday with some people from Bergamo and Milan. And they were saying the worst stuff about the situation there, and I got really disappointed, I told them 'how do you mean? You're taking even this hope away from me, I think of you as a civilised place.' Anyway, I'm actually not convinced that it's like they say. In my view we truly hit rock bottom. (Brigida, 48, teacher)

Mauss' (2002) point, that when objects are given they are never completely detached from the giver, means that when things circulate, social relationships are created and altered. This is true of food as of any other 'thing', though the former occupies a special role as one of the cornerstones of socialisation and household reproduction. From this perspective, the buying and giving of ethical goods is a way of fostering an ethical polity, because the values and sentiments of those who purchased them remain attached to these goods as they circulate. They are thus a means of widening the imagined circle of people's desired society. This was clearly the case for the ethical consumers I met in Palermo, who shopped mainly with reference to gift transactions within their households, in the shape of the food bought for it during family shopping.

'Society' here exhibits at least two facets. First, that explored in chapter 3; secondly, a more 'local', rooted and grounded level, bearing on society as it informs everyday life rather than grand narratives of modernity (industrial agriculture, international trade, etc).

Barnett et al. (2005) have recently explored similar dynamics. They propose the concept of 'moral selving' to point out how ethical consumers engage in this type of shopping to try and construct a moral identity consistent with their values and beliefs. Part of this process is achieved through 'educating' family and friends by involving them in the circulation of ethical commodities (see also Varul 2009).

The linking of place to ethical economic values that is at stake here also bears on what Miller (2001: 111–44) has said about ethical consumption. Writing specifically about 'green' shopping (2001: 133), he distinguishes between ethics, altruistic concern for distant others, and morality, concern for good and bad in one's own life. He thus argues that ethical shopping faces an almost insurmountable contradiction. The consumer's moral concern for her household and friends, largely expressed by the ideal of thrift, cannot be reconciled with the ethics of organic goods, which are relatively expensive. He notes that "interest in Green or organic foods and other such concerns could be experienced not as a sign of the ethical depth of the shopper but as a sign that the shopper is more concerned to express their self-indulgent 'issues'" (2001: 137).

As mentioned before, Palermo's ethical consumers saw the values embodied in fair-trade and organic goods as about the opposite of what they saw as prevalent in their city. This seems to contradict Miller on the impossibility of bridging economic ethics and economic morality when practising shopping. The individuals I spoke with constantly appeared to subsume fair-trade's and organic's general (far-away) values with the close-by experiences of their lives: not only those of their immediate household, but also those of their immediate community, such as peers or workplace colleagues, who they thought part of a problematic polity.<sup>38</sup> Looking at the issue from a different angle, more attuned to its socio-political aspects, proves useful in making sense of the data.

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<sup>38</sup> It is worth speculating why my conclusions differ from Miller's. Firstly, my research focussed on people who I knew to be regular buyers of fair-trade and organic goods. Miller, on the other hand, looked at ordinary shoppers. His point about the impossibility of bridging ethics and morals is, thus, based on data from individuals who were not regular ethical consumers. Secondly, my informants were middle class, and apparently better off on average than Miller's. This may have made thrift less important to them, and so made it easier for them to express care for the wider community. Class thus appears to have an important role in determining consumers' engagement with ethical consumption. Thirdly, these differences may reflect the differing ways in which English and Italians engage practically with public spaces, and thus symbolically with the idea of 'community' (the former leading lives that are more private, more centred on the self and the household) (I thank James Carrier for raising this point.)

Palermo's social structure and its workings, both practical and symbolic, were an important factor at play in informants' positionalities vis-à-vis ethical consumption. Chubb, who investigated extensively such workings, has argued that conventional theories of patronage do not explain Palermo's social milieu, where the system "works less through the distribution of benefits to all-comers than through the astute management of *scarcity*" (1982: 98). While scarcity is more of an issue for the city's popular classes, the middle class is also involved in patronage, though the manner of its involvement differs and its members manage to escape the more severe forms of clientelism. Cole (1997: 31) says that for the middle class clientelism involves an exchange of favours (for jobs, promotions, bureaucratic mediation etc.), whilst for the poor it involves food, cash and job *promises*. This means the ethical consumers whose values led them to reject what they saw as a 'culture' underpinning the city's patronage system, are still part of it in terms of the class system. Their belief, sometimes hope, in the effect of consumer power can be interpreted as a reaction to the disillusionment and political disaffection engendered by their uncomfortable position. Perhaps more poignantly, as already remarked above, they saw themselves among a wider population who did not view these issues as problematic (see Dombos 2008 for a somewhat similar case in Hungary).

#### **4.4 The circle of society...or the archipelago?**

In chapter 1 I said that both the fair-trade and the organic movements developed at the same time as the onset of neoliberalism in industrialised nations (Simmonds 1995), arguably as a response to that onset (De Neve et al. 2008b). Making sense of what people say about the effects of consumer power, then, entails considering the degree to which the neoliberal ideology that sees the market as the solution to virtually everything has influenced the idea that shoppers have the capacity to ameliorate the social landscape (Johnston 2008). Considering that means understanding how contemporary politico-economic arrangements, still largely framed by neoliberalism, affect new social movements, of which ethical consumption is an example. In this last section I look at the class position of those Palermitan citizens who felt disaffected by things Sicilian, and who turned to ethical consumption as an avenue of action.

In section 4.3 I described the ways that ethical consumers thought about Palermo's polity at the level of imagined community. Those thoughts, however, were held by a specific section of the urban citizenry. Paradoxically, if Palermo has any underlying feature, it is that of being unequal and fractured. Class, therefore, acted as a factor shaping people's perceptions of different sections of the urban polity, and hence the distinctions that they made between them.

Although I had initially wanted to understand how participants saw those lower down the social hierarchy,<sup>39</sup> people spontaneously compared themselves with those who they saw as being their class equals, and occasionally their superiors. Those I spoke to claimed that 'the problem' with the middle class—the absence of ethical consumption—was 'a cultural one' (*un problema culturale*) or one 'of sensitivity' (*di sensibilità*) to the values in question. Typically, then, in this context people ignored income as a factor, saying that ethical consumption is only 'a matter of choice' that 'everyone' just 'has to make'.

I haven't got less money than a lot of other people, but I live in a house with a lot less furniture and which is a lot less beautiful, because clearly I spend money on organic, on books, etcetera. These are things that cost, so I can't afford other stuff. I have to make some choices. In the middle class [*nel ceto medio*] there's a lot of difference between those who invest in a property [*nel mattone*] or in clothes, and those who invest in health. Apart from diet, health is something that I allow myself, but I don't spend money on jewellery. I haven't got jewellery. Many of my colleagues have a lot of jewellery. (Brigida, 48, teacher)

When ethical consumers did talk about the lack of fair-trade and organic shopping by members of the *lower* class (*abitanti dei quartieri popolari*), two views emerged, which were generally mutually exclusive.

Some saw buying ethically as impossible for the poor, with people typically replying "that [i.e. working-class life] is another level" or "that's another story", and also "they've got other problems". As the salesman Lorenzo (see chapter 3) explained:

There's minimum knowledge in a bourgeois middle class, a tiny amount amongst those who can afford everything, and almost none among the ultra-poor. I can understand the ultra-poor because they have to think about their more immediate lives, after all they are exploited here. There are problems of poverty which perhaps don't allow them to contemplate consuming something that costs more, maybe they

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<sup>39</sup> I emphasised middle-class citizens' opinions of their working-class fellows because I was interested in vertical class distinction. I soon discovered that my informants were more interested in horizontal distinction.

would like to. Perhaps they haven't got enough to live on, so they say 'first of all I need to think about myself and then I can think about others'. A person who's got a full stomach can, actually should, take care of others. But how can somebody who has an empty stomach think of feeding someone else?

For other consumers, however, working-class people did not engage in ethical consumption for the same reasons as their middle-class peers. Even though she recognised that ethical commodities cost more than some could afford, the journalist Margherita still stressed cultural, rather than economic, reasons for the failure of the poor to be ethical consumers:

There's still a cultural problem, there's an ideological prevention. I'm definitely convinced that if the person from *Capo* [one of Palermo's historic working-class areas] can get his vegetables in the countryside, he does, because unconsciously he knows they're better than the ones he buys at the shop and come to him from outside. But then he thinks that going to an organic shop costs who knows how much, but he doesn't know because there's a sort of ideological prevention. He would never do it because it would seem to him he's acting like someone who spends money. If the greengrocer round the corner had organic food, and he knew what it was, and he found out it had the same price, I think he would buy it. There's a difficulty in spreading the culture. Because it's obvious that the person living in *Borgo* [another of Palermo's historic working-class areas] shops round the corner. He doesn't go to an organic shop because it would seem too strange to him.

Participants therefore often spoke in ways that resembled what Bourdieu (1984) describes of the relationship between class and processes of distinction. Individuals never talked explicitly about good or bad 'taste' (*buono/cattivo gusto*). Rather, they expressed 'judgement' (as in 'evaluation' or 'appraisal') through their discussions of why people from different classes did or did not engage in ethical consumption. On the whole, they focussed on those who did not engage in it. Such comparisons were an expression of taste/judgement in Bourdieu's sense insofar as they indicate that people saw a correspondence between classes of products and classes of consumers.

As I will show in the thesis' conclusions (chapter 8), the picture of distinction just painted is the contemporary result of a series of historical trends that have affected Palermitan society in the past twenty years or so. These trends have seen class fractions whose members rely on the state for their livelihood, and who are of broadly leftwing political creeds, declining—to adopt Bourdieu's vocabulary—compared to other fractions.

## Conclusion

This chapter drew on anthropological perspectives to explore ethical consumption in practice, rather than only considering discourse. In it, I have shown the degrees to which the Palermitans who bought and consumed organic and fair-trade foods did so through dominant structures of retail and family, and how this affected their understanding of ethical consumption. I focused particularly on the ways in which these ‘acts of mediation’—to borrow one of my informants’ words—affected women, as they represented the majority of my sample. A complex picture thus emerged, with ethical consumption being potentially both an oppressive and a liberating practice for women (and also men, but to a lesser degree).

On the one hand, as the practice was usually firmly inscribed in the social fabric of domestic life, involvement with fair-trade and organic was for women just another aspect of the work of household reproduction. In this sense, ethical consumption was oppressive in that it stood alongside many other chores performed by women and perceived by them as stressful and obligatory. This was the case even though a woman (and her family) felt positively about fair-trade and organic foods: these remained ‘a woman’s thing’. On the other hand, however, shopping ethically also appeared as empowering and, in some cases, liberating. Empowering, because it offered a means for women to pass on values that were clearly important to them. This aspect should not be underestimated, regardless of its deeper social and cultural roots in a patriarchal cosmogony. Ethical consumption was potentially liberating, paradoxically, when a woman faced the greatest difficulties in practising it because her family were uninterested, or opposed her. From this perspective, making the effort to buy the foods in question was a powerful affirmation of agency and politics.

But there were also signs of what may be termed ‘post-patriarchal’ arrangements in this domain, for example in those couples where both sexes (or the man only) practised ethical consumption. If this practice, in fact, is an aspect of housework and thus of socialisation, as I’ve proposed, then the fact that *men* take part in it raises the question of the origins of this behaviour. A patriarchal society could not have told *them* to be ‘caring’, homely, etc. What was their socialisation? Perhaps, as I mentioned, a different culture

where even the sexual roles of household reproduction have changed.<sup>40</sup> In the thesis' conclusions I pick up again these points for a broader discussion of Sicily's most recent past and its radical changes, including those relating to the historic gender roles analysed in chapter 2.

Class, particularly its effects on identity and the cultural representations of others, intersected with all the above dynamics.<sup>41</sup> By looking at this intersection, ethical consumption appeared firmly grounded in a lower-middle-class discursive field. However, there were considerable differences in how people came to terms with this fact: some did so quite consciously, others very little, or not at all.

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<sup>40</sup> Because there is no one-to-one relation between sex and gender, the co-incidence between womanhood, family shopping, and home-keeping is a shifting reality in different nations and historical periods. Thus the gender gap in ethical consumption could easily disappear if men engaged more responsibly in family chores. There is now some evidence of this. Recent survey data from northern European countries such as Denmark, for example, where men are increasingly assuming roles as family caretakers, shows the gender gap in ethical consumers diminishing (Goul Andersen & Tobiasen 2003, cited in Micheletti 2004).

<sup>41</sup> I am giving for granted here that class impacted consumption in the very material sense that only certain people could afford to buy organic and fair-trade.

## CHAPTER 5

### FAIR-TRADE AND MODELS OF LIVELIHOOD: NECESSITY AND COOPERATION

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter and the following one, I look at the two Palermitan worker cooperatives that owned small stores specialised in fair-trade and organic food retail. As they originally started out selling only fair-trade, I refer to them as ‘fair-traders’. I investigate the relationship between understandings of labour and personal identity of the Palermitans who worked in these cooperatives, asking three closely related questions. Why do people engage in this kind of labour in Palermo? What does it mean for them? How do cultural and politico-economic contexts influence fair-traders’ own answers to the first two questions? To address these issues, I look at how these actors experienced and reflected on their labour practice, and on ideas of labour value more generally, thus exploring a number of key local models of livelihood (Gudeman 1986). (I deal with the actual job of the two coops, and the issues it raises, in the following chapter).

A change of perspective will become apparent in the process of uncovering such livelihood models. The values of organic food and consumption that I analysed in chapter 3 will be somewhat put aside in this chapter (and the next one). The reason for this is twofold. First, as the emphasis of the discussion shifts to another set of actors—from those who purchased to those who sold organic and fair-trade—the themes at play in the ethnography inevitably also change. This is a consequence of my decision to follow the particular network of initiatives found on the ground, which I stated in the introduction to the thesis. Second, and related to the first point, because the shift in question involves passing from a perspective that was external the realm of work to one that is internal to it: from a group that took part in moral economy without a livelihood ‘interest’ in it to one that made moral economy a means for a living. As I mentioned above, the people this chapter deals with originally started their cooperatives selling exclusively fair-trade. This fact impacts on the material presented below skewing it more towards the fair-trade ‘pole’ than

the organic one. This does not mean, however, that these informants had nothing to say about organic foods. Rather, it is the absence of a continuous reflection on them that is of significance, testifying to the prevailing role that issues of work identity and practices had in this chapter (to a certain extent, in fact, the change of perspective can be said to affect not just constructs of organic, but also of fair-trade, food).

I begin this chapter, then, by focusing on the events and circumstances that led to the development of fair-trade activities in Palermo, analysing how economic and cultural elements have interacted in this process. I set out with protest movements and civic groups, and then focus on unemployment and economic fragility, roughly following the actors' real-life trajectory. The main factors at play were, on the one hand, a left-wing critique of capitalism and development economics, and commitments towards self-determination, and on the other, the need to find employment in the local economy. These factors led individuals to work in fair-trade and to establish cooperatives—with their emphasis on 'democracy in the work-place'—as the particular local form of the fair-trade movement. The coops in question can therefore be seen as an example in Palermo of worker self-help, a central value in the history of labour cooperation.

In the chapter's second section, I investigate why Palermitan fair-traders viewed their work as a 'real job' (*un lavoro vero*) and 'proper trade' (*commercio a tutti gli effetti*), constructs which they opposed to the version of fair-trade they believed prevalent in the centre-north of Italy. Analysing their views of daily livelihood, I show the importance that earning incomes had for participants, and the meaning this acquired in the context of a national fair-trade commodity network heavily reliant on volunteers (i.e. on charitable labour). For participants, what truly characterised *their* fair-trading was the conscious decision to embark on it as a means to gain a livelihood. This fact was expressed as something setting them apart from others. The value of wage labour was thus charted on a much wider system of social exchange: Italy's unequal national community. The ethnography therefore confounds established views of the alienating nature of wage work (of commoditisation), and of the socialising one of charitable labour (of gift-giving) (see discussion in chapter 1, also Goddard 2000; Hart 1983; Thomas 1991).

The last section of this chapter (5.3) deals with workers' understandings of fair-trade's daily goal. Such understandings rested on a particular articulation of the idea of

‘profit’ with ideas about the nature of the different enterprise forms constituting the fair-trade retail network. The question of profit, and of what stands in opposition to it, did not refer to price setting or price differentials, or to the moral connotation of supply relations between market actors (see chapter 6), but to workers’ daily motivation and their broader goals in life-work. Such themes were strongly influenced by the normative discourse of legislation. Participants classified together the different enterprise forms of the fair-trade commodity network as ‘non-profit’, but did so uneasily.

In fact, they believed the concept of non-profit—much cherished by Italian fair-traders—to be inadequate, as for them legal limits to capital accumulation were unworkable when compared to an individual’s desire to break these. Therefore, they also thought that a *for-profit* motivation, which they conceded existed and thought was wrong, could not be taken for granted in all *capitalist* enterprises. Belonging to one of these did not automatically mean people were bent on making money. Models of worker personal motivation, instead of the law’s normative power, appeared as the criterion chosen to define attitudes towards profit. In the case of fair-trade, these models took the form of ‘making-a-living’ as the metaphor for working up to a point of ‘necessity’. For informants, capitalist enterprises could thus be allowed to fair-trade (as long as they respected the necessary rules), given that fair-trading was not the kind of job that allowed one to make money.

The coops in question were Sodalis and Equalis. Both were very small worker cooperatives (*cooperative di lavoro*). Their size, and the fact that they were engaged in retailing rather than production (i.e. manufacturing, construction, etc.), are two crucial elements in understanding their worlds of work, and should be kept in mind throughout the discussion, in both this and the following chapter.

Sodalis employed seven individuals, of which four were actually members of the coop, while the rest were its employees: one full-time at the warehouse, and two part-time at the shop (the clerks). The cooperative had other members in addition to the four just mentioned, people who had other jobs and didn’t take part in running the business. But as I explain in a moment, they contributed in other ways to the organisation’s life. Sodalis belonged to *Commercio Alternativo* (CA, ‘Alternative Trade’), Italy’s second largest fair-trade organisation. CA is a ‘consortium’, or second-degree coop: a cooperative made up of smaller ones as its constituent members (those running individual fair-trade outlets).

Sodalis' members were an interesting group of people. There was Riccardo, whom I knew from my past involvement in Palermo's pacifist movements. I remembered him attending with his children the vigils against the bombing of Afghanistan in 2001, organised by the Lilliput Network in Palermo's main *Piazza Politeama*. We had both been active in the Network, a national 'umbrella organization' for NGOs and associations, informal groups and individuals, born in 1999 after the WTO events of Seattle (see chapters 1 and 3). The Network promotes change in international trading rules and global financial institutions, the spread of sustainable consumer lifestyles, pacifism and nonviolence. It is based on principles of horizontal power, and works through participatory methods such as consensus decision-making. The Network's philosophy is that of changing the world through small, concrete acts of resistance, which create alternatives cumulatively.

Though one of Sodalis' founding members, Riccardo worked as a schoolteacher and was not involved in running the cooperative. He did contribute to it in other ways, for example by giving talks on its behalf. He was also closely involved with a non-profit organisation called Jambosana, of which he had been the president in the past. This organisation was founded by a group of Palermitans who carried out volunteer work with churches in Tanzania, where Jambosana is active. (Riccardo himself received a degree in Theology and collaborated closely with the Missionary Centre of Palermo's Diocese.) The association's website states among its aims: 'to act collaboratively on the social fabric of an increasingly global world, with special emphasis on the economic and health problems of Southern countries, and on the peaceful integration of people of different cultures'. Jambosana carries out 'educational work on themes such as global poverty and multiculturalism, and implements a series of concrete, small-scale interventions in favour of the economic and sanitary development of Third World countries, and the integration of migrant citizens in Italian society' (I am not providing the website's address to protect the group's anonymity).

Another founding member of the Sodalis cooperative was Franco. In his early forties and married with two little children, Franco was in charge of Sodalis' commercial relations. He thus travelled regularly to places such as Egypt to check on the coop's projects. With a degree in economics, before Sodalis he had worked rather precariously as a books salesman. Of far-left political convictions, Franco met many of those who would set up

Sodalis during university, particularly during Italy's student protest of 1989-1990, known as the 'Panther' (*la Pantera*).<sup>42</sup> This was a formative episode for the coop, which was founded three years after it. *La Pantera* was a grass-roots university movement that saw faculties all over Italy occupied against proposed reforms of the academia. The reforms would have allowed for the private funding of public research institutions and for the companies providing it to gain seats on faculty senates. At the time, students claimed this would give an unfair advantage to scientific over social and humanities faculties, and to the north of Italy, where industry is stronger, over the south.

The movement was inspired by anti-authoritarian ideals, pacifism and, following Italy's post-war legacy, anti-fascism. In keeping with its self-managed nature, alternative teaching and research models were developed in the occupied universities. Seminars and courses were run autonomously from (or in collaboration with some) lecturers, and small thematic libraries were opened by students inside faculties. The belief was that only autonomous and participatory study, not 'frontal lessons' (*lezioni frontali*), is worthwhile. Many people currently active in grass-roots politics in Palermo began their militancy during the Panther, a fact which is often acknowledged by them.

Franco was not the only member of Sodalis who experienced the Panther in his student years. Dario, another of the coop's founders, was a student of the Humanities Faculty where the movement actually kicked off. He met Franco during university, and graduated with a dissertation on 'the cultures of peace and war'. He then opted for a year of national community service (*servizio civile*) instead of military service, at the time compulsory, working on immigration-related projects of a social and educational nature with the local branch of Caritas (the charitable 'arm' of the Catholic Church's Episcopal Conference). He was then employed for some time as a schoolteacher. Now in his early forties like Franco, Dario lived in the north of Italy where he was the vice-president of the 'Pedagogic Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution', an institute specialising in nonviolent conflict management courses. Though he didn't live in Palermo anymore, Dario

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<sup>42</sup> The name originated in Rome after an alleged 'panther' had been sighted around the city. The slogan 'we are the panther' (*la pantera siamo noi*) was then coined by two young advertisers and suggested to local students, and soon appropriated by the whole movement.

was still a member of the Sodalìs cooperative and, much like Riccardo, promoted its image with the public whenever possible.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, there were Elena and Roberta. Elena, Dario's younger sister and also one of the coop's founders, began university the year the Panther movement emerged. She had worked as a teacher and a pedagogue in Palermo's non-profit sector, following a similar trajectory to her brother's, and was president of the cooperative and its shop manager. She lived in the working-class neighbourhood *Noce*. Roberta was the other woman working member of the coop. Her father had worked for the local railways, and she had grown up with her family in the area around Palermo's main rail station, also a modest neighbourhood. In the 1980s her parents joined a housing cooperative and moved to a newly built tower block in the *Sperone* area, quite distant from Palermo proper, on its southern outskirts along the coast. When they moved to the area there were no asphalted roads, and to reach the main one where the bus stop was they had to walk through a lemon orchard, getting covered in mud during winters. There were no private telephone lines, and people had to use the public phone in the square. Roberta didn't go to university, but started working soon after finishing high school.

Equalìs was Palermo's other fair-trade coop. This was a small worker cooperative made up of just three members, of which only two, Gabriele and Antonella, were involved in the business (the third member was employed as a teacher). The story of Equalìs was entangled with that of the older Sodalìs. Gabriele, in fact, had been a founding member of the latter coop. In his mid-forties and with a degree in architecture, he had met Dario while they were both carrying out national community service, and was introduced by him to the rest of the group above. However, in 2000 the Sodalìs coop split, following unresolved tensions, and shop and warehouse became separate organisations. The name 'Sodalìs' was kept by the coop that owned the warehouse, while Gabriele stayed at the head of the shop (which acquired another name).

Two years before my arrival in the field, Gabriele abandoned the shop for reasons that I was unable to ascertain, and founded his own new coop and shop—Equalìs. The people he left at the other shop eventually failed to cope, and thus asked the Sodalìs

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<sup>43</sup> I met Dario when he represented Sodalìs at a conference on 'ethical consumption' organised by Palermo's antimafia association *Addiopizzo* ('Goodbye Racket').

warehouse group to take back ownership of the store they had originally contributed to found (which became known again as Sodalis). Gabriele opened the new shop with his partner Antonella, a thirty-six year old with a degree in political sciences, who had worked in the past for the town council of one of the many small cities of Palermo's province. She had left this job out of disaffection and boredom.

## 5.1 Fair-trade as workers' self-help

The cooperative value of self-help ... reminds us how cooperation, in every time and place, has grown relying on its own strengths, on the labour and ideals of its members.

(Sapelli 2006: 23)

The cases discussed in the paragraphs above illustrate how Palermitan fair-traders were active in social movements and associations both in the past and the present. Such activism is an important element to understand participants' involvement with fair-trade. However, those who set up the first fair-trade cooperative in the city explained their action as the consequence of a different set of motives: their need to find employment in a land characterised by economic hardship.

Lavoro vero *and* necessità

During the second October that I spent in the field (2007), I attended a meeting on 'Fair-trade and ethical consumption in Palermo' held on the main campus (there are many) of the University, quite close to my flat in the *Albergheria* neighbourhood. The campus is a vast area enclosed by concrete walls and accessed through tall gates. A main road crosses it, and secondary arteries lead to the various buildings. The only two green spaces inside it represent the lucky remains of the rural land on which the campus was built, their trees providing much-welcomed shade during Sicily's long spring-summer. Shrubs and dwarf palms in concrete beds also testify to the Mediterranean climate. As in the rest of the city, cars are parked everywhere on campus, and traffic jams are thus common. Though popular with joggers, the feeling of the area is the same one as for any other part of town (but

without shops), something unwittingly acknowledged in the official name of *la città universitaria*: ‘the university’s city’.

The meeting was organised by a student group called Al-Janub, from the degree in international cooperation of the Faculty of Economics. There were two guest speakers: Riccardo, member of the Sodalìs coop; and Gabriele, from Equalis. Al-Janub promoted awareness of developing countries’ current problems through movie screenings on Africa and Latin America, or events with local migrant communities, and information about the possibilities offered by development work. It collaborated with a local non-governmental organization called CISS – the acronym for ‘South-South International Cooperation’. It isn’t hard to think of this student group as part of the Panther’s broad legacy, as self-managed seminars and student-run libraries are still today a feature of faculties such as the Humanities one in Palermo. It therefore seems particularly apt that the Sodalìs coop, which originated from this movement, should end up talking of its experience to the students of Al-Janub, many of whom were enrolled at the same Faculty of Economics from which Franco, for example, had graduated himself. The group was based in a hut in front of the Economics Faculty, from where they also sold some fair-trade items. The meeting took place there, with about twenty chairs spread around the hut.

Halfway through the discussion, I began to wonder if attending had not been a waste of time, as the tone was very generic. Then a student asked: “Why is fair-trade, like the wholesalers, the shops, and also the consumers, mainly concentrated in the north of Italy?”. Gabriele answered by referring vaguely to the “cultural and economic problems” of southern Italy. Riccardo elaborated further on this theme by saying:

The point is that historically, fair-trade was born out of voluntary organisations and associations. So it has suffered from the south’s late arrival in this sector. You have to realize that until the beginning of the 1980s there wasn’t a single NGO from Naples – included – downwards. Then one opened in Catania.

Bearing in mind here the stories discussed above, Riccardo’s reference to ‘voluntary organisations and associations’ as fair-trade’s general milieu of origin was all in all a good description of the Palermitan case. Clearly, it was Riccardo’s ‘insider knowledge’ of both these social and cultural dynamics, and of fair-trade, that made his portrayal an accurate one of the development of fair-trade in Palermo. But this part was only half the story.

When the discussion touched upon the thorny issue of selling fair-trade products in supermarkets, in fact, Riccardo told his audience:

Personally I'm in favour of it, I don't think it compromises you. I mean, why didn't Sodalìs choose an emporium [*uno spaccio*] but decided to open a proper shop? Because it didn't seem fair to us to stay on some church's premises and sell from there, not paying a rent etcetera. [with emphasis] We wanted to actually trade, we wanted a real job [*volevamo fare un commercio a tutti gli effetti, un lavoro vero*].

Riccardo appeared to have switched levels. Initially, he had referred to fair-trade for the whole of Italy, though pointing out the south's 'late arrival', and to those involved in it without distinctions (for example between consumers and workers). What he said was applicable to fair-trade in Sicily as elsewhere. But the point above was a personal one, specific to the Sodalìs group and their motivations. Participation in social movements and associations was not sufficient on its own to explain the setting up of the business. Riccardo's words disclose another, more immediate reason to establish the cooperative: the *necessity*, for a group of people who had been involved in civil society's groundwork, to find a job in the local labour market.<sup>44</sup>

'Necessity' was Franco's term of choice, the person in charge of Sodalìs' commercial relations, whose use of the term expressed very clearly the sense of difficulty, almost anguish, connoting their decision to start a fair-trade business in Sicily. During one of my days spent unpacking and sorting at the coop's warehouse (see chapter 6), I was telling Franco of rumours I had heard that someone planned to open a new fair-trade shop in town. Initially surprised, Franco wondered if the hypothetical new store would end up being another case of a fair-trade shop that went bust in Palermo (at the time, there had already been two such failures, with one outlet closing twice). Then he said: "In the south of Italy fair-trade shops are opened out of necessity [*necessità*]: someone needs a job and decides to open one. Sodalìs also started like this".

Sodalìs was an established commercial reality and, at least from the outside, a healthy one. But the prospect of failure was an ever-present concern for Franco, probably given his knowledge of the city's past troubled fair-trade experiences and of how hard the early

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<sup>44</sup> This is not to say that protest and social commitment represent simply 'background'. The values inherent in these personal experiences probably influenced the decision to choose a cooperative instead of another form of enterprise.

stages of the business usually were (see also below). Clearly, he considered his coop's existence a substantial achievement. (The important geographical contrast implicit in Franco's words is analysed in detail in section 5.2.)

That Franco's views were not idiosyncratic was confirmed by a conversation I had with Gabriele of Equalis. As I mentioned previously, Gabriele had originally been one of the founders of Sodalis. I was volunteering at his new shop when he shared some memories of this previous experience:

When I was at the other shop, I noticed how at the beginning people used to come and ask to join the cooperative. But then things changed and they started asking how to create their own cooperative, how to open a new shop. I remember especially two guys who once came and asked me if at the beginning one made at least one million, one million two hundred a month [in *Lire*, Italy's old currency, roughly €70]. I told them: 'you're crazy!'".

Gabriele then suggested how the episode showed a change had occurred in people's perceptions of Sodalis' business. For him, the shift from inquiring as to join the already existing coop as new members, to asking how to start another similar initiative, was due to the fact that their group had proved to be successful on the market and that Palermitans in search of employment were thus trying to imitate it. In fact, the new coop founded by Gabriele himself and Antonella provided a very interesting point of reference to his story about the beginnings of the older coop, illustrating well the different phases that a fair-trade organisations wanting to create wages had to undergo.

For about one year after they had opened the shop, when customers asked Gabriele and Antonella, out of politeness, "How is the shop going?", their answer remained always the same: "Not too bad after all, but it still can't remunerate labour [*retribuire lavoro*]". Since the beginning, the pair had been working without receiving an income from their activity. Although at the end of the month their accounts were in order (they were not in the red), they still didn't make enough money for a proper income. These words regularly prompted clients to ask them how they managed to live, to which they replied: "By reducing all expenses to the indispensable minimum, and with some savings". Then one day, Antonella explained to a woman how they had finally managed to "incorporate Gabriele in the job [*fare l'inserimento lavoro di Gabriele*], and create a pay cheque [*una*

*busta paga*] for him”. However, she added the pay cheque “will arrive months late, in March he’ll get September’s pay cheque” (I was never able to clarify this point.)

Perhaps not surprisingly, Gabriele and Antonella saw the initial job prospects offered by fair-trade retailing quite negatively. In this regard, they once told me how “fair-trade isn’t a job that can give satisfactions at work [*soddisfazioni lavorative*] immediately, but only very slowly. And it will give very little overall”. They said that when a shop is at the beginning of its ‘life’, it made very little money, so the only thing one could do was not pay the workers, “because you have to pay the rent, otherwise they kick you out. Same thing with the bills, otherwise they cut your electricity. And obviously you have to pay the suppliers, otherwise you can’t make new orders. You pay pension contributions because you have to by law”. In the case of such a small cooperative, not paying workers meant it was themselves who were without an income.

### *Making a living in Sicily*

Riccardo’s words on the group’s desire to make a ‘real job’ out of fair-trade, Franco’s on the ‘necessity’ of finding employment as their original motivation, and Gabriele’s on the public perception of the first coop, all point to the cooperative value of self-help (e.g. Ronco 1983). Since its birth in England in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, labour cooperation has both spread worldwide and changed dramatically during this process (Karafolas et al. 2004). In some countries, like Italy itself or Spain, worker cooperatives have reached great sizes, employing thousands of people (e.g. Bartlett 1992). In such cases, mutualism has often been compromised by the need for professional management and the search for large-scale ‘profits’ (Holmström 1989; Sharryn 1996). However, the presence of self-help as a core element of smaller worker coops has been consistently demonstrated throughout the long history of labour cooperation’s (see Morris 2004; Smiles 1859; Young & Rigge 1979). In the case of these smaller organisations, the essence of self-help lies in the fact that they “aris[e] out of conditions of hardships or disillusion caused by capitalist development” (Thornley 1981: 2).<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> A slightly different issue is that of coops resulting from the conversion of failed capitalist enterprises (e.g. Holmstrom 1989: 26, and Sapelli 2006: 67).

Thornley also writes: “Workers’ co-operatives are rooted in the struggles of working people to emancipate themselves from wretched conditions. Widespread suffering [leads] them to form numerous associations to help one another” (p. 10). Studies of the cultural, economic and historical roots of labour cooperation all share this emphasis, from the classics (Cole 1944, Webb 1912), to the works that accompanied its renewed flourishing in the 1970s (like Thornley 1981), to present-day scholarship (Sapelli 2006). This aspect was evident in the origins of both the first and the latest of Palermitan fair-trade coops. *Equalis* was in fact set up by Gabriele and his partner Antonella with the explicit aim of creating for themselves a source of income.

For Palermitan fair-traders, economic hardship took on the shape of high levels of unemployment, particularly for the young and for university graduates. As I show in a moment, such difficult economic conditions were also inseparably linked to socio-cultural ones. Unemployment has been for decades an enduring characteristic of the southern Italian economy, and of Sicily in particular (see chapter 2). Frey (1991) and Trigilia (1994) provide a picture of the southern labour market’s depressed conditions during the years that preceded the birth of Palermo’s first fair-trade cooperative. Frey notes that in the second half of the 1980s, centre-north regions in Italy all experienced significant reductions in unemployment. However, in the same period, southern regions not only missed out on this positive trend, but saw unemployment rise dramatically (1991: 160-3). In Sicily, unemployment and under-employment rose, between 1986 and 1988, respectively from 16 to 22%, and from 20 to 27%. Trigilia writes:

In 1990 [the rate of unemployment] in the south was 19.7 percent, compared to 6.5 percent in the centre-north. Its weight is greater not only for the young between 14 and 29 years of age, amongst whom it is as much as three times higher than in the northern regions, but also for those between the ages of 30 and 50. This group exhibits virtually full employment in the north, but an unemployment rate of 9 percent in the south. (1994: 40-41)

In Palermo, small commerce (formal or informal) has historically acted as a safety net for people who were under- and un-employed (chapter 2). This is not to say the strategy was ever effective. However, although it is not uncommon for Palermitans to try their fortunes in small business, they almost never choose cooperatives as a form of enterprise. This wider trend also offers a new perspective on the fair-traders’ political and ethical values: though

their decision to open a shop was not atypical, founding a worker coop was and represented an expression of very specific values and conditions.

The importance of self-help vis-à-vis high levels of unemployment acquires further significance when one considers southern Italian citizens' historic reliance on the provision of public sector jobs, with its negative cultural and political consequences (Trigilia 1992). As the site of the regional government, Palermo has always been an exemplary case of such consequences, with one author (Crisantino 1990) describing it as a 'hypertrophied tertiary' city. In its fragile economy, dependent on external cash flows, requests for public sector jobs were greater than the sector's capacity to generate employment. After the second world war, this dynamic ultimately created a particular system of patronage linked to the administration of state development funds (e.g. Chubb 1982. See also Gellner & Waterbury 1977 for a general introduction to patronage systems, mostly rural, in the Mediterranean, and Blok 2001 for a reappraisal of this field).

In order to get a job through a competition (*concorso*), or a licence related to work, and also for career advancements, pay rises, etc., Palermitans compete to secure 'recommendations' (*raccomandazioni*) from individuals in positions of power. In the process they become socially, and sometimes economically, indebted to them. Insofar as patronage is based on such forms of unequal exchange and vertical dyadic ties, it stands in almost perfect contrast to the horizontal cooperative value of mutualism (patronage is often connoted by idioms of fictive kinship indicating vertical ties). As I mentioned above, for example, Antonella of the Equalis coop had first-hand experience of working in the public administration. Her memories of this job were highly negative, especially with regards those aspects of it that bore on the effect it could have on an individual's character.

Antonella had been an assistant to the person in charge of the office dealing with building contracts, in one of the many small cities located in Palermo's province. Throughout this job she had witnessed 'inexplicable' things happening on numerous occasions, like individuals who could obviously hardly read nor write signing contracts accompanied by 'friends'. This is what she had to say about this part of her life-history:

There's a big difference between public and private employment, because in the first case one can be a poor [*scarso*] worker, inefficient, she can make mistakes, and nothing ever happens to her. The job is guaranteed, so is the salary. Nobody checks

on you. Doing a good job depends only on your own will, but it's not a necessity, it depends on your ethics. On the other hand, in private [self-]employment you've always got someone breathing on your shoulder, on your back. You're always chased by a thousand things to which you have to pay complete attention. You can't take a wrong step. If you do, you immediately pay the consequences on your own skin [*paghi immediatamente le conseguenze sulla tua pelle*].

I took these words as an accurate reflection of some of Antonella's feelings regarding her new job. But her story also made testimony to her values. She had in fact decided not to continue working for the town council (from which she used to go home 'feeling completely useless'), something that I confess surprised me enormously, given she renounced one of the most sought after and culturally valued jobs on the island, and indeed in the whole of southern Italy: a place in the public administration.

The philosophy of labour cooperation is based on an ideal of 'democratic participation in the workplace' (Mori 2008: 35-39), which resonates with those values of equality, solidarity and self-determination expressed in fair-traders' past and present engagements. This represents a possible point of intersection between individuals' life-histories and their need for employment, which might have also influenced the choice of the cooperative form of enterprise over other forms. The imitation of enterprise forms already established elsewhere in the commodity network is also a factor to take into account. Sodalis was by no means the *first* fair-trade retail coop in Italy. My argument here is about the local realisation of the dynamics in question. It is therefore not impossible that fair-trade cooperatives elsewhere might have been inspired by the same 'compromise' between civil society and the need for employment (but see below for further analysis).

## **5.2 The value of wage labour in an unequal country**

Alienation is the consequence of the workers' (con)fusion of the ideology of labour as a free gift and the ideology of labour as a purely utilitarian activity, *rather than their sharp separation*.

(Mollona 2005: 1, italics added)

The reason given by Palermitan fair-traders to explain the birth of their cooperatives—a need for work—was also central to their everyday understanding of this labour practice.

Participants broadly used the same set of values when talking about their current situation as they did for their beginnings. But a change in time frame, past or present, triggered an important conceptual shift. While for the past coop members emphasised unemployment, for the present they spoke of the need to earn incomes and pay their employees' salaries. Achieving these aims was perceived as a constant struggle, and one typical of the Italian south. Participants therefore contrasted both their daily material lives and the labour imaginary that ensued from them to the lives and imaginaries of fair-traders in the north. This aspect of the ethnography, which I call the livelihood divide, is the central theme of this section.

*On volunteers, stentare to pay salaries, and not 'screwing up'*

During one of the many mornings I spent helping out at Equalis' shop, I found Antonella chatting with a customer who in the past had been involved with fair-trade on mainland Italy. As they exchanged views, they came to the issue of price mark-ups for fair-trade goods. The man was adamant that these "are too low, they should be raised. After all fair-trade shops are still commercial stores, they have high operating costs [*costi vivi alti*]". Antonella agreed, and brought as examples the cost of rents and other living costs in cities of different size. The customer continued by saying that he didn't agree with what he considered the widespread but unofficial 'policy' of running fair-trade shops entirely through the use of volunteers, something which he saw as a consequence precisely of not being able to cope with normal operating costs. Antonella again agreed and commented, putting a strong emphasis on the last part of her sentence: "Of course. If you rely entirely on volunteers, it means that alternative trade isn't possible".

Antonella's words connect to those spoken by Riccardo about wanting to 'actually trade' (*fare un commercio a tutti gli effetti*) in order to create their own employment. (The issue of renting premises also recalls Riccardo's remark on 'selling from a church'.) In Antonella, the discourse was centred on a present-time exclusion of volunteering from what she considered the proper model of fair-trading. On the one hand, her conversation with the customer painted a picture of fair-trade in Italy as a commercial activity that relied heavily on charitable labour. On the other, it also testified to how strongly she felt the contrast between this charity-based fair-trade and the one she partook in, which was based on paid labour. Both aspects were central to Palermitan fair-traders' labour identity.

Whilst in the field, I attended a one-day conference in Rome convened by the oldest and largest Italian alternative trade organization (ATO), *CTM Altromercato*. At this conference a report entitled ‘The sustainability of fair-trade shops’ was presented, which dealt with the capacity of CTM’s shops to sustain themselves economically in the medium-long term. One day soon after the conference, I was helping Franco put together an order in the coop’s warehouse (see also chapter 6), and decided to ask him his opinion regarding the report’s figures that showed the majority of CTM’s retail outlets having very few paid staff.<sup>46</sup>

Franco [slightly mocking, sarcastic]: “In fact the sustainability of fair-trade shops doesn’t exist. The truth with fair-trade is that if you decide to pay salaries – and even so, poor ones – you struggle [*stenti*, from the verb *stentare*].”

G.O.: “So how does CTM manage to run so many outlets?”

Franco: “Have you got any idea of who stays in shops there? Old grannies with nothing else to do, or people who’ve already got a job. I know a person who’s got an estate agency that buys and sells rural houses for renovation. He’s got billions, then on a Saturday he volunteers in a shop. Hello?! I would volunteer as well if I were him! The point is that these are people who’ve always found a job easily. In the north people already have a job, and open a fair-trade shop made entirely of volunteers. They open them out of conviction, not out of necessity [*necessità*].”

Like Antonella, Franco separated a volunteer fair-trade from his ‘salaried’ version, but he also added an important spatial dimension to such contrast, mapping the first opposition onto a second, geographical one: that between the north and south of Italy. This shift in emphasis points directly to the wider context of relevance in which his thoughts and those of the other fair-traders discussed below acquired significance.

As was the case with the connection between Antonella and Riccardo’s opinions highlighted above, the issue of paid work and volunteering appeared closely linked to that of the original employment motive also by Franco. In his case, the linkage took the form of a renewed use of the key term ‘necessity’, this time connoted through a north-south contrast. I don’t think Franco’s words on that occasion can be interpreted also as a

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<sup>46</sup> ‘CTM’ stands for *Cooperazione Terzo Mondo*, Italian for ‘third-world cooperation’; *Altromercato* roughly translates as ‘another-market’. The organisation is a consortium, or second-degree cooperative: a coop made up of smaller ones as constituent members (those running individual fair-trade outlets). The document (Rinaldi 2007) shows that 43% of the shops belonging to the CTM consortium have an average of two full-time staff, and 38% no paid staff, relying entirely on volunteers. I thought these figures surprising given CTM is not only by far the biggest ATO in Italy (both in terms of sales and number of shops), it also ranks second in Europe after Germany’s GEPA (EFTA 2001).

suggestion that people in the south open fair-trade shops *without* a true commitment, but only to get a job. In my view he was pointing to an ‘extra element’ that characterised, for him, the movement in the south.

Recent surveys support Franco’s view that voluntary work dominates fair-trade’s retail network (the shops), though not necessarily its wholesale one (the ATOs). A study (Barbetta 2006) published the year I began fieldwork gives the following picture. At the time, Italy’s eight main ATOs employed 155 individuals, while the country’s 485 fair-trade shops employed 373 individuals and relied on 4.412 volunteers (Barbetta 2006: 25). These figures translate in an average of 0.8 employees per physical shop, or 1 per organisation (some groups own multiple shops), compared to a ratio of 9 volunteers per shop, or 13 per organisation.<sup>47</sup> There are no figures on ATOs’ reliance on volunteers in the study. This fact, together with information on this issue I gathered in the field, suggest these organisations rely only on paid staff. Participants’ view of the separation between different kinds of fair-trade labour thus referred to the shops, which are overwhelmingly the largest component of the commodity network and are, as a result of this, its ‘public face’.

Franco also spoke of a ‘struggle’ to pay salaries. Figures for the average gross earnings of fair-trade’s (few) employees show that non-profit organisations pay higher wages (between €16.000 and €18.000 per year) than cooperatives (€15.000-€17.000); this would appear to make sense if non-profits rely more on volunteers and less on paid employees. The highest gross incomes are found in the country’s north-west (between €17.000 and €18.000 yearly), followed by the north-east (€15.000-€17.000), and the south (€15.000-€16.000). As I will show in a moment, Franco explicitly linked the reliance on volunteers to the legal status of many fair-trade actors as ‘associations’, again contrasting this issue to that of generating income for paid staff. In fact, 52% of fair-trade shops are managed by associations, while 24% by worker cooperatives (capitalist enterprises run 4% of the total [see Barbetta 2006]). This data also indirectly confirms the geographical opposition between volunteering and working proposed by Franco, given that by far the majority of fair-trade shops—and hence of voluntary associations—are located in the centre-north of Italy.

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<sup>47</sup> These figures result from aggregating all types of employee into ‘full-time equivalents’. Those actually working, with different forms of contracts, are 940 (which gives averages of 1.9 employees per outlet or 2.5 per organisation). See also chapter 6 for further discussion.

Having to generate their income, and the feelings attached to this fact, were central to Palermitan fair-traders' concepts of labour. This was true both of their views about their own work and also of that of other actors in the movement, to which they compared themselves. Both Antonella's and Franco's cases reveal this clearly. Franco showed how these themes were weaved into the fabric of the coop's everyday business when, at the beginning of my fieldwork, I approached Sodalìs asking to volunteer for them. Initially, Franco replied that he didn't want to exploit me by making me volunteer (for the implications of this particular remark, see also chapter 6). I therefore told him that I wouldn't see it as exploitation, partly because I wanted to do it, partly because I had an income in the form of my PhD studentship. He replied saying he could see my points, but added that there were two other problems.

The first resulted from Sodalìs' status "of worker cooperative, not an *onlus* [a type of non-profit organisation]". This meant that they were not legally allowed to use volunteers, who could be likened to illegal workers (*lavoratori in nero*) by the trade unions or Palermo's labour inspectorate. Franco acknowledged it was highly unlikely that the inspectorate would check a very small business such as the fair-trade shop. The second concern was more pressing for him:

I worry that without a role [*una collocazione*] after two days you get bored and decide to do things yourself [*farti le cose tu*]. We can't afford to have people in the shop that do harm [*fanno danno*]. We're an enterprise with employees. [heavy matter-of-fact tone] At the end of the month I have to guarantee seven salaries. We're not an association, where if someone screws up [*combina cazzate*] there are no consequences.

I would understand fully the meaning of Franco's warning after some months. At the time, the only plausible justification that occurred to me was the danger of knocking over or dropping a bottle of expensive Chilean wine, or something of the sort.

The sacking of a shop assistant (not a coop member) was the revealing event. After the crucial period of Christmas shopping (see also chapter 6), an assistant who had only recently been hired was dismissed on the grounds that she was "not fit" for the job. The cooperative thought her "attitude" had not been well received by customers, and that she hadn't got on well with the rest of the group (one person later admitted to me that "no one could stand her"). Franco gave me the following motivation for the sacking: "You see,

when you run a shop it's important to have not only the right goods [*le cose giuste*], but also the right people. This is something you cannot underestimate, otherwise you hit the wall. When we employed that particular shop assistant, we received some complaints from our customers". (For a discussion of issues related to this one, see also chapter 6.)

After this episode, I understood how, during our first meeting, Franco had not referred to the possibility that I could break something valuable (or at least, not only to this possibility). He had referred to the problems that I—like the sacked shop assistant—could create with other workers and especially with customers, and hence to the coop's sales. This in turn could have ended up damaging the group's ability to pay salaries. In his view, this possibility firmly separated the kind of fair-trade practised by his coop from that of non-profit fair-trade "associations" that do not confront the same pressures, given their reliance on charitable labour.

#### *Tracing work imaginaries across the livelihood divide*

The value attributed by Palermitan fair-traders to their work emerges as the main theme in the episodes discussed above. Central to this value is an opposition between labour as a commodity and as a gift. This opposition was manifested by participants through the radically different ways in which the two kinds of labour supporting fair-trade retail—wage and charitable—were seen. The labour value changed profoundly, both rationally and emotionally, whether a salary accompanied work or not. Only in the former case was work recognised as constituting proper fair-trade. Antonella's remark on the (mis-)use of free work to develop alternative forms of trade points to this crucial dualism. The same was true of Franco, who once also told me: "Fair-trade is often seen just as charity, especially in religious contexts. [strong emphasis] But we *work* with producers in the South, we *trade* with them". (As I showed in chapter 3, the same issue—a distancing from charity—arises in the ethnography of fair-trade consumption.)

In volume one of *Capital*, Marx (1999) explained wage labour as the commodification of human beings' physical and cognitive capacities to transform their world—their capacity to work. He saw this as the result of the institutionalisation of a market where labour itself could be sold and bought, something that had fundamental consequences for how workers conceived the value of their efforts. Marx grouped such

consequences under the concept of ‘alienation’. Of the slightly different processes belonging in this rubric, the one relevant to my present argument is the symbolic construction of work as an action done in exchange for a salary.

Graeber (2001) notes how Marx revealed the central role money plays in measuring human actions (work) when he drew attention to its role as the primary end of labourers’ efforts. According to Graeber (p. 67): “In money, workers see the meaning or importance of their own creative energies”. Labour under a market regime is thus conceived as the exchange of efforts of time and energy in return for monetary value. For Marx, this arrangement was detrimental to workers as social beings. Because he saw labour as an activity that contributed to society’s creation, and that had to be recognised as such, Marx thought that when labourers sold their work on the anonymous market they inevitably lost track precisely of the social meaning of their work. This process resulted in alienation.

Volunteering, though seldom directly addressed by anthropologists, is often interpreted as a form of non-commodified, non-alienated labour. In a recent volume on the comparative anthropology of work, for example, Dilly parallels Marx’s various aspects of alienation when she writes that “participation in a volunteer labor force ... counters the alienation from self, production, product, and community so frequently experienced by wage and semiprofessional laborers” (2006: 309). This interpretation ultimately rests on the opposition between charitable labour as a form of gift-giving<sup>48</sup> and working for a salary as a form of selling. Contrasting gift economies to market ones where work is commodified has been an influential trend in the vast anthropological scholarship on gift and commodities, and probably explains why wage labour and the problematic of gift-giving are often approached together. Whereas selling one’s labour is generally seen as negative, as de-socialising and contributing to workers’ alienation from society, giving is seen in the opposite way, positively and as a source of new human relations.

There are, of course, many types of gift relations (see also chapter 1). Much research on charitable labour has centred on the opposition between altruism and self-interest (see Dilly 2006: 309-309), often influenced by economists (Brown 1999) and sociologists

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<sup>48</sup> As a form of giving, charitable labour presupposes a relation between two parties, the giver and the recipient. My emphasis is not on this relation per se, but on the former pole only. In particular, it is a comparison between the ‘giver’ in two different geographical locales, as I am interested in understanding how coop workers saw those who gave their time and energy in fair-trade retail for free.

(Borgatti et al. 1998).<sup>49</sup> Similar approaches can be easily seen as reflecting the contrast between an alleged ‘pure (or free) gift’—something given with no expectation of a return at any point—and other types of gifts or, ultimately, of commodity exchange (in this case, the selling of labour). Both the existence in industrial societies and the heuristic value of a concept of selfless gift have been criticised by anthropologists as “simply an impossible mirror image of [pure self-interest]” (Graeber 2001: 155, also pp. 160-1), the latter concept being itself one that can be imagined only under market regimes (see also Hart 2007).<sup>50</sup> I believe part of the problem originated from difficulties in defining those relations of exchange in non-industrial contexts that Mauss (2002) termed ‘total prestation’ and Sahlins (1972) ‘generalised reciprocity’. Parry (1986: 467) has argued that “an elaborated ideology of the ‘pure gift’ is most likely to develop in state societies with an advanced division of labour and a significant commercial sector”. I would add that the accompanying tendency among capitalist societies’ inhabitants (including anthropologists) to see any form of return as self-interest easily leads to viewing generalised reciprocity, *where return appears absent*, as close to our own ‘pure’ gifts.

Whether or not Palermo’s fair-traders believed that volunteers ‘got something out of it’ (expertise, gratification, social capital), and were thus also motivated by self-interest, is beside the point here. What is evident from the ethnography is how they emphasised, above all, the fact that charitable work was free: it did not receive monetary compensation. Insofar as this was their main criterion for evaluating labour value, it can be said they saw volunteering as what is usually called a free gift. What is interesting about the data, then, is that fair-traders saw salaried fair-trade work positively and volunteering negatively, seemingly contradicting the scholarship on alienation and reciprocity that sees the former kind of labour as commodified and the latter as (freely) gifted. I suggest that wage labour was thought of as having positive social value because for Palermitan workers it represented their agency in a wider social system of exchange framed by the idea of

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<sup>49</sup> An interesting example of contemporary anthropological scholarship on volunteering was a workshop held at the 2008 biennial conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists. Entitled ‘Getting behind the “No man is an island” phrase: volunteering between altruism and self-interest’, the workshop’s abstract stated: “According to many explanations (not only anthropological, but also psychological, biological and economic) such activities exists not only to unselfishly help others, but also to improve an individual’s knowledge and reputation”.

<sup>50</sup> Economists and anthropologists inspired by economics also reject the notion of a pure gift, but do so from a completely opposite standpoint. They believe precisely in the idea of self-interest as a universal motive that automatically subsumes anything a person might receive ‘in return’ for a gift.

southern Italy's unequal development. Within this system, charitable labour took on negative significance because it was conceived of not as the pure gift discussed above, but as an exchange taking place in an intrinsically unequal context. For participants, charitable labour was practically possible, and morally acceptable, only when the wider social exchange was justly balanced. I explain these points below.

Graeber (2001: 222-224) has done important work in uncovering the role of ideas of equality in human economic exchange. His discussion (2001: 225, also pp. 218-9) of a possible typology of gift relations shows here that charity cannot be considered automatically a form of total prestation (with Mauss) or generalised reciprocity (with Sahlins). The reason for this is twofold. First, because such relations are in fact not 'free' in the sense that the giver receives nothing in exchange—on which the scholarship on charity draws—being founded on a somewhat opposite premise: that a person gives with no expectation of return because she knows she can herself take back at any time without asking (what Graeber, following Mauss, calls 'individualistic communism' 2001: 159, 225). Secondly, because this possibility presupposes an idea of reciprocity "defined as one in which two parties act, or are disposed to act, towards one another in equivalent ways" (p. 225). A volunteer, however, cannot expect to get the time and energy spent in her charitable work back from those to whom she gave them (nor can she take anything from the shop). From a perspective as the one just discussed, then, this gift exchange relation is unequal.<sup>51</sup>

Both Antonella and Franco saw (correctly) fair-trade's commodity network as one based on charitable work, and judged this negatively. In the latter's opinion, what explained this vast reliance on volunteers among fair-trade shops was that paying salaries with fair-trade is difficult (*stentare*), something he considered an inevitable feature of the business. What allowed this particular arrangement to exist, then, was that volunteers were individuals who had their primary source of income outside fair-trade: pensioners, or working people with other jobs. A fact in turn linked to the higher rates of employment

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<sup>51</sup> Graeber's example, borrowed from Testart, deals specifically with giving money to beggars. This relation is intrinsically unbalanced because you cannot ask the poor to whom you gave money for something in return, nor will your act "make said beggar inclined to offer you a dollar if you run into him again" (Graeber 2001: 225).

historically enjoyed by Italians living in the centre-north.<sup>52</sup> The emphasis, often emotional, put on this point by participants indicates how they saw it as the most important difference from their fellow fair-traders.

The idea of a charitable fair-trade in Sicily appeared unjust insofar as Palermitan fair-traders had not received the same chances as those in the centre-north of Italy. For these Italians, volunteering was part of an overall less unequal system of exchange because—in Franco’s words—“they have always found employment easily”. These individuals had been provided with good job opportunities by their wider social and economic community, and ‘in return’ had decided—because they could—to volunteer.<sup>53</sup> Franco’s use of a generic “there” in reference to where such conditions applied (“Have you got any idea of who stays in shops there? Old grannies...”) constructed a geographical contrast with a ‘here’ that he identified with the story of his cooperative. His words, then, pointed to the social and economic milieus of origin of those involved in fair-trade enterprises as a key factor in understanding how this labour practice was conceived of locally. Again, we see how the categories of ‘commodified’ and ‘gifted’ are mixed, charitable labour being less ‘free’ than initially assumed.

In a study of Buddhist charity among Thai peasants, Bowie (1998: 474) notes that the capacity to give should always be interpreted as relative to one’s broader social and economic ability. The following passage is particularly insightful with regards to the present analysis:

Although charity may appear unidirectional to its participants, when charity is considered in the context of a class stratified society in which exploitation has generated social inequality, it is not so easy to determine the directionality of relative benefits. ... In a complex society, what appears at one moment as generalized

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<sup>52</sup> I don’t think Franco was suggesting that the people in question are necessarily rich, his reference to ‘billions’ in the previous sub-section being somewhat theatrical (or perhaps a one-off case). He was pointing to the average – one could say statistical – economic difference between the north and the south.

<sup>53</sup> Though Franco did not mention this, it is plausible that such differences can result not only in a willingness (or simply capacity) to invest time and energy volunteering in fair-trade shops, but also in one to invest capital setting these up. This could be another factor explaining the stronger presence of fair-trade organisations in the centre-north of the country. Franco, then, appeared to hint at a sequence of events, both temporal and logical, for Italian fair-traders in different regions: an individual living in the south ‘needs a job and decides to open a fair-trade shop’ (as discussed in section 5.1), an individual living in the north ‘finds a job easily, then opens a fair-trade shop’. Though there is no independent data to support Franco’s claim that fair-traders in the centre-north enter the business as a form of charity, and thus set up associations of volunteers, the figures given previously are compatible with this an interpretation.

reciprocity suddenly may easily be transformed into part of the negative reciprocity of exploitation. (1998: 477)

For Antonella and Franco, fair-trade was synonymous with employment, thus with waged not charitable work, and from their point of view it could hardly have been otherwise. The need to make a living out of fair-trade, and thus for it to be recognised as a *true job* by others who come into contact with it (as workers, customers and sympathizers), was apparent in participants' words.

This dual divide in livelihood—both material and symbolic—was the decisive factor influencing fair-traders' beliefs about the nature of work in Palermo, thus separating their identity from those of fair-traders in the north of Italy. The livelihood divide sheds light, then, on the coop's fear of people who might damage their work, and on their actions (firing an employee). In a system where the majority of fair-trade outlets have only one full-time member of staff and are often associations, if somebody 'screws up' there are few consequences. The group might cease to exist, maybe with considerable disappointment, but the people involved in it will simply return to their lives. However, when there are livelihoods at stake, as in the case of the Sodalìs and Equalìs cooperatives, this cannot happen without people losing their only source of income. (I am not suggesting there are no cases in which charitable fair-trade actors are sustainable, or that these are amateurs. Mine is a hypothetical argument to highlight participants' views.)

### **5.3 Working to 'make a living', not 'wear a suit'**

An apparently general, neutral question such as 'what makes people work?' turns into further questions concerning its implicit assumptions, and the recognition that they are part of a long history.

(Harris 2007: 157)

Throughout this chapter, I have explored the local models of fair-trade labour expressed by coop workers through those key terms—'real job', '(proper) alternative trade', 'necessity', 'struggle'—that bore personal and social significance to their eyes. Going one step further, in this section I look at workers' models of personal motivation to fair-trade and its end in everyday life.

After Sodalis fired the shop assistant (see previous section), they found a replacement. Franco commented on the new recruit as follows:

“The new shop assistant we’ve hired to replace the old one is capable. It seems she’s even better at selling than Piero [the shop’s other assistant], I can tell from the daily sales figures. [half-jokingly] So Piero has already been warned!”

G.O.: “Has he?”

Franco: “Of course. It’s obvious that if she’s better at selling than him, she deserves to work more hours. It’s a matter of being correct [*è una questione di correttezza*]. It’s not a question of reducing everything to the market [*ridurre tutto al mercato*], it’s too easy to look at it that way.”

As the coop’s shop assistants were part-time, Franco’s words here (‘work more hours’) indicated a reward, not a punishment. The term *correttezza* can be translated as ‘fairness’ or ‘justness’ (literally ‘correctness’). Franco appeared to want to convey the compelling sense of what one is supposed to do because it is the right thing to do. Given his previous emphasis on customer complaints, the ‘dangers’ caused by having ‘wrong people’ in the shop, and how his coop’s members received salaries, I suggest he was referring to acting in a way that safeguarded the organisation’s commercial viability. *Correttezza* thus implied the burden of responsibility for doing everything to guarantee that coop workers were not exposed to risks and did receive their salaries. An attitude offered as the right interpretation of their warning to Piero, as opposed to a possible motivation based on the search for profit (“reducing everything to the market”). As with charity above, ‘correctness’ also recalls the ethnography of fair-trade consumption (chapter 3.3), in particular the idea of ‘justice’. But here the context is that of people working in fair-trade retail and their right to have a stable salary.

Fair-traders’ ideas about the motivation and ultimate end of their work, and the influence these had on everyday life and self-perception, surfaced most clearly during a conversation I had with Luigi one morning in late November. In his mid-thirties and with a degree in economics, Luigi was from the region of Emilia Romagna, where he had worked for the larger alternative trade organisation CA, Sodalis’ main point of reference. Luigi had been the director of CA’s newsletter, had travelled to Vietnam on project-development assignments, and while working for the ATO had been elected on the board of directors of

the ‘Italian Fair-trade General Assembly’ (AGICES).<sup>54</sup> He had recently joined Sodalis after accepting a job offer from them.

We were unloading a metal framework and an old fridge from the coop’s van, which were used to sell fresh organic produce at the shop. We had been talking a little about his previous job in Emilia Romagna and his views of the fair-trade movement, when he said: “For example, an obsession entirely peculiar to Italian fair-trade is the non-profit one. At meetings there’s always someone from the shops who stands up and says [mocking] ‘but it isn’t non-profit!’”. According to Luigi, this ‘obsession’ took the form of a ‘movement pressure’ on fair-trade actors to be constituted as non-profits. Secondary data (Barbetta 2006) shows 91% of fair-trade shops are run by ‘non-profit’ groups: organisations legally bound either by non-distribution of capital (mainly associations and social cooperatives) or by limited distribution (worker coops).<sup>55</sup> Luigi continued: “It’s a criterion [non-profit] that makes no sense, because if there’s an organisation that isn’t a cooperative, but complies with all of fair-trade’s criteria, there’s no reason why it shouldn’t do business”.<sup>56</sup>

Palermitan fair-traders kept their worker coops firmly separate from the other organisations in the fair-trade commodity network, which was overwhelmingly reliant on voluntary work, by valuing differently the types of labour used by the two groups. However, Luigi’s use of the term ‘non-profit’ above shows they classified them together on the basis of the limits to capital accumulation imposed on both by the state. Although there is currently no definition of such a term in Italian law, Luigi’s use reflected a now commonplace interpretation of it that conflates two legal requirements: limited and non-distribution of capital. In theoretical terms, this use is consistent with a model recently defined by European scholars as the ‘social economy’ (Evers & Laville 2004). This can be

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<sup>54</sup> AGICES is the movement’s umbrella body and coordinates its actors. While I was in the field, Luigi was elected on its board for the second time in a row.

<sup>55</sup> Currently, there is no legal definition of the term ‘non-profit’ in Italian law (see Mori 2008). The criteria of limited or non-distribution of capital is what all the entities in question, legally recognised specifically as associations, social cooperatives, etc, share. It is on this basis that they are grouped, *ex post facto*, as ‘non-profit’, usually in academic, activist and public discourses.

<sup>56</sup> His aversion to non-profit actors might seem to contradict part of the argument developed in section 5.2: that fair-traders in the centre-north of Italy—such as Luigi—favour volunteering as the work practice of the movement. The presence of charitable labour has in fact as one of its main preconditions a ‘non-profit’ status (see above). The explanation is that Luigi came from an ATO, not a shop, and as I showed in section 5.2, ATOs make virtually no use of volunteers, relying overwhelmingly on salaried staff. In Palermo (where Luigi was again employed at the warehouse and dealt with wholesale) the ATO/shop distinction does not apply, given Sodalis relied (usually) on its members and two part-time staff.

considered an expanded version of the Anglophone (particularly American) concept of ‘third sector’. The difference in approach between the American school, which considers part of this sector only groups for whom any kind of capital redistribution is forbidden, and the European one, which considers it one part of a broader social economy, is explained in detail by Evers and Laville.

A concept of the non-profit sector appropriate to Europe must be broader than concepts from countries where—as in the USA—cooperatives or mutuals have never played such an important role. ... In contrast to charities and most voluntary organizations, cooperatives represented an attempt to create a different economy ... From that perspective, the line of demarcation is not to be drawn between for-profit and non-profit organizations but between capitalist organizations and social economic organizations, the latter focusing on generating collective wealth rather than a return on individual investment. (Evers and Laville 2004: 12-13)

Luigi’s words reflected a view of the fair-trade commodity network that is consistent with this model, one ultimately based on the power of the state to regulate, through law, the use of capital. The emphasis in Evers and Laville’s quote is on the inadequacy of the term non-profit to connote a wider social economy; the idea of ‘for-profit’ (‘capitalist organization’) remains unaltered.

For Luigi, redrawing the boundaries of the former was impossible without also questioning the latter. Luigi’s justification of his unhappiness with fair-trade’s “non-profit obsession”, in fact, consisted in what he believed were the inadequacies of a legal status that restricted or forbid capital redistribution. He said: “There are so many ways in which cooperatives can make loads of money, and actually be capitalist enterprises. After all to be [for] profit in a cooperative it’s enough to raise your salary, isn’t it?” Luigi’s scepticism seemed to suggest that although capital accumulation per se might be constrained in worker coops, even within these there can be very few limits to a profit-driven attitude, of which said accumulation is just one facet. Luigi’s disregard of legislative measures to limit these attitudes loosened the boundaries between different kinds of enterprises.

Not only did he question the ‘good nature’ of cooperatives, inverting his line of reasoning Luigi also questioned the ‘evil nature’ of actors legally recognised as capitalist (for profit) organisations: “These images [the fixation on a non-profit status] are absolutely false, simplistic. Like if you don’t belong to a cooperative then it means you wear a suit and a tie [*giacca e cravatta*] and all you think of is making money”. Luigi, then, understood

‘non-profit’ not as the Italian law’s prescription of non- or limited capital redistribution, but as a symbolic construct centred on the issue of workers’ personal motivation and the ends of any given labour. His final remark was particularly revealing: “What’s absurd, forgetting about legal formalities [*al di là delle formalità giuridiche*], is that nobody makes money out of fair-trade. It’s simply a job that, if done properly, allows you to earn what you need to make a living.” This problem of distinguishing between the profit and non-profit attitudes did not apply to fair-trading, because in his view this kind of job did not allow making money. But the reason the issue of deciding what counted as ‘non-profit’ arose is easily understood: the term is widely seen as a container for worker coops *and* charitable organisations, those important counterpoints to the fair-traders’ identity.<sup>57</sup>

Luigi appeared not to believe in a social economy construct that rested on non- and partial redistribution of capital. But Palermitan fair-traders did argue, in their own way, for limits to capital accumulation. Luigi’s thoughts above, and Franco’s views about the two shop assistants, suggest that motivation to work and Work’s ends were the criteria chosen to classify enterprises and, by extension, imaginaries of economies. For them, the crucial distinction informing such models was that between workers who ‘wear suits and ties’, and those who just try to ‘make a living’. Or in more abstract terms, a distinction between ‘for’ and ‘not for’ profit (different from ‘non-profit’) in which being ‘not for’ profit *included* capitalist enterprises that simply made enough for their owners to live on.

## Conclusion

The personal circumstances and the events that brought the members of Palermo’s fair-trade retail cooperatives to meet each other, and found their organisations, tell a story of leftwing critique of capital. This is true with regards to the influence of private business on culture and the wider society, of the negative effects of global trade and development

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<sup>57</sup> There might also be another reason, stemming from the argument brought forward in section 5.2. As mentioned there, in a fair-trade commodity network where the majority of retailers have only one full-time staff, groups can afford not to seek to make a profit. If things go wrong, they can cease to exist with little consequences for their members. However, when retailing supports livelihoods, the same cannot happen. Hence a very different attitude towards the idea of being ‘non-profit’. In the examples discussed above, then, part of the emphasis of the term ‘profit’ might be better understood as a reference to being commercially sustainable in terms of income.

policies on poorer countries, but also of the authoritarian and unequal power relations underlying such phenomena. As was the case with the identities of consumers, leftwing-Catholic and leftwing-secular positions co-existed among the fair-traders I worked with.

But as a phenomenon of work, fair-trade in Palermo was very much the result of high levels of unemployment and precarious employment, two of Sicily's principal politico-economic features. Founding the coop was, for my informants, the act of creating their own livelihood, and was universally recognised by them as such. The ethnography of this chapter thus showed that Palermo's fair-trade cooperatives are a manifestation of the classic cooperative value of worker self-help, a central theme in the history of labour cooperation in different periods and different locales. From this struggle for work, an understanding of wage labour resulted as the only proper form of fair-trading. This belief took on particular emotional significance for Palermitans, who knew that the fair-trade commodity network in the rest of Italy relied mainly on voluntary labour. The socially established value attached to fair-trade—especially retail, its most 'visible' part—was one of charitable work, which informants rejected.

Fair-trade workers also had little faith in the effectiveness of the legally defined social economy that the charitable organisations in question represented, and they considered state-imposed limits to capital (the concept of 'non-profit') as unworkable. Labour, this time in the shape of its motivation and ends, remained for them always the most important criterion to understand economy.

## CHAPTER 6

# FAIR-TRADING: OF CLERKSHIP, SEASONAL WORKLOADS, AND RETAIL COMPETITION

### Introduction

In the previous chapter I analysed mostly the symbols and models of livelihood held by Palermitan fair-traders. Some of the analysis there was based on events linked with the work of retailing fair-trade, but this aspect made only a passing appearance as an object of ethnographic inquiry in its own right. The actual practice of fair-trading and its many facets stand at the centre of this chapter's discussion. From this point of view, the analysis speaks to the vast field of ethnographies of markets and marketing (e.g. Applbaum 2004; Dilley 1992; Hefner 1998; Mandel & Humphrey 2002; Plattner 1985). However, it does so awkwardly, as the very small scale of operations of the actors in question, and their explicitly 'alternative' or 'ethical' nature, renders this scholarship of somewhat limited use. The same is true of studies of small-medium enterprises in Italy (see Blim 1990; Yanagisako 2002), which again deal with realities that are hardly comparable to those of this case study, and finally, also of most ethnographies of cooperatives. The latter, in fact, have dealt with large-scale manufacturing, not small retailing, both in Italy (Holmström 1989; Bartlett 1993, 1991) and elsewhere (e.g. Bartlett 1992; Gibson-Graham 2006; Sharryn 1996; Whyte 1991).

I start this chapter with a detailed description of the various kinds of work that allowed ethical foods to be sold to consumers, adopting a rough distinction between material and intellectual work, as this appeared to be relevant in terms of the two coops' division of labour (especially the larger Sodalis). Following a commodity chain approach at the micro-level, I describe first the tasks carried out at the warehouse, where goods arrived either from other larger Italian ATOs, or directly from producers in developing countries, and then focus on the retail outlets, where goods were brought to be sold. By looking at how workers experienced these tasks of wholesaling and retailing, I show the richly textured nature of fair-trade 'behind the scene', so to speak. I also show the degree to which

this texture was lived in a somewhat negative way: as stressful and emotionally draining. This was largely due to having to cope with consumer demand in periods of high sale volumes, such as the Christmas one. In some respects, the picture that emerges is comparable to that found in other service industry and retail sector studies that highlight the alienating nature of these jobs (e.g. Ehrenreich 2002; Leidner 1993; Hochschild 1983).

Section two is entirely dedicated to a specific issue faced by the coops: how to manage the highly seasonal nature of their retail labour cycle. From the ground level, this issue appeared to be very important for my informants. The coops ran what were, effectively, specialty foods store; this meant that normal workloads were usually low, except during certain periods or events. These required an increase in the number of hands (and arms) available to carry out more efficiently the tasks that I describe in section one. Different sets of social and economic relations were thus called upon to solve, or rather to cope with, this need. Though the wage labour market was one of these sets, reliance on it was problematic for a number of reasons. In consequence of this difficulty, the coops took advantage in different ways and to different extents of relations of kin and friendship, but also of relations with the state. The labour obtained through these channels was of a voluntary kind (broadly understood, as it was sometimes paid, for example by the state). This fact represents another site of contradictions between discourse and practice, entirely similar to those already highlighted in the case of ethical consumers (see chapter 4). As I discussed in the previous chapter, in fact, Palermitan fair-traders were highly critical of voluntary labour, both as a practice (i.e. the reliance on volunteers) and a discourse (the non-profit 'fixation' of some actors).

Finally, in the third section I analyse the ethnography of ethical food marketing proper, what I've described above as the 'intellectual work' of fair-trading, for lack of a better term. Two aspects were evident in this domain of activity. On the one hand, 'quality of customer service' was the overarching framework that inspired a distinct set of behaviours performed (or on some occasions implemented) to please consumers and thus, hopefully, increase sales. On the other hand was the theme of competition between actors in the ethical economy sector. In this regard, I explore particularly the coops' local agency vis-à-vis a national retail context characterised by multiple, quasi-identical foods lines, first and foremost those of alternative trade organisations (ATOs) themselves. By doing so, I

also bring to light another discrepancy in informants' attitudes, this time towards the idea of 'Fair' trade itself. While from one point of view their belief that trade should be just was undeniable, given their choice of work and other life commitments, from another the evidence makes it clear that the applicability of 'fairness' was limited to production in southern countries and import practices. Within the national economy whose sales they relied upon, in fact, actors saw consumerism and market competition as entirely necessary, and thus justified.

## **6.1 Shop-keeping groundwork and ethical alienation**

I will begin this section by recounting an episode that I took part in on a late October day, as it aptly illustrates the kind of day-to-day work that the fair-trade retail coops performed.

On the day in question, I arrived at Sodalis' warehouse in the morning, and was told that a large delivery was due to be dropped off shortly. The cooperative had placed this order from their partner coop *Commercio Alternativo* some months back, so as to receive the goods in time for the beginning of Christmas shopping. I immediately noticed a lot of excitement about this order among the people of the office. Because the warehouse was located on an open road, during the day cars parked along the kerb left hardly any space to receive a large delivery. So the night before the day in question, a member of the coop had parked the small company van as close as possible to the warehouse, in order to take up some space that could be freed when the lorry arrived.

That morning, however, we realised there wasn't enough space, so I joined a couple of others in trying to find the owners of the cars parked next to the company van and (kindly) ask them to move. We did this by enlisting the help of the people at the near-by bakery, who somehow knew the owner of every car in the vicinity. When the lorry arrived, Marco (the person in charge of the warehouse), Luigi and I set out to unload it. We piled boxes of various sizes in a damp and stuffy room (Sodalis's warehouse is located next to Palermo's port). From this room, the boxes would eventually be moved to be unpacked, and the goods distributed in the designated rooms of the warehouse. Eventually, we finished the job, and I left for lunch with my arms stiff from shifting all the boxes.

Of the four people who worked full-time in Sodalis' warehouse-cum-office (see chapter 5), three usually sat at their desks in the office room, in front of computers, sending emails and fax copies, answering the phone, and dealing with all the paperwork involved in small trade. These were also the coop members who attended to wholesale clients showing up in person at the warehouse to do business or finalise purchases. Only one person (*il magazziniere*) was specifically in charge of the warehouse's other rooms. Sodalis' fair-trading was thus roughly divided along the lines of manual and intellectual work (something reflected in the spatial arrangement of its premises). The latter type of work was represented mainly by the coop's marketing, which I discuss in section 6.3. However, in terms of people's actual involvement, this division of labour held true only for such marketing efforts: when the workload of the *magazziniere* required it, in fact, the other three individuals would join to help him as soon as they had a spare moment.

For many of these more practical aspects of fair-trading, the coop possessed a system of classification 'indigenous' to its organisational culture. This took the form of a set of specific terms used regularly to refer to each activity, almost a 'vernacular of retail' (see Whitelaw 2009: 64-65).

When goods arrived at the warehouse, the first task was that of 'unpacking' (*spacchettare*). This involved opening the boxes, checking (*controllare*) their contents—the number of items and their integrity—then ticking them off the packing list (*spuntare*) enclosed by the supplier. Then one had to distribute them in the warehouse's different rooms (*impostare*), which had separate areas with different sized shelves to accommodate the various items. In the past, one had had to price (*prezzare*) every single packet of tea, or jam jar, etc., writing by hand the item's price on a tiny sticker and attaching it. However, Sodalis had recently invested in a barcode reader for their shop, so pricing wasn't necessary anymore (goods had barcodes printed on them by the main ATO). Equalis, in contrast, didn't have this technology, which was too expensive for the finances of a recently formed, small fair-trade coop. So when I helped at their shop, I could sometimes end up having to write—say—'€1,30' on more than fifty tiny stickers.

These were all tasks that could be carried out easily by one person (in fact, two people could end up confusing each other). Other tasks, though, required a joint effort to be performed more effectively. 'Putting together an order' for a client (*mettere assieme un*

*ordine*) is a good example of this type of task. It entailed collecting from different parts of the warehouse all the items on the list sent by the client, and then packing them. The former part of the job was more easily done with one person reading (or shouting) out the list to another person, who moved around the warehouse collecting the items needed.

During my long months of ‘apprenticeship’ with the two coops, shadowing experienced coop members in their daily tasks, I came to realise how painstaking this part of fair-trading was. It demanded precision, patience and efficiency in order not to lose count of items, misplace them, or wrongly price them. It meant getting covered in dust from all the unpacking and sorting through dirty boxes. Standing for long hours, feeling too cold during winter and too hot during summer (there was no heating in the warehouse, given the amounts of easily inflammable materials). All constantly under the dull glow of artificial lights, due to the premises’ lack of windows.

Apart from myself, three female volunteers also worked for Sodalìs without actually being employed by the cooperative. These women were in their twenties, with two of them still attending university. Sodalìs had been assigned them by the Italian national community service (*servizio civile*, see section 6.2), to which the women had applied. These three volunteers therefore had regular shifts for a whole year, which they negotiated with the coop. I worked side by side them both at Sodalìs’ warehouse and shop. The coop alternated the community volunteers at these two locations depending on the amounts of work required at each.

The fair-trading that took place in the shops entailed many of the same tasks of the warehouse (unpacking, sorting, pricing, etc.), given the shops had their own small storage rooms, and the items on display had to be properly organized. However, as a workplace, the shop differed fundamentally in one respect: inside it, one came into close contact with the general public. During most of the year, having to do with customers was not particularly problematic. Even on the crowded mornings when people concentrated their weekly ethical shopping, a clerk’s experience with a client depended on the latter’s individual character. Clients were usually agreeable. But there were other occasions that showed how stressful working in specialised retail could become. Christmas shopping was by far the best example of this.

*Wrapping gifts and coping with customers: stress at the workplace*

The period of Christmas shopping lasted roughly four weeks. During this period, both shops' premises were often so packed with families and children, couples, people on their own, and sometimes groups of teenagers, that it became almost impossible to move from one part of the shop to another. Items had to be passed around by stretching the arm to reach the nearest co-worker. People rushed and pushed around clutching long lists with names of family, friends and colleagues, trying desperately to match the right gift for each of them. On these days, one's job often involved acting almost as a personal shopper, following clients in their dilemmas, explaining what could be found where inside the shop.

Invariably, long queues formed at the counter, where customers brought handfuls of presents to be wrapped in highly personalised ways ('with a green ribbon, not a red one'), and always flawlessly. Without doubt, being assigned to the 'wrapping table' (*il tavolo delle confezioni*) was the most dreaded and annoying part of the job during this period, as it meant having to interact with people who had finally made up their minds, paid, and just wanted to leave. Very rarely, though, would they renounce what they considered an inalienable right: to have a nice packet. Compared to the warehouse, the shop required a much more rapid learning curve, to acquire all the techniques needed in order to avoid potentially uncomfortable situations with consumers. During the rare moments of respite, when fewer clients were in the shop, one immediately took on the other tasks that had been put aside to serve customers: opening boxes, organising new items on shelves, throwing away piles of rubbish from underneath the counter, etc.

At the warehouse, Christmas meant having to cope with many more orders than usual, and with bigger quantities. During these weeks, one not only had to get all the details of an order right (number of items, size, flavour, etc.), s/he had to complete the whole process as quickly as possible. Wholesale clients from all over Sicily and Italy kept frantically calling to know if *their* lot had been dispatched. The daily routine was thrown into chaos. It was not uncommon to end up having lunch at four o'clock in the afternoon. This usually happened when Sodalis' warehouse received a phone call from its shop at the end of morning trading hours (1pm), asking for a re-supply before the afternoon opening (4pm). I remember one day sitting down at a café to eat with the people from the office, when the city was just coming to life for the second half of the day's shopping frenzy.

Inevitably, when fair-trading reached this stage, it began to take a toll on workplace relations. Throughout the Christmas season, and also during the rest of the year on any day of the week that was particularly hectic, I often witnessed fraught exchanges between workers, tensed looks and grimaces. At Sodalís' warehouse, bad temper usually developed between Marco and the other coop members, given he was the person with the greatest responsibility for sorting deliveries and putting together orders. Often, if he was told to do something else, or something differently, as soon as the person who told him so left the room, Marco would look at me and make a face that conveyed the words 'I can't stand them anymore', or 'now they're really pissing me off'.

Towards the end of one December morning, Marco and Roberta had the following altercation. It centred on taking more supplies to the shop while it was closed between 1 and 4pm (see above). Marco, who would have to physically collect the goods, put them into boxes and drive them to the shop, thought it wasn't necessary. But Roberta disagreed, and quickly closed the exchange with a rather brusque: "Yes it is [necessary], and it's my call, oh!". After which she left the room saying loudly, and feigning a crazed tone: "We must sell everything, everything!". While I was helping Marco to collect the goods in question, he eventually told Roberta: "At some point we have to stop", by which he meant—rather obviously to my eyes—that he wanted to stop immediately. She gave a vague, uncommitted answer, to which Marco replied, this time openly annoyed: "Roberta, are we going to end up having lunch at five o'clock in the afternoon like the other day?". It was only at this point that she answered, in a conciliatory tone that indicated she was desisting: "No no, of course not".

At the shops, nervousness and stress manifested themselves in the frequent nagging that everyone seemed to inflict on everyone else, telling them what they were doing/had done was not the correct way, that the best way was another one (*theirs*). Or by behaving in such a manner as if their task was the only one that needed solving, thus demanding immediate attention: "where are the scissors?!", "who moved that?? I left it there!", "where were you?!". One day, for example, Elena (Sodalís' shop manager) asked Laura (one of the two shop assistants) if she had sent an order. When Laura replied she still hadn't, Elena complained. At which point Laura told her, exasperated, that she already stayed after closure to tidy up the shop and she didn't know what to do first.

Tiredness was probably the main cause of these scenes. Prolonged periods of intensive retailing could easily strain anyone, both physically and psychologically. Trading hours during Christmas were especially problematic. Traditionally, in Italy shops are closed on Sundays, but in December they are open; also, on weekends they remain open at lunchtime (*orario continuato*). Fair-traders followed this trend, and usually felt that they were forced to do so by the rest of the city's shops. However, sometimes they seemed willing to go even further, by staying open non-stop (9:30am-8pm) even during weekdays, something that only the larger stores tended to do. From one point of view, this made some sense, as often workers didn't bother to go back home and have lunch between 1 and 4pm. But as Antonella of Equalis constantly repeated, this arrangement meant that there was absolutely no time to rest, especially with Sunday openings, which meant the only moment of the week when the shop closed (excluding the nights) was Monday morning. During one of the two Christmases I was in field, however, such non-stop strategy turned out to be 'putting the cart in front of the horses' for Sodalis. Originally, in fact, they had planned to open non-stop for the last two weeks before December 25<sup>th</sup>, but they had to drop this regime "because the people at the shop got completely knackered and revolted after the first weekend of this", as one coop member admitted to me.

Overall, then, the retail work entailed in fair-trade did not appear essentially different from that of other trades. The concept of 'alternative' seemed to have little bearing on the realities of selling ethical goods on Palermo's consumer market, notwithstanding the widespread use made of it as a tag by fair-trade actors. A story from the conventional retail sector offers an interesting point of view to understand this aspect of the ethnography. During both Christmas periods I spent in the field witnessing the work dynamics just discussed, the Palermitan trade unions of shop clerks were engaged in a struggle with employers and politicians. This was chronicled in the local newspapers.<sup>58</sup> The unions received anonymous complaints from the employees of large and small retailers about refusals to pay overtime, lack of contracts for temporary staff, and other instances of broken labour laws. Employees also complained of the long opening hours for the period (which were decided at the local government level) and the impossibility to rest that resulted. This was a problem felt particularly by workers of smaller enterprises, as these could not

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<sup>58</sup> Articles on the matter can be found for different years (the problem is clearly a recurrent one) by searching for 'Lailac' and 'Uiltucs'—the unions involved—on the website: <http://palermo.repubblica.it>.

implement staff rotation, given they employed very few people. Employers replied that they were ‘forced’ to practise long opening hours because everyone else did so. As I’ve shown above, these were exactly the same conditions under which the fair-trade coops operated.

This is not to say that there were no happy moments for the coops, even during the most frantic periods of retailing. In fact Christmas, and to a lesser extent Easter, were eagerly awaited because of the job satisfactions they could bring in terms of sales. Also, participants were conscious of the picture described in this section. Once, for example, Franco clearly told me how one of the greatest challenges of their job was working together with other people in an office, with desks that faced each other, following a hectic schedule for long hours, and maintaining throughout this enjoyable relations without resorting to “give orders”. Presumably thinking of the previous unresolved tensions that had led to the original group splitting, Franco declared: “Making a group like this work together is something very difficult”. He continued by saying that he was well aware that sometimes relations were tensed, but in the end the people there were “friends, and not just colleagues”.

## **6.2 Friends, family, and the state: the work cycle through highs and lows**

As I mentioned in chapter 4, the Equalis coop ran an organic vegetable box scheme from its shop; boxes were collected on Tuesday afternoons. Handing these over was inevitably one of Equalis’ biggest tasks, which explains why they were always keen in finding extra help on the days in question, busy throughout the year. In the shop, the normal flow of customers was thrown into chaos. As almost everyone came to collect their box after finishing work, in fact, they wanted to pay as quickly as possible and leave to go home. In autumn and winter, this trend was made worse by the effects of bad weather on traffic. When it rained, clients constantly kept repeating that they had no idea how long it would take them to get back home “with this traffic!” (*con questo traffico!*), a way of letting us know that we should speed things up even more. (For us, rain also meant a carpet of cardboard sheets at the shop’s entrance that became constantly soaked and needed changing, wet umbrellas that no one seemed to know where to put, and coats dripping in the most recondite places where customers rushed to, which made mopping the floor also a

frequent necessity.) Usually, after everyone had come to collect their box, we took up the smaller tasks that had been put aside. I would open any boxes which had been delivered but left unopened, or just start tidying up. Gabriele and Antonella would do the same, or tackle any bureaucratic work that need completing.

Tuesdays at Equalis illustrate the periodic demand for extra labour faced by the fair-trade coops. During most of the time, there was little need for help. Fair-traders described business during such periods as “tranquil” (*giorni tranquilli*). One or two people were enough to cope with the work, and both cooperatives managed to provide for this with their members. Then there were other moments when workloads called for more people than were normally employed. Such moments were either parts of the week—like Equalis’ Tuesdays, and more generally weekends, the arrival of consignments, and special events (see below)—or certain months. All such occasions were referred to as “having movement” (*c’è movimento*). With regards to monthly variations, Christmas was the most important example of seasonal workloads, as the following episode shows.

In early December, I walked by chance into Sodalis’ shop with my partner—she wanted to buy a few things—having not been there for some time. As soon as Elena spotted us, she said she had been “looking for us for ages”. When we asked her why, she replied that she had been meaning to ask if we could “come and lend a hand [*venire a dare una mano*]” either at the shop or the warehouse. We soon realised the coop was desperate to find ways of coping with the amount of trade expected for the period. Elena wasn’t just in search of a simple commitment. When we expressed our willingness to help, she immediately asked us to ‘volunteer’ precise dates, the morning or the afternoon, taking out her agenda and cross-referencing it with the shop’s calendar. We were obviously free to pick our own dates, but she suggested those “when there’s more need [*quando c’è più bisogno*]”. These were, invariably, the long Christmas weekends: Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays of non-stop retailing.

Spending time at Sodalis and Equalis during the course of fifteen months, I was able to meet the people who helped out both cooperatives with their need for extra work. Different individuals did so at different moments of the year; their motivations, and the extents to which they were involved, also varied. Some were considered, and referred to as,

'volunteers', while others were paid. But as I show below, this distinction was not entirely straightforward.

Apart from myself (and my partner), at Sodalis' two workplaces I met only one woman who helped them (occasionally) without receiving any money in return. Another woman was hired as a part-time staff for their shop during the first Christmas I spent in the field. In her early thirties and originally from Cape Verde, from an early age she had spent long periods in Palermo and spoke Italian perfectly. One of the coop members described her as "an old friend of the group". Then there were the three volunteers from the national community service mentioned above.

Italy's community service (*servizio civile*) was introduced in 1972 as an alternative to military service for those who refused the latter on grounds of conscientious objection.<sup>59</sup> When compulsory conscription ceased in 2005, the community service was transformed. Once also compulsory and available only to men, it is now open to all those aged between 18 and 28 who decide to spend a year working on projects of a social nature (state discourse defines these as 'active citizenship'). Volunteers, as they are officially designated, contribute a fixed amount of hours, for which they receive a monthly 'reimbursement'. They carry out work either in public institutions (hospitals, museums, libraries), or in certain non-profit organisations. The latter are required to develop projects compatible with the broader aims of the national programme, and to train the volunteers in their particular field of expertise. The largest Italian alternative trade organisation (ATO), *CTM Altromercato*, brokered an agreement with the state to include fair-trade organisations in the community service. As stated on its website, the aim of this particular initiative is to promote among the populations 'the issues of solidarity economy and fair-trade'.<sup>60</sup>

Of the community service volunteers, two would normally work at Sodalis' warehouse, where the coop managed orders from mainland Italy all year round, and one at the shop. On busy days, this division was inverted. The Christmas period made adhering to such pattern increasingly difficult. Workloads started peaking at the warehouse well over a month before Christmas Day, given wholesaling operations dealt with larger scales than the

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<sup>59</sup> As I mentioned in Chapter 5, two of Sodalis' male founding members had opted for community rather than military service.

<sup>60</sup> See <http://www.economiasolidale.org/sito>.

urban one. At the shop, normal routines started to change at the end of November or the beginning of December, depending on the national economic climate for the year.<sup>61</sup> All through Christmas, then, the teams at Sodalis' shop and warehouse 'fought' each other over the volunteers, desperate to get every helping hand available.

A somewhat similar situation took place between the two fair-trade coops with regards to my presence. One afternoon, Elena of Sodalis called me on my mobile phone to ask if I could go to their shop—immediately—to help them, as they were “in great difficulties”. Unfortunately, I was on a crowded bus on my way to Equalis, having already agreed to spend that particular afternoon there. Without telling Elena this, and feeling a slight sense of absurdity regarding the matter, I opted for the classic “I’ll see what I can do”. (I eventually went to Sodalis quite late, and found the confusion there had died down. I was met by rather disappointed looks.) This example of a micro-peak in the cooperatives' need for surplus labour, though atypical, conveys nicely the issues at play.

At Equalis, the smaller group, I witnessed a somewhat different surplus workforce from the one at Sodalis. I became friends with Olivia, a forty years old part-time teacher and the partner of Equalis' third coop member, who worked as a teacher. Though their relationship ended while I was in the field, Olivia continued to help out at the shop very often, almost daily for Christmas. Another person who occasionally came to lend a hand was the brother of Antonella (one of the coop's members). His partner was even keener to help than him, perhaps because her parents owned a bakery and she was thus quite used to the physical and psychological demands of small retail. The reliance on kin at Equalis sometimes extended to the presence of Antonella's mother. Friendship-based networks were also apparent in this workplace. Pietro, a friend of the third coop member from university years, and Liliana, a friend of Gabriele (the other coop member), usually showed up at the most critical of moments.

Eventually, Equalis relied also on another source of temporary labour. This was a project with a local social cooperative that worked with disadvantaged individuals, particularly those who had mental health problems. One of the aims of this coop was to create employment opportunities for its disadvantaged members. Under the terms of this

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<sup>61</sup> The type of work I witnessed during Christmas was not in any fundamental way different from that carried out during the rest of the year (see section 6.1), only the amounts varied.

agreement, the cooperative sent one person to work at Equalis' shop on a part-time basis, with flexible hours. The person was not paid by Equalis, which simply provided the workplace to host her. The social coop had in fact obtained one year of funding for the project from various third parties: the state (thanks to welfare legislation), the local health authority, and the local branch of Caritas.<sup>62</sup>

Before a suitable person was found, two different candidates had been sent to Equalis, both of whom proved too unreliable and were withdrawn from the project. Gabriele and Antonella said that teaching (some of) the shop's tasks to the person they eventually hosted was a long and tiring process, but one that was beneficial also to the person's health, as shown by the fact that his drug treatment was reduced. Notwithstanding such difficulties, this person provided yet more help to Equalis' daily trade. During the same period, Sodalis was also involved in this project, hosting another person from the social cooperative.

*The scope and significance of charitable labour for the work cycle*

As the ethnography shows, the requirements of their labour cycle drove Palermo's two fair-trade cooperatives to seek out additional labour. This periodical need is a trait shared by these organisations with other economic units that also regularly face surges in the intensity of their work. Family farms in peasant societies are one of the most studied examples of this dynamic (e.g. Chayanov 1986; Goody 1958; Harriss 1982; Shanin 1987). However, these present two key differences from the cases I have described. First, for farms, securing extra help is essential to the completion of the cultivation cycle. If, for example, the crop is not all harvested on time, then one of the farm's central functions is jeopardised. Secondly, and related to the previous point, extra labour is thus sought for its main function. The two fair-trade coops I studied differed from this situation.

The coops required labour for the smoothing out of certain retail functions; this process had greater importance for an enterprise in its early stages, as testified by Equalis. But both organisations ran the bulk of their business by relying on their members (i.e. on themselves) or on permanent staff. Extra hands did have an impact on the work's general quality, and on the possibility of sustaining other activities beneficial to the enterprise. But

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<sup>62</sup> Caritas is the charitable 'arm' of the Catholic Church's Episcopal Conference.

if the coops had had to rely entirely on these workers, they probably would have closed.<sup>63</sup> Also, relying on many different and somewhat atypical workers was possible because the tasks assigned to them were of a simple nature. This was an effect of the coops' small-scale business. Almost anyone could learn very quickly to perform such tasks in an acceptable way (see also the case study in Alexander 2009). But this was only a part of the fair-trade retailing that took place. Commercial strategies and marketing (see next section) remained entirely outside the processes I have described above.

As we have seen, different sources were tapped into to obtain additional labour and cope with the weekly and seasonal work peaks. The first one was the wage labour market. This solution was adopted by both organisations when they hired extra staff for the time and tasks needed. Though the use of monetary remuneration makes this solution fall within the market realm, the individuals who were thus recruited often came from the social networks in which the two coops were entwined. The person hired was usually a friend, or a friend of a friend; jobs were rarely formally advertised.

The second solution was the reliance on unpaid voluntary labour. The fair-traders denoted two different kinds of work with the term 'volunteer(s)'. One was that offered by, and requested from, friends and family, for which social and kinship networks were again relied upon. This usage is reminiscent of forms of peasant mutualism. Some authors tend to distinguish such forms from the use of charitable labour in urban settings. Dilly (2006: 310-1), for example, sees volunteering as 'rational' and 'anonymous', compared to the help provided through personal community ties. However, such distinction doesn't hold true in this case study, where it *was* friends and family who helped the business.

But voluntary labour was also that obtained through the state (the national community service), or other third sector organisations that relied closely on the state (the social coop with mental health patients). In this case, labour was remunerated, though through the state's redistributive means rather than market ones (the coops' retailing activity). The ways in which the two coops accessed part of their volunteer labour, then, made apparent the third sector's historical reliance on the state and its mechanisms. In this regard Lewis, for example, notes that "the relationship between the third sector and the state ... is [the

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<sup>63</sup> When fair-trade cooperatives in Palermo have closed, this has never been due to a lack of volunteers, but to a lack of customers, thus for financial difficulties.

most ambiguous [one] and arouses most concern” (2004: 170; see also Deakin 1995). Two aspects in the ethnography highlighted this topic. The first one is the issue of funding. The three volunteers from the community service worked at Sodalis’ whilst being paid by the state; the two individuals sent by the social cooperative for disadvantaged people also received ‘compensation’ through different forms of state (and Church) funding. The second aspect pertains to the kinds of workers accessed by the third sector through the state. These often include subjects who, for diverse reasons, find themselves outside of the wage labour market.

Alexander (2009), for example, shows that in UK third sector community recycling schemes the workforce tends to be composed of people with chronic health issues, or of those who have broken the law. People with health problems were also found in the Palermitan case. Then there were young-adults volunteers, two of whom were still at university, while one had completed her undergraduate studies. Particularly for this last person, the ‘wage’ offered by the community service was an important element in making the programme worthwhile.<sup>64</sup>

However, one has to consider how in European countries the state usually provides the *majority* of the third sector’s income, through a combination of earned income (contracts) and grant income (see Lewis 2004: 170-171; for the Italian case Borzaga 2004). This was *not* the case for Palermo’s two fair-trade coops, which relied almost entirely on the market for their income stream, even when taking into account the labour costs offset through the use of volunteers (see also below). This makes them appear an exception to the rule of third sector state reliance. As I showed in chapter 5, participants were strongly opposed to the idea of running a fair-trade business entirely on charitable labour (unpaid or paid by others). The data on their actual fair-trading presented in this section does not contradict such idea. It does show that charitable labour was deemed acceptable on an occasional—fixed term or seasonal—basis.

Reliance on various types of volunteer labour was partly a side effect of difficulties faced in covering for the expenses of extra staff, or as a matter of fact in providing an

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<sup>64</sup> In 2006-7, the hours to contribute totalled 1400 annually, and the reimbursement was €433.80, which gives an ‘income’ of roughly €4 (£3) per hour. In 2007 in the UK, the hourly minimum wage for those aged above 22 years was £5.52, for those between 18 and 21 years £4.60; Italy does not have minimum wage legislation.

income for the coop's working members themselves. This was the case particularly for Equalis, the younger business. While both cooperatives eagerly sought volunteers for Christmas, during the rest of the year Sodalis hardly ever relied on them, as a result of its larger permanent labour force. In contrast, Equalis was always in search of volunteers, given the coop was at the beginning of its commercial life and faced serious cash constraints (as discussed in chapter 5).

But financial constraints are not the only explanation of the fair-trade cooperatives' reliance on voluntary labour. Equalis, in fact, was eventually able to afford one extra paid member of staff to help with the weekly box scheme. Yet after hiring this person, they still clearly welcomed more help; they also entered an agreement to host the mental health patients from the social coop mentioned previously. Then there was Sodalis. This coop was in a very different, more robust financial situation than Equalis, employing seven people overall, and it also hired occasional staff (the Cape Verdean woman). But seemingly to Equalis, it was also keen to find volunteers, especially for Christmas, and requested the volunteers from the national community service. These facts inevitably expose the thin line between relying on volunteers out of necessity, and wanting to rely on volunteers (either 'true' ones or those provided—and paid for—by the state) to save money and energy. The latter option makes sense commercially, considering the uneven intensity of the work cycle; always having to hire someone for a 'prolonged' period, which could mean just one month, was not an attractive prospect. It is also a clear indication that formal-economic decision making was at play. The following is an example of the ambiguous line just mentioned.

When the Sodalis coop hired the Cape Verdean woman for Christmas, it had re-acquired the shop only the previous year (see the coop's story in chapter 5). The following year, Sodalis hosted the three volunteers obtained through the national community service, and didn't re-employ this woman, nor any other extra part-time staff (they still welcomed 'true' volunteers, though). Third sector organisations have to apply for volunteers from the community service programme one year in advance. This meant that Sodalis couldn't do so before returning to retail, and thus had no volunteers initially, but did so immediately for the following year. It would appear that as soon as the opportunity presented itself, the group resorted to the civil service as a conscious strategy to avoid having to pay someone or look for volunteers, obtaining these from the state instead. The community service was

an almost ideal solution to the problems of the work cycle, providing extra labour not just for Christmas but for a whole year, and completely free. Also, the year after Sodalis hosted the community service volunteers, the section of the national programme linked to the fair-trade sector was discontinued. The cooperative thus decided to *hire* two of the three women as part-time staff, on a fixed term basis of one year (the third person was also offered a job, but turned it down).<sup>65</sup> That this happened raises further questions regarding the true nature and meaning of the coop's reliance on the state.

One example of a situation for which these doubts can be raised was an event Sodalis organized to celebrate the 'world fair-trade day' (promoted by the World Fair Trade Organisation). This consisted in a Saturday evening of fair-trade/organic drinks and snacks at the shop. The event was quite successful, with a lot of people attending during the course of many hours. As the event happened in May, the weather on the evening was quite pleasant, which meant people could spill onto the street and continue to chat, smoke and drink there. Almost all the coop's members were present. In addition to them, the three volunteers from the civil service, the other woman I met volunteering at Sodalis during my fieldwork, and myself were also there to help out. However, at the end of the evening it was obvious—at least to my eyes—that whilst we had remained all the time at the tables serving snacks, wine and fruit juices, the coop members had spent most of the evening chatting with customers and friends, just coming every now and then to check if everything was alright (if we needed another bottles of Chilean wine, more plastic cups, etc). Which raises the (rhetorical) question: were volunteers necessary, or even indispensable, on that night?

### **6.3 The ambiguities of agency in the market**

One morning in late November, I was volunteering at Sodalis' warehouse when Franco and Luigi came back from the shop. They had gone there early to deal with a number of things, but when they came back they only talked about one issue: the shop window. Both had been shocked by how the window looked. Franco—who was always inclined to theatrical

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<sup>65</sup> In Equalis' case, I have no evidence that someone was not hired when they took on the person from the social cooperative that worked with mental health patients. However, I believe this was due to Equalis' very small permanent labour force, which would not have allowed them to shed staff (and also probably to the fact that the disadvantaged person they accommodated could not be considered as reliable as a paid staff member).

displays of emotion—was quite angry and swore profusely. Luigi, while agreeing with Franco on the seriousness of the matter, was more seraphic about it and said it was an issue that could be easily resolved. The main problems were the types of goods on display, and the way they had been arranged. The items were not sufficiently ‘beautiful’ (i.e. expensive) for the shop to present itself appropriately to the public. Also, they were placed in a confused way that didn’t allow them to ‘shine’. Franco and Luigi both complained about the financial harm that the shop window, as it stood, could end up causing the business during the crucial Christmas shopping period, just a few days away. For them, an ugly shop window almost certainly meant fewer customers entering the shop and making purchases.

The following day I went again to the warehouse. I arrived there after lunchtime, and found the entire cooperative engaged in a meeting to discuss the shop window. At around 4pm, one person left to go and open the shop, but the meeting continued for at least another hour. Though they kept their door closed, I could guess from the tone of the exchange that it wasn’t the most pleasant of conversations. In the end, the meeting lasted more than two hours. The day after, I decided to go to the shop and have a look at the contested window myself. I might have been biased by Franco’s and Luigi’s comments, but the window did look a bit shabby. I could see their point—that it definitely was not a ‘Christmas shop window’—though I also felt it wasn’t an issue so important as to warrant the coop’s meeting. But I knew nothing about commercial strategies and had no retail experience, and successful sales is what the issue was all about.

Weeks afterwards, in the middle of the Christmas shopping period, the shop window incident was long since forgotten. I was again spending the morning at Sodalis’ warehouse. On that particular day, Franco’s pastime seemed to consist in calling the shop almost every fifteen minutes, to find out the takings. The news was good. So as soon as he put down the telephone, he shouted out the figure so that all of us in the warehouse could hear it. Eventually, as he was feeling ill with flu-like symptoms, he went home. But he obviously continued to monitor the business from there, as he now called the warehouse on the phone, to keep letting us know the news. At ten-thirty in the morning, one hour after opening time, the shop had already sold goods for €64, at twelve-thirty they had reached €1017. This was the last figure I heard before leaving that day, but if the trend continued unaltered

during the afternoon, they will have easily gone beyond €3000. (To put these results in context, the Sodalìs cooperative's average net salary was roughly €700 monthly.)

The shop window incident and Franco's obsessive announcements are two examples of how important attracting customers and selling as much as possible was for Palermo's fair-trade cooperatives. This aspect of their retailing work was evident in different forms throughout the year, not just during the busiest business period of December. One early autumn day, for example, Sodalìs decided to organise a party similar to the one discussed in section 6.2, to "mark the beginning of the year" after the end of the summer holidays. The 'year' in question was clearly the shop's annual commercial cycle, as the summer months were a 'dead period' (*periodo morto*) from a retail point of view. A few days before the event, Elena had been talking to one of their customer-friends and telling her about the evening in question. When this person left the shop, Elena said she looked forward to seeing her on the day, and recommended her to tell other people about it, concluding half-jokingly: "But to people with money!" (*ma gente con i piccioli!*).

The smaller coop, Equalis, appeared to share much the same attitudes as Sodalìs, perhaps only slightly less so given its smaller business scale. An episode from the many Tuesdays I spent at their shop helping with the distribution of vegetable-boxes shows well the dynamics in question. We were all busy at work—giving the right box to the right customer, dealing with the usual requests for additions, processing payments—when a client asked if we could take out the entire contents of his box and put them into plastic carrier bags. Gabriele began to reply "Ok, sure, let's take two plastic bags...", at which point Olivia, who was also there helping out, told the customer "...and you can do it yourself". Her tone was very light, and she was smiling when she spoke; it sounded almost like a joke. But the fact that she thought the client's request was absurd inevitably came through. Gabriele quickly repeated that we would do it ourselves, and we did. As soon as feasible without letting other customers hear, Gabriele told Olivia: "Olivia, don't ever do that again". He also had a smile on his face and remained calm, but again, the true meaning came through: he was annoyed with Olivia for the episode and that was his reprimand. A long moment of embarrassment followed, then quickly got lost in the midst of the hectic work.

Pleasing customers had different facets. The episode just described illustrates one of these: the quality of customer service. Another facet was offering people variety. This issue is exemplified by a small episode regarding some Argentinean organic pears. When I first saw them at Equalis, I made a simple remark saying they were new. Gabriele, overly apologetically, replied that they had to order them because “our customers ask for them, they tell us ‘they’re really nice, we want them’. So what can we do?”. Creating a successful sale strategy required offering clients variety as much as it did offering good customer service (I have discussed in chapter 4 the importance of produce availability for consumers).

The clients of a small fair-trade shop needed to be pleased (and appeased) in the same way as those of any other conventional shop or supermarket. In fact, this was probably even more the case as fair-trade shops can be considered specialty retail, which must have as one of its main selling points precisely a high quality customer service. Among other things, such service entailed a further aspect of retail vernacular (see section 6.1), one based on ‘friendliness’. This didn’t reach the rigid, formulaic level that big corporate retailers impose on their employees, with manuals specifying the correct way to greet a customer or how to answer the phone. Still, if one was at a fair-trade shop, s/he had to take on a certain welcoming, forthcoming, agreeable (obliging?) attitude, no matter what their actual mood was on the day. This process almost amounted to an embodiment of clerkship, which is reminiscent of wider societal trends of late-capitalism, particularly the commodification of human emotions characteristic of the service industry (see Hochschild 1983).

Fair-traders also targeted people who ‘had money to spend’: customers with a certain amount of disposable income. Or at least they tried to, as their efforts were not always successful. This was the case, for example, with a woman who came to Sodalis’ shop all dressed up (*distinta*), wearing jewellery and a pair of Gucci sunglasses, who after asking a lot of questions about the fair-trade coffee, finally decreed she wouldn’t purchase it as it was more expensive than the *Lavazza* one she normally bought. When the woman left, she was widely insulted by those at the shop—Elena was among them—who found absurd that she had made such a point given the amounts of money her appearance revealed. But Elena was also the person who recommended bringing to Sodalis’ party precisely the kind of people represented by the customer in question.

### *Commercial strategies from the bottom-up*

As a marketing strategy, product variety entailed for fair-trade also the ‘imitation’ of conventional products. The following episode illustrates precisely this point, though it does so—ironically—with a customer who did *not* like such strategy of imitation. As I show below, however, there was strong evidence for this phenomenon and its consequence on fair-trade retailing.

During Sodalis’ party mentioned above, I got ‘assigned’ to the drinks table. (On the evening, food—fair-trade couscous—was free, but drinks were on sale. Customers could purchase a glass of red or white wine, a quinoa beer, or various fruit juices as non-alcoholic options. This arrangement had been chosen because the wine, beer and fruit juice were far more costly for the coop than the couscous, so they were not prepared to give them away for free.) At one point, a woman customer and Roberta came chatting to the table. Eventually, the woman said to Roberta that she trusted fair-trade, but there were things she didn’t like about it. One of these was the fact that it had a tendency to copy too many of the foods that were already on the conventional market. She started giving examples of this.

She mentioned curry, lamenting that the shop sold four different types of it: one for vegetables, one for fish, another one for meat, and a nondescript type. “Curry is always curry, one is enough!” said the woman, a little exasperated. She continued with the ‘fair cola’, which was on sale that evening as a non-alcoholic beverage, a product clearly intended to mimic Coca Cola. Then she attacked the fair-trade *panettone*, which she remembered from the previous Christmas.<sup>66</sup> The woman felt that these were all examples that fair-trade wanted to imitate normal brands, which she thought was wrong. She concluded by saying: “You just don’t buy certain things anymore, period”. The woman’s complaint about too many ‘curries’ might have been off the mark, as this is a Western term used to refer to many different spice mixes, but the customer did pinpoint an important dynamic in contemporary fair-trade. Her comments about the fair cola and the *panettone* were harder to deny. Perhaps because of this, Roberta simply didn’t reply and let the subject drop.

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<sup>66</sup> *Panettone* is an Italian traditional Christmas sweet bread, consumed every year in huge quantities. It is sold by all major food brands and is one of the most recognisable symbols of Christmas’ consumerism.

Copying conventional food lines had a number of practical effects on fair-trade retailing. The first one was that it caused different ATOs to have very similar products. Coop members were clearly aware that many of the fair-trade products being sold were “entirely substitutable” with each other. As I show in a moment, in fact, the latter words are how Franco himself described this issue.

Volunteering at Sodalis’ warehouse allowed me to witness how the coop conducted business. The office was found in one of the warehouse’s five rooms, and its door was usually left open. As I mentioned earlier, because Sodalis also runs a wholesale business, the warehouse-cum-office was where clients who had a fair-trade shop in other Sicilian towns sometimes came to sample the goods, make an order, and collect it (the latter was done to cut down on the price and time of third-party deliveries). On one occasion, a wholesale client was chatting with Franco in the office, while waiting for his order to be packed and put in his van. They eventually started talking about how Sodalis was back in charge of the shop they had co-founded more than a decade before (see chapter 5). During this part of the conversation, Franco proudly said how they had not only managed to achieve record sales, which didn’t occur previously, but they had done so selling almost no products of the ATO *CTM Altromercato*. CTM, as the largest and oldest Italian ATO, dominates the national fair-trade market (see also below). For Franco, his coop’s performance was proof that product lines were “entirely substitutable [*interamente sostituibili*]”, i.e. that his brand of fair-trade coffee or jam was as good as CTM’s. The client agreed.

Gabriele of Equalis had reached much the same conclusion. One day, while we were sorting out some new stock, he spontaneously remarked that all the main ATOs now had their own complete range of foodstuffs (e.g. chocolate bars, teas, coffees, biscuits, fruit juices, etc). He told me how in the past, this had not been the case, as one organisation had only some products, while another specialised in something else. He also told me how sometimes ATOs got blocked with a lot of unsold stock. He was able to see this thanks to the ATOs’ online wholesale catalogues for shops, which showed certain stock numbers never changing. In his opinion, the root cause of this was obvious: “It’s products that have been sold a million times [*venduti e stravenduti*], which people don’t want anymore. They

have to increase the lines' range".<sup>67</sup> I said that the picture looked like one of intense competition. Gabriele replied that in practice, different fair-trade shops tended to stock the product lines of different ATOs, "as usually one shop is closer to one organisation rather than another". He suggested this tendency neutralised any competition, though I thought the tendency itself might have been a *result* of competition, as much as a means to avoid it.

There were in fact quite a few examples of how this type of competition was played out on Palermo's local fair-trade scene. In chapter 5 I recounted how Sodalis fired a shop assistant and hired a new one. One day during the latter's training, Franco was showing her how to arrange items on the shelves. This consisted in making sure that there were no gaps between products, filling empty spaces by taking a packet from the back of the line and putting it to the front, so that the shelf always looked full. Similar strategies seem to be adopted almost universally by retailers. At one point, Franco also complimented himself saying that thanks to 'his strategy' the shop had started selling greater quantities of their own-brand coffee than of CTM's, while in the past the opposite had been the case. Franco didn't specify what his winning strategy had entailed, so the next day I asked Piero, the other shop assistant. Piero's slightly sarcastic answer was that Franco had simply stopped ordering CTM's coffee when Sodalis reacquired the shop the year before (see also below). They had started stocking it again after a while, but apparently at that point customers had—according to Piero—"got used to our own brand and now they keep buying more of that". Franco's strategy also lends weight to Gabriele's remark about the close relationship of shops to certain ATOs rather than others.

Both this episode and the previous one regarding Sodalis' new successes at the helm of the shop point to the history of fair-trading in Palermo. This history is interesting as it also illustrates my current argument about the marketing strategy and the competition entailed in contemporary fair-trade retailing. As I wrote in chapter 5, Palermo's first fair-trade worker cooperative eventually split in two groups, one of which remained in charge of the shop, while the other founded the wholesale business at the warehouse. When this

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<sup>67</sup> That this was an issue within the commodity network was brought home—literally—when two women from a producer organisation in El Salvador visited Palermo, hosted by Sodalis. The coop arranged a public meeting one afternoon at their shop to introduce the producers directly to their customer base. During this event, the two women openly said that they were trying to diversify their product list because they realised that "people can't keep buying the same thing next week, or next month".

split took place, the two groups brokered an agreement in front of a lawyer, which included the following conditions (Franco himself once told me these).

The shop group would have to order all its stock from the newly formed wholesaling coop for three years. This condition was put in place so that the shop would not be able to order from CTM, as up to that point the national ATO of reference for Palermitan fair-traders had been *Commercio Alternativo* (CA), the country's second largest ATO and CTM's main rival. (As I said in chapter 5, both CTM and *Commercio Alternativo* are 'second-degree' cooperatives, i.e. coops made up by many smaller ones as their members.) The warehouse group clearly wanted to keep working with CA, and did not want another competitor on the local market. Also, as a wholesale business they necessarily needed a local outlet in order not to be cut off from the market, especially at the beginning. In turn, the warehouse group wasn't allowed to open an outlet for three years. This second condition safeguarded the people in the shop from any competition at the retail end. (The warehouse would have had the added advantage of making greater profit margins, selling directly to the public from a wholesale standpoint.) Clearly, then, fair-trade retail involved a deal of commercial competition, both at the local and national levels.

The daily trade offered numerous examples of such competition, as when Franco was talking over the phone with the manager of another shop one day in November. Given the period, fair-trade businesses were engaged in stocking up for Christmas. At one point, Franco warned the person at the other end of the phone that he needed to place his orders as early as possible, as he could foresee a depletion of stocks. Some items, in fact, were already selling very quickly. Franco concluded by saying: "I'm only telling this to my people and to you".<sup>68</sup> Another insightful episode regarding the internal mechanisms of fair-trade retail happened when a couple from a town in Palermo's province visited Sodalìs to talk about opening a fair-trade shop. Among the matters discussed during this meeting (much of which took place while the couple walked with Franco through the warehouse, looking at different products) were prices. Franco told them that they could buy wholesale from Sodalìs with discounts of 27% and 33%, depending on the type of item. Eventually,

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<sup>68</sup> Of course, one has to consider that saying this to the client was itself part of Franco's commercial strategy, and that he might have overplayed the need to order early on (i.e. more) from his warehouse. However, the data discussed thus far does lend weight to interpreting Franco's advice at face value (for example, Gabriele's remark on how certain shops are 'closer' to certain ATOs than others).

they discussed ‘recommended retail prices’ (RRP). Franco said that raising these (the only option that was discussed) was up to each individual shop. From the tone of his remark, I got the impression that he did not agree with the practice. However, he went on to give some fairly detailed advice on how to proceed if one did decide to do so.

He told the couple that prices for items bought on a regularly basis (i.e. the cheaper foodstuffs) should be left unaltered, as people were used to compare these with conventional ones, which were already cheaper than fair-trade’s RRP, and they might also find out what other fair-trade shops charged for them. These circumstances could all lead to embarrassing questions from customers, which were best avoided. The same argument did not apply to specialty foods and those that customers bought sporadically (as a treat, or for a special occasion), for which the price could be raised fairly safely.

On a different occasion, I had a follow-up of sorts to this discussion with Luigi, who had worked in Emilia Romagna for the ATO *Commercio Alternativo*. We had taken the company van to deliver goods at Sodalìs’ shop and then drop off some documents to the coop’s accountant. While sitting in the traffic, we ended up talking about prices. Luigi said that, historically, Italian fair-trade actors had worked on the basis of an informal agreement, according to which the RRP should be left unaltered. At the retail end of the commodity network, this meant that one should not practise discounts and ‘special offers’. Luigi disagreed with this policy. He first pointed out that, in truth, discounts and special offers had always been practised, when goods were near their sell-by dates.

But he felt this position was even more untenable now that offering discounts was a widespread practice between producer organisations in the global South and ATOs, and between ATOs and shops in Italy. He was adamant that there was a lot of competition around. The only actors still pushing to keep the no-discount policy for the public were the shops, particularly smaller ones. He said that their usual complaint was that practising discounts would push smaller actors out of the market, as only medium-large shops had the necessary economies of scale to offer meaningful price reductions. Luigi’s reply to this line of argument was to mock it as ridiculous, saying that it was “the incompetent” who got pushed out of the market. All in all, both the conversation between Franco and the couple, and that between myself and Luigi show yet again (see also section 6.2) that a formal-

economic mentality played an important role in determining, at least in part, the coop's commercial approach.

Attracting and satisfying customers were only two aspects of a successful retail strategy for the fair-trade cooperatives. For them, competing with other ATOs on the fair-trade market was also a crucial domain of activity. The trends and events related to such domain that took place in Palermo were often a result of wider national ones, acted out by the main players of the Italian fair-trade commodity network. Interestingly, Palermitan fair-traders didn't seem to be much concerned with competition from conventional food lines. They hardly ever discussed it, at least on a day-to-day basis. This fact was perhaps also the result of their level of operation, too local and small-scale. Fair-trade product lines are developed, top-down, by the larger ATOs at the national level, so it is reasonable to suppose that consideration of which goods to release on the market happened at that level. (That fair-trade 'copied' famous products shows this competition must be taking place.) As a result of this product development dynamic, marketing was also top-down. But some aspects of it exhibited a degree of autonomy at the local level, as Sodalis' parties testify.

## **Conclusion**

Retailing fair-trade and organic foods in Palermo as two small worker cooperatives was a complex and difficult matter. The people who were engaged in doing so had to juggle livelihood at different levels of physical, emotional and intellectual commitment. Satisfaction and disappointment, happiness and tiredness were closely entwined in the ethnography. Among the coping mechanisms put in place by the organisations to deal with the demands of their work a special position was occupied by the use of 'volunteers', broadly defined. The analysis seems to suggest that relying on volunteer labour was at least in part the result of a conscious strategy to offset (further) self-exploitation and labour costs (i.e. salaries), both of which could have been in theory affordable. (With regards to labour costs, this was definitely truer in Sodalis' than Equalis' case.)

As a section of the service industry—specialty food retail—the demands put on fair-trading by the contemporary culture of mass consumption were similar to those put on

many other market actors. For the coops, morals and ethics in the national, rather than international, section of the commodity network were heavily circumscribed. This was true of their dealings with customers, wholesale clients, and suppliers, and particularly evident during the most important periods of the year for business.

The data discussed point to a retail picture characterised by competition on the national consumer market. As for the previous issues of customer care, then, the question arises of exactly what aspects in fair-trade can be seen to be outside the normal economy. As a labour practice, the alternative nature of retailing fair-trade and organic foods had to face up with stringent market logics based on product segmentation, discount strategies (both international, national, and local), consumerism and the satisfaction of often superfluous needs that rested on the availability of disposable income.

The contradiction raised by apparently insignificant events points in the direction of an issue of much greater significance: the idea of society that fair-traders rely upon, both symbolically and (very) practically. At least on certain occasions, such an ideal appeared to rest on the following assumption: 'rich is good as long as it buys fair-trade'. Again, one realises how fair-trade's discourses have very little to say about the state of the societies in which fair-trade operates, beyond their need to stop exploiting the societies of the global South.

# CHAPTER 7

## ORGANIC FARMING: WORKING THROUGH NATURE(S) AND MARKET(S)

### **Introduction**

This chapter looks at the organic farmers that sold their produce either through the fair-trade shops discussed in the previous two chapters, or directly to consumer groups; in both cases, they were those with whom the shoppers and fair-traders had relations. I spent a comparatively shorter amount of time with growers, which explains why they are addressed in a single chapter. But the same framework adopted in the previous chapters is followed also in this one: I first deal with values, normativity and culture's symbolic dimension, and then move to explore how agency is performed in the face of social institutions and structures, and the interaction between culture and structured practices.

A focus on the farmers allows to expand further the panorama of moral-economic networks I have been following, and offers a chance to look at the origins of one of the two ethical foods that were circulated and consumed in these networks. As was the case for the shift in analysis from ethical consumers to fair-traders, then, a change of perspective in the values of moral economy occurs also in the current chapter. Not surprisingly, the emphasis is back on constructs of organic rather than fair-trade, especially in relation to food, but not exclusively. The evidence discussed below, in fact, puts us in front of a hybrid situation. If, on the one hand, similar themes to those already encountered in the first two sections of chapter 3 are again at play here, on the other, concerns for work identities and livelihoods are also highly important. The latter belong to the kind of issues we have become accustomed to throughout chapters 5 and 6. As I mentioned at the time, this can be explained by the engagement of certain informants—the fair-traders or, in this case, the farmers—as actors who have a stake in moral economy beyond consumption, i.e. beyond a voluntary commitment that is outside of the compelling demands of making a living. The focus of this chapter thus permits to appreciate many of the concepts already encountered

(e.g. risk, nature, justice, responsibility, etc.) from an important point of view that has been missing thus far, that of the producers of ethical commodities.

My analysis will draw primarily on the actor-oriented approach of the Wagenigen school of rural studies (e.g. van der Ploeg 1995; Vanclay et al. 2006), and on socio-cultural research on food provisioning (see Fine 2002; McMichael 2009; Winson 1993). According to the former, in a farming community there are always a number of cultural strategies of farming, defined as ‘farming styles’, from which growers select their *modus operandi*. This process is what accounts for the diversity that effectively characterises almost all farming communities. The following elements usually give rise to a style of farming:

- A. A set of strategic notions, values and insights shared by a particular group of farmers concerning the way farming *ought* to be organized;
- B. A specific structuring of the practice of farming that corresponds to the strategic notions or ‘cultural repertoire’ used by these farmers;
- C. A specific set of interlinkages between the farm enterprise on the one hand and the surrounding markets, market agencies, government policy and technological developments on the other. (see van der Ploeg 1995: 122)

In the chapter’s first section I look at point A; the second section deals with aspects of point B, while the third and fourth with point C.

I therefore start by analysing the ethnography that illustrates self-representations of organic labour practices and, secondly, growers’ views about conventional agriculture and those who work in it. I uncover the ethical constructs that informed growers’ identities as practitioners of a different kind of agriculture, whose difference stems from ideas of risk avoidance, but also of social responsibility and cultural innovation. In section 7.2 I turn to which cultivation practices were actually employed by farmers, and what this tells us about their relation to nature. The rationale for including this aspect is to avoid an exclusively social-constructivist approach, and adopt instead a more complex one that incorporates human and non-human factors in the ethnography (see Milton 2002). A tension between two different paradigms framing human-nature relations emerges from data in question. One was based on ideas of cooperation and stewardship with living organisms; this was the paradigm that linked most closely with organic farming practices. The other one, though, was centred on the need to produce food to certain standards of marketability and across

temporal scales, and to defend produce from the threats posed by other organisms. Finally, in the third and fourth sections I explore how organic growers viewed and coped with the political economy in which they found themselves operating.

Before beginning my ethnographic analysis, in the following paragraphs I provide some essential information about the larger political, socio-economic and agronomic contexts of Sicilian organic agriculture (see sections 7.1 and 7.2 for a detailed discussion of its cultural context).

Overall, the development of an organic farming tradition in Italy followed different geographical trajectories (Compagnoni et al. 2000). In the centre and north-west regions of the country, it relied on the composite reality of sparsely populated plains and valley bottoms known as the ‘urbanized countryside’, while in the north-east it quickly developed a more vertically integrated system. In the south of Italy, and particularly in Sicily, the movement initially benefited from foreign outlets located mostly in northern European countries. Citrus fruits (mostly lemons and oranges) were of special importance to this initial process, given their status as one of the island’s most highly prized, ‘typical’ agricultural products (Schifani 2007: 12).

These foreign channels are still present today; they have also diversified with time to include other sought after products, like olive oil and wine. But their importance was superseded by the definition in 1992 of a subsidy scheme for organic farming at the European Union (EU) level, which was received at the regional level in 1994. As a result of these politico-economic changes, in the past fifteen years the organic sector has witnessed sustained growth in Sicily, leading the region to become the first in Italy both for cultivated organic land and number of organic producers (Schifani 2007). (Italy is currently the second country in Europe for organic land, having occupied first place for many years; Rohner-Thielen 2010.) The role of subsidies in explaining the conversion of farmers to the organic regime cannot be underestimated, as is clearly indicated by longitudinal data on the trend of conversions (see Chironi & Galati 2005: 24-27). In section 7.1 I will show this was probably also the case for my informants’ personal trajectories.

In 2005, Sicilian organic agriculture could count on a productive base of just above 180.000 hectares (this figure includes both fully-certified and in-conversion land), which

represented roughly 14% of the island's total cultivated land (see Schifani 2007). The province of Palermo had the second highest share (19%) of organic land. Taken together, the island's organic sector exhibited considerable agronomic diversification. It was dominated by the production of pasturage and fodder crops, and leguminous and cereal ones (especially *durum wheat*), which together occupied 63% of total organic land. Palermo's province came fourth with 13% of land in this agronomic class. Arboriculture (which includes citrus and other fruits, grapes, and olives) was the second main component of the sector regionally, occupying 21% of total organic land. In this class Palermo scored first for the cultivation of olives, second for grapes, and fifth for citrus and other fruits. Finally, horticulture was involved on 1% of Sicily's organic land. The south-east of the region hosted the vast majority of organic vegetables production, reflecting the area's well-known specialisation in this type of production (especially intensive, greenhouse-based one) in the conventional agricultural sector. However, the province of Palermo had the third highest percentage (13%) of land in this agronomic class.

With regards to actual producers, in 2005 there were 7688 certified organic farms in Sicily (Schifani 2007: 15). By looking at the certified farms that also received subsidies (the two groups do not match perfectly), we can see that organic producers represented in 2002 less than 2% of all producers active on the island (see Crescimanno 2005: 182). Organic farms were characterised by a strongly unequal geographical distribution. In terms of the number of farms per province, the highest percentage was found in the island's eastern provinces. Palermo scored fourth, hosting 12% of Sicilian certified organic farms (Schifani 2007: 17); of these, those that were also subsidised represented in 2002 1% of all farms in the province (Crescimanno 2005: 182). The average organic farm size in Sicily in 2005 was 23 hectares (Schifani 2007: 17).<sup>69</sup> Finding data on the average size of vegetable and fruit farms, which are the ones I dealt with most closely, proved difficult. However, data on citrus and olive farms can act as suitable proxies (3 out of 4 of my informants had olive and fruit groves). In 2003, both had averages of approximately 8 hectares (Chironi & Galati 2005: 32).

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<sup>69</sup> The Sicilian data reflects the national picture, where organic farms are also bigger than conventional ones with an average of 27 hectares (see Bio Bank 2006).

While the implementation of the EU subsidies scheme was a vital stimulus to production in the region's organic agri-food system, the political context has been considerably less favourable to distribution and consumption (Foti et al. 2007). For example, schemes in support of farmers' retail strategies, of initiatives for product processing and added value, and of consumer initiatives at the local (city) and regional levels, have remained patchy and been left to the initiative of the very first tiers of political administrative power and of isolated citizen's groups (see the case study in Orlando 2011a). It is important to appreciate this situation as its effects can be felt both in the organic farming sector as a whole (see below) and in the evidence I will discuss in this chapter's ethnographic sections. This was the case, for example, with producers' efforts at selling their goods through direct channels.

Cultivation, in fact, is only one of the functions that agricultural enterprises ('farms') can engage in. Farmers may not just grow food, but also transform and package it; they may import food from other producers and then re-sell it, or process it, etc. Actors who do so are generally known as producer-processors, processors, importers-wholesalers and so forth, depending on the particular combination of biological and economic functions they specialise in. This is true of conventional as of organic agriculture. These actors are all weak in the Sicilian organic agri-food system, a fact usually judged negatively by researchers (e.g. Bonafede et al. 2005). From one point of view, it is undeniable that this situation creates an unfavourable politico-economic climate for farmers, particularly small-medium ones. This happens, for example, with the lack/cost of processing facilities that can give added value to food. However, from another point of view, the data I analyse below (see sections three and four) shows that some of the actors mentioned above do not necessarily impact positively on farmers' livelihoods. This was especially the case with the issue of prices along the supply chain.

Unfortunately, there is still very little evidence as to the economic weight of the region's organic agricultural sector, both in absolute terms and relative to the rest of the conventional sector. Some sketchy data is available in connection to the subsidy programme (Crescimanno 2005). Between 2001 and 2003, Sicilian organic farms received €138.000.000; those in the province of Palermo scored sixth for the amount of money received in this three-year period. At the time of fieldwork, payments to producers were in

the order of €850-900 per hectare/year for citrus cultivation, €750-800 for olive and fruit cultivation, and €550-600 for horticulture. Two case studies provide data on the income of citrus and olive farms. With regards to the former (see Ascianto & Galati 2005), 22 enterprises were shown to have an average total gross income of €71.000, with considerable variations (€800-€26.000) due to different farm sizes. The average gross income margin (obtained by deducting farm expenses from the total gross income) was €7.000, but with variations between -€2000 and €238.000. In a study of organic olive farms (Chironi 2005), 29 enterprises were found to have an average total gross income per hectare of €4000, with a range between €300 and €12.000. The average gross income margin was €2000, oscillating between -€600 and €8000.

I will now give a brief introductory summary of the farmers with whom I conducted fieldwork, taking my cue from Pratt (1994: 88-103). One of them was Francesco, in his thirties. He owned a farm of 20 hectares together with his parents. They had converted to organic agriculture around 1991, and produced mostly vegetables and olive oil. Their farm was located on a large agricultural plain in the westernmost part of the island. The area surrounding it was typical of contemporary Sicily's heavily built interior. A couple of industrial warehouses, including a large distribution centre of the supermarket chain De Spar, sat next to some of the farm's holdings. The farm's main compound was a large building, still partly being developed. It had a central atrium surrounded by the house proper and two smaller buildings: a warehouse with a cold storage facility, and what would become either a classroom for visiting school groups, or a small on-site restaurant.



Figure 8: an aerial image of the territory close to Francesco's farm, with large warehouses clearly visible (source: Google Earth).

Then there was Giuseppe, who was in his early seventies. He was originally from a rural town on the north-western coast of the island, approximately seventy kilometres to the west of Palermo. While Francesco's farm was positioned on almost flat land, Giuseppe's

was located on a slightly narrow agricultural plain sided by the sea and the mountainous interior, closer to the latter on hilly ground. He had inherited the original plot from his grandfather, who made wine there during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The site had been abandoned, partly as a result of the 1968 earthquake, which damaged the compounds, and Giuseppe had worked in Palermo for many years. Slowly, he began reinvesting in the farm, renovating the buildings and acquiring more land. He now owned 17 hectares, and had moved there permanently after his retirement. Giuseppe had a daughter in her thirties, recently married and with a newborn child; she had decided to take on the business and make it her full-time job (while I was in the field, she was enrolled on a course for ‘agricultural entrepreneurs’). They had converted their farm to organic agriculture around 1989, and produced mostly vegetables and olive oil, but also some wine.



Figure 9: the area close to Giuseppe’s farm (notice the wind turbines on the horizon) (source: the author).

Then there were Sandro and Benny, both in their late forties. Sandro had worked for many years for a large organic producer organisation that specialised in orange and lemon

cultivation, dealing with their marketing operations. However, as he owned some land himself, he had recently set up with others a cooperative of organic growers, of which he was the president. This group, which had nine members, grew and sold a variety of fruits and vegetables; together, it pooled roughly 100 hectares of land. Finally, Benny used to be a member of Sandro's coop. However, he had abandoned this as he thought the prices farmers received through it were too meagre. He owned a very small plot on the outskirts of one of Palermo's provincial towns, on which he had installed a number of greenhouses to maximise his productive capacity.

As far as I was able to ascertain, Francesco, Giuseppe, Sandro and Benny were not strictly speaking of peasant origin. This was evident from the fact that all of them, except Sandro, actually lived on their land, and also from the amounts they owned (see discussion in chapter 2). These amounts were greater than the average farm size of the conventional agricultural sector, and indicate a different trajectory from the widespread landlessness that preceded the reform of 1950 (but see also section 7.4 below).

## **7.1 Farmers' identity: of health, responsibility, and innovation**

Cultural geographies of agriculture ... study farming discourses and practices, what farming means to people in particular places and times, the production of farming knowledges, and the corporeality of farming people.

(Holloway 2002: 2056)

I will begin the discussion with a description of a particular agricultural task I witnessed at Giuseppe's farm, which exemplifies the central factor at play in this section's ethnography.

One early morning in May, I reached Giuseppe's farm and found him working with one of his labourers (*operaio*) next to the field of grapevines. They were busy spraying an organic anti-parasite on the plants, something that was done periodically during the season. Giuseppe was preparing the treatment by diluting the thick, azure paste from a large plastic can—very similar to paint—into a large jerry-can. The liquid was then poured into the tank of the spraying machine attached to the tractor, which was driven by the *operaio* along each

line of grapevine. The tractor and the labourer, who was wearing only his day clothes, soon got entirely covered with the substance. This made the labourer look like a living version of one of the characters from the Smurfs cartoon series.

Giuseppe said the treatment wasn't poisonous for humans.<sup>70</sup> However, he admitted his employee should have been wearing a mask, goggles, and a suit, so he went inside and returned with a k-way and a straw hat, which he gave to him. We continued talking about pesticides, particularly those used in conventional agriculture, and what these would have meant for the labourer's health. Giuseppe said this concern had played a major role in his conversion to organic farming, a decision he took "out of awareness that pesticides are really nasty". He then told me that one of his uncles, who was a conventional grower, had died of cancer, which he thought was probably due to a lifetime of spraying crops.

Giuseppe's argument was a familiar one among the organic farmers I met. Francesco, for example, told me: "We decided to convert to organic after the second intoxication [*intossicazione*]. Now we've been doing it for sixteen years. We changed first of all to safeguard our health, our safety". It wasn't clear if Francesco meant they had been actually poisoned when using pesticides and other inputs, or if they had experienced food poisoning (the Italian *intossicazione* can refer to both). But he did say, eventually, that since going organic he made it a rule to eat only food grown on his own farm.

One September day, while we were walking by his olive grove, Francesco said that the neighbouring (conventional) growers had "already sprayed their olive trees seven or eight times". They had done this to fight the 'olive fly' (*Bactrocera Oleae*), the worst pest for this kind of tree. The fly population develops in September, when olives start ripening (Guet 2001). As these are collected from October throughout December, Francesco was suggesting that the growers were set to use vast quantities of anti-parasite preparation. He added that even when farmers carried out analyses of their product, "they never say what they find", and also that, in any case, one "can't know what remains of the liposoluble substances". He stressed that his oil was still edible two years after being bottled.

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<sup>70</sup> This paste was made of copper and sulphur. Giuseppe said that questions were being asked about the reliance of organic techniques on copper as treatment, given it is a heavy metal and tends to accumulate in ecosystems. He said its use was already highly regulated, and he thought it would be eventually banned.

Benny was also strongly opposed to the use of chemical pesticides in agriculture. His line of reasoning was that “in order to understand what organic means, you have to go and see what conventional means, what non-organic means”. He had done so, visiting areas like that of Mazara del Vallo, an agricultural plain in the westernmost part of Sicily, and especially Vittoria, a town in the south-east of the island (in)famous for its highly intensive, greenhouse-based agriculture (see Cole & Booth 2007). There, Benny saw “fields sterilised with methyl bromide, greenhouses gassed with all the plants inside, which you weren’t supposed to enter for ten days, but plants were harvested after just four”. He took strawberries as an example of conventional farming practices, saying that an organic strawberry had to be eaten in a day or two otherwise it went mouldy, whilst conventional ones “are sprayed with a substance that creates like a thin film on them to make them last longer”. On one occasion, he gave me a large jar of his bees’ honey as a gift, so that I could “taste the difference with conventional honey, produced with artificial sweeteners and antibiotics”.

As growers held these opinions about one of the key aspects of food production, it is not surprising that they viewed equally negatively the actual food produced by conventional agriculture, as Benny’s last comment shows. Constant emphasis was placed on the issue of food quality and its impact on health. Francesco, for example, often recounted anecdotes and stories of people who came to his farm to buy food because they suffered from dietary problems (*disturbi alimentari*) and intolerances (*intolleranze*), of people who were sick if they didn’t eat organic food, something which he said he “couldn’t believe” (though he implied that they were, in fact, telling the truth). These individuals complained with him if he didn’t have something they were looking for.

Among his on-site customers, there were many couples who regularly visited Francesco to buy food exclusively for their babies. Some of these couples commented that having an organic diet for the entire family would be too expensive. Francesco’s reply to this view, as he gave it to me, was: “They will end up spending more money by going to the doctor, because they didn’t eat healthily”. Benny was also full of examples of clients who visited him (especially during the summer months) to purchase food because they had “problems of various sorts”. His explanation for this was straightforward: “If you eat properly then you’re healthy [*stai bene*], vice-versa you’re not”.

The growers I met decided to practise organic farming because of the effects of using pesticides. This has been shown to be a recurrent feature of organic farmers' lives in different locales. Fairweather, for example, found that one of the main reasons growers convert to organic in New Zealand is "the first-hand experience of adverse effects from use of chemicals rather than a general aversion, in principle, to the use of chemicals" (1999: 57). According to him, such first-hand knowledge includes cases of ill health experienced by family members, and also farmers' observation of people's reactions to chemicals. For the North American case, Buttel & Gillespie (1988) have noted that, although conventional and organic farmers may share very similar preferences with regard to some production practices (see below), a constant area of disagreement is the use of chemical agricultural inputs.

In fact, the importance of personal knowledge of agriculture's harmful side emerges also for the case of *conventional* growers. Ethnographically-minded studies of farming have shown the discrepancy between expert views and the practical knowledge of those who actually work with agricultural inputs. Wynne (1989), for example, says that the use of pesticides is often more cumbersome than manufacturers and government agencies recognise, which causes non-compliance with regulations and, in turn, risk to workers. He writes of his case-study: "Scientists' implicit assumptions were of idealised worlds of herbicide production and use ... . Conversely the workers, whose risk perceptions were for a long time dismissed as overactive imaginings of side-effects, had real empirical experience" (1989: 37).

First-hand experience of pesticides had a further facet in the Sicilian case. As I discussed in chapter 2, in Sicily peasants have historically lived in urban centres and not on the land they cultivated. This arrangement continues in the present. However, some of the growers I spoke with were in a different situation, actually living on the land they owned. That this arrangement was uncommon is shown by the fact that these individuals had been previously living in a city, but at some point had taken the opportunity to transfer to their land. I thus suggest that having to regularly apply anti-parasites in the vicinity of their homes was a factor that led growers to adopt organic agriculture.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> The idea that living on their farms made growers shun pesticides would also suggest that living away from where chemicals are applied can act *in favour* of this practice.

Financial reasons (such as market price premiums) appeared absent as a motivation to cultivate organically: no one ever mentioned them explicitly (but see below). This is not realistic, and I thus take such reasons for granted. There was some circumstantial evidence of their importance. For example, the dates of Francesco's story coincide with the introduction by the European Union of its organic farming subsidies scheme. Also, in sections 7.3 and 7.4 I discuss evidence of growers' concerns for the market price of their produce. With regard to secondary data, recent studies (e.g. Harris et al. 2008, Rigby et al. 2001) underscore the significance of financial reasons for organic growers in the UK.

### *Of conventional agriculture and its practitioners*

When Giuseppe told me he had decided to convert to organic “out of awareness that pesticides are really nasty”, he added: “It isn't fair [*giusto*] to have a small family plot done properly [*fatto bene*] and the rest poisoned, like everyone else does”. Giuseppe referred to this practice on many other occasions, saying it was typical of conventional growers: to keep free of chemical inputs the small portion of one's land that provisioned the family. It was obvious that Giuseppe took issue with this established custom on moral grounds.<sup>72</sup> In fact, Giuseppe was not alone in stressing a moral dimension in his adoption of organic agriculture. With very similar words, Francesco explained his family's choice to abandon conventional agriculture thus: “We wanted to grow a healthy food, we wanted to do things properly [*fare le cose bene*]”.

Benny went further. He appeared to hold a more holistic view than the other two farmers, in which the moral element was part of a broader strategy: “For me, organic is an ethical issue. It's a practice that should make you more independent of the system, make you go towards simplifying things, get to the point, back to basics. But I see that things aren't going in this direction, so I think perhaps I'm out of this world [*sono fuori dal mondo*]”. Sandro had his own thoughts on these matters: “Organic agriculture is a job with an ethical component, a moral tension to it, not one of speculation. Obviously, one can do it also for speculation”.

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<sup>72</sup> This anecdote also lends further weight to the idea that living on cultivated land in Sicily makes it harder to apply chemical inputs: the practice mentioned by Giuseppe shows that conventional farmers try to avoid eating (their own) pesticide-treated food.

An ethical perspective was not the only one from which organic growers looked at those in the wider agriculture sector, of which organic was a small part. Sandro, for example, also often lamented that conventional farmers in his area had to “begin understanding things, they have to realise that they can’t do things like in the old days: poorly and with no organisation”. He thought this attitude was the result of farmers being still attached to a way of producing that was—in his words—“old style” (*vecchio stile*).

The following story illustrates one of the ways in which, according to informants, this ‘old style agriculture’ was perpetuated. On one occasion, Giuseppe explained to me that he had observed his conventional farmer-neighbours, and had thus realised how, if they wanted to, they could avoid spraying pesticides on their grapevines. They only had to plough with the tractor very close to each row, and this would eliminate almost all the weeds. In fact, he claimed that one year they had done so. But in general, they just kept applying pesticides. So I asked him why, and he replied, bluntly: “To copy what everyone else does”. When I expressed some scepticism about this explanation, Giuseppe confirmed it and added, getting somewhat excited, that it was the result of a strong tendency farmers had to imitate what the majority in their sector did. He judged this “absurd” and said mockingly: “When he sees someone else applying something, every grower says [in a strongly accented dialect]: ‘Am I a fool?’ [*Chi ssugnu fissa io?*], so he sprays as well”. Giuseppe was adamant that pesticide use kept increasing, even among farmers who would have only needed to clean the mechanical plough when weeds got stuck in it.<sup>73</sup>

This evidence points to the problematic of the symbolic relationship between conventional and organic growers, from the perspective of the latter. The consistent use made by organic producers of certain expression (‘doing things properly’, ‘ethical dimension’), reveals their reliance on cultural repertoires that defined conventional farmers as “unimaginatively conservative” (Holloway 2002: 2060), or as Duram (1997: 161) describes them, “reactive farmers”: farmers who follow their neighbours’ behaviours. But organic growers’ understandings of farming styles were not always clear cut. From an ‘outside’ perspective, their boundaries appeared more permeable. An example of this were

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<sup>73</sup> Giuseppe did acknowledge, however, that if the farmer in question was a *coltivatore diretto* (roughly, a farmer with no employees), then having to spend even little extra time on weeds translated into a greater work load (and that hiring someone to do the extra job would of course translate into extra costs).

the difficulties at the production and distribution end of the local organic system of provision (see sections 7.3 and 7.4).

Other studies have obtained similar results to the ones just described. Giarrizzo (1993) writes that organic farmers in Sicily believe conventional agriculture is stifled by a lack of desire for innovation and of faith in the possibility of change. Giarrizzo also writes that such lack of innovation was attributed by organic growers to “the strong propensity toward imitation of Sicilian farmers ... the traditional mechanism that comes into play is that of imitation ... the constant monitoring, on behalf of the farmer, of the operations and improvements introduced by neighbouring producers” (1993: 26). Giuseppe spoke of this attitude as acting conservatively to reinforce lack of change. As Holloway notes of small-holders in the UK, all-in-all organic growers

provide interesting examples of sets of relationships where farming is often explicitly bound into moral discourses concerned with (re)establishing what are taken to be ‘richer’ and ethically superior relationships between humans, animals, food, land, nature, etc, and which are also associated with a sense of being ‘other’ to more conventional styles of farming which might be less explicitly concerned with the ethics of their practices. (2002: 2054-2055)

I now turn to analysing precisely these ‘relationships between humans, animals, food, land, and nature’ as I encountered them in western Sicily.

## **7.2 Cultivating organically: “It’s the plants that tell us what to do”**

[We] should be exploring the processes by which environmental attitudes are shaped and formed ... . To do this would require a sensitivity ... to the time and place specific processes by which farmers construct their own particular ‘version(s)’ of the environment.

(Morris & Andrews 1997: 90)

I usually went to Giuseppe’s farm on the even days of the week, as on the odd ones he went to Palermo by van to re-supply the city’s organic shops. I travelled there on the local *strade statali* (‘A’ roads) by *motorino* (moped), from the small coastal town where I rented an accommodation during spring. Some days I would follow Giuseppe on his errands. These mainly consisted in monitoring and planning farm work—checking how plants were

developing or visiting a particular plot where a new crop would be grown—and mild physical work—weeding or preparing an organic plant treatment. On other occasions, when Giuseppe was busy with a less interesting errand (e.g. filling in paperwork), I would help—up to a certain point—his employees. This usually entailed planting crops, applying manure, or clearing from weeds an area for future use. Arguably, the core of farm work was the planting of a new crop, something that I took part in on different occasions.

For example, in May I helped to plant honeydew melons. The field, a large rectangular stretch of very dark soil, had been mechanically ploughed some time before. The rest of the work, however, relied on human labour, which was a constant presence on the farm under various guises. Manure and organic fertilizers had also already been applied, by hand using shovels. We began by inserting small bamboo poles at regular intervals on both sides of the field, then tied an old piece of cable to each corresponding pole on the two sides. This was done both to set the correct distance between each row of plants, and to sow the seedlings in a straight line. Before inserting the young plants, the earth was opened up with two powerful blows of the hoe, and water applied to soften the spot.

Water, which was obtained from Giuseppe's private deep-well with an electric pump, was transported by tractor near the field in large containers. It was then poured in the watering cans that we used on the spot. The seedlings, bought at a plant nursery, were encased in 'plugs' in a sheet of polystyrene. One had to gently push these out from underneath the sheet with a stick, which also served to dig the small hole in the soil that would receive them. After putting them in place, the earth was gently compacted and plenty more water applied. We worked with a wind that climbed from the sea down below, up towards the hills of the interior. The days were bright, with lots of clouds rushing over our heads. When the sun was blocked from view the air became a little chilly. The only noise one could hear were some near-by trees moving in the wind, and the faint mechanical rattle of other tractors working on neighbouring fields.

Many other processes and factors were required to make planting possible. First of all, the earth had to be fertilised. Giuseppe preferred to use manure to enrich his fields' soil, though he also relied on other means. One day, while walking through the fields, we passed some bags of organic 'fertilisers' lying on the ground. Giuseppe commented on them negatively, saying: "You don't know what they contain! Bones, stuff like that. But they're

allowed, so...”. When I asked why he preferred compost, he simply answered that it was “better”, but added that it was hard to come by and “tiring to use”. He purchased it from other farms, given he owned no animals. It was ‘tiring’ in the sense of being time-consuming to prepare and very unpleasant to apply (Giuseppe said a machine for this existed, but claimed it was too expensive).

During fieldwork, I witnessed the use of goats’ manure. The lorry delivering it dropped the material in very large piles at the boundaries of two fields. Giuseppe’s labourers then accurately covered the heaps with plastic sheets, in order to make the compost age, or “cook” (*cuocere*), as informants said. This was a difficult but crucial process, given it allowed to kill pathogens and process the weeds present in the manure, and also neutralize potential residues (see Guet 2001). The cover had to be very tight all around the mound, to avoid that insects got inside and created a pest factory (and to minimize the release of foul odours). Of course, having to eventually apply the manure was also an unpleasant job.

These were not the only difficulties linked to the use of compost. As one of Giuseppe’s employees once told me: “Farming organically is harder because you don’t use poisons” (*veleni*). (‘Poison’ was a word used frequently to qualify synthetic pesticides.) This meant a much greater workload was needed to clean areas that hadn’t been treated with weed-killers, especially if manure had previously also been applied on them. Both facts allowed wild plants to re-colonise an area very quickly indeed. This was pointed out to me while we spent a morning clearing a plot where three months before lettuces had been grown. The area, which had been left to fallow, had so many weeds covering it that we couldn’t even free the water hose that was lying on the ground. Fallowing was another means by which Giuseppe managed his soil’s fertility. He also regularly left his fields to ‘renew’ themselves by not growing any cash crops on them, planting instead chickpeas, grass peas, lentils, or French honeysuckle.<sup>74</sup>

These latter two practices show the important relation in organic agriculture between fertility management and the promotion of farm biodiversity. To achieve the latter,

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<sup>74</sup> Known locally as *sulla*, French honeysuckle (*Hedysarum Coronarium*) is a perennial legume indigenous to the Mediterranean. Historically, it represented the most important soil-renewal and fodder crop of the landed estate system, where it could reach heights of two meters (see Blok 1974: 45, 266).

Giuseppe rotated his crops spatially (see below), for example having aubergine, lettuce and corn on the same plot, or tomato and two different varieties of melon. It was often hard to distinguish what counted as being grown together on ‘the same’ plot, or closely but in different fields. Another tactic Giuseppe adopted was to produce his own seeds, both for cash and cover crops. His definition for this was “strengthening biodiversity” (*rafforzare la biodiversita’*), or “giving an extra hand to the seedlings” (*dare una mano in più alle piantine*). He maintained this allowed to have seeds from plants that were already adapted to the micro-locality of his fields, and that this was important to have “more resistant” plants.

One day, one of his employees told Giuseppe that a number of newly-planted seedlings had died for no apparent reason. He replied: “We haven’t discovered anything new, the plant needs to adapt to the soil that receives it”. Around his farm were patches of land where lettuce, Mediterranean cabbage, broad beans, borage and *giri* (a vegetable I’ve been completely unable to identify) were planted and left to flower. These were then collected and spread out on tarpaulins around the house compound, left to dry, and eventually bashed to gather the seeds. But as I mentioned above, Giuseppe relied also on seedlings purchased from plant nurseries. Growing one’s seeds, then, was also partly an economic strategy to cut costs and avoid having to rely every year on nursery plugs (at least not entirely). This was something Giuseppe himself acknowledged. The strategy made even more sense in the case of cover crops, given these were not sold and thus made no profit for the farm.

The bio-diversified cropping patterns adopted at Giuseppe’s farm—non-crop plantings, rotations, fallowing—made for a visibly blurred landscape (this was compounded by the fragmented layout of farms in the area; see section 7.4). Some plots (though not all) lacked clear boundaries, their confines appearing uncertain given the variety of weeds and wild flowers that filled the space between cash crops. That this was not the first impression of an inexperienced eye was confirmed by how Giuseppe once remarked, smiling sarcastically, that “one of the characteristics of an organic field is that you have to look for the plants among other things”. He continued by explaining this was due to the fact that plots were not sprayed with weed-killers before planting. Giuseppe used a mixture of careful mechanical controls, old-fashioned hand ones, and a good degree of tolerance

against weeds. Francesco used also another technique—mulching—where black plastic sheets are applied on the plots to cover the soil, thus blocking out all sunlight and killing the weeds.

Giuseppe raised an interesting point regarding agricultural pests. While collecting plants among considerable amounts of non-cash crops, he asked, with a mixture of sarcasm and resignation:

Now, should we consider all this stuff as infesting plants [*infestanti*] or as living matter? The organic philosophy says you shouldn't talk of infesting plants, because ultimately everything is living matter that feeds the soil. But in the end they're just weeds.

Both Giuseppe and his employees constantly showed me the weeds, insects and fungi that attacked their plants. This was clearly one of the most important concerns for the farm. There was no question that this aspect of the human-ecosystem relationship was one grounded in competition and confrontation, a constant battle between the labour of agriculture and nature's wider demands. Total war was, however, a last resort.



Figure 10: 'weeds', and fields with compost heaps in the background, on Giuseppe's farm (source: the author).

With regard to pests, many of the treatments employed were aimed at dissuasion rather than extermination. They were also largely ineffective. Under extreme circumstances, certain treatments were applied with the specific purpose of killing pests. Giuseppe didn't like to use them, and thought doing so was "paradoxical". He complained they killed "indiscriminately", but were allowed given their natural, non-synthetic origin. He also pointed out that they were active for a very short time. For example, the treatment I described in the opening vignette of section 7.1—the azure-coloured paste—was photosensitive and thus rendered inactive after just a couple of sunny days (not a rare event in Sicily.)<sup>75</sup> Francesco was faced with much the same reality. He stressed how, as a consequence of diseases and pests, every season he lost "tons" of produce, at a considerable economic loss. He often repeated that, had he been under a conventional regime, he wouldn't have had such problems and would have harvested larger quantities. Certain treatments (such as Neem soap) were also so expensive that virtually no one used them.

Another interesting aspect of organic cultivation that I witnessed being practised was the use of greenhouses. Though Giuseppe had none, Francesco, Sandro and Benny did. Francesco had an impressive array for what was a family farm. He was extremely proud of them, stating openly that "thanks to them I can produce lots of great vegetables during the winter". To make his point, he told me the following anecdote. One winter, tomatoes growing in his greenhouse had become seriously ill with a fungus. The situation was so bad that the agronomist consulted by Francesco had decreed it pointless to keep them, and suggested eradicating them and starting anew. Francesco didn't follow this advice, and eventually the tomatoes had "healed themselves and reached an incredible height". His concluding, somewhat contradictory (see below) remark was: "I'm telling you, nature always wins!".

### *Collaboration and stewardship vs. resources and productivism*

Organic farming comprises a number of different agronomic practices (for an overview, see the classic Altieri 1995). In terms of soil fertility, Guthman notes that "the use of compost

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<sup>75</sup> These treatments were rotenone and pyrethrum, both of which are widely employed in organic farming. Giuseppe said that conventional agriculture now benefited from 'systemic pesticides', which are aimed only at certain insects and remain active for long periods. He told me there was nothing equivalent for organic crops, because agronomic research did not focus on organic techniques and "goes where the money is, and agri-business puts the money".

is most idiomatically associated with organic production” (2000: 261). All the growers made use of manure to a certain extent, and valued it highly. None of them, however, had their own animals to provide for this need. This lack separated their farms from the organic ideal, in which resource use should be minimised by creating an on-site self-sufficient cycle. Growers also purchased organic agricultural ‘inputs’—bags of certified-organic fertilisers—sold by agri-business companies. Such input substitution practice has been heavily criticised for removing even further organic agriculture from its goal of sustainability, and back towards the system used in conventional farming (e.g. Rosset & Altieri 1997).

Though the use of compost traditionally epitomizes organic growing techniques, cover cropping actually provides broader advantages as a fertility management strategy (Rigby & Cáceres 2001). As I showed above, Giuseppe practised non-crop planting and fallowing consistently, though the others did so to a lesser extent. Such techniques are used primarily for fertility, but they also contribute to enhancing farm biodiversity, another important indication of sustainable agricultural systems (Edwards et al. 1990). Agro-ecological principles also require a planted mosaic of small fields, which are then rotated. Rotations can be temporal—with one crop never planted on the same plot for two seasons—or spatial—with different plants grown on different plots each year. Giuseppe seemed to practise both techniques; the other growers relied more on the simpler temporal rotation.<sup>76</sup>

Overall, the agricultural work analysed thus far has been in keeping with the central values of the organic farm worldview, which was reflected in farmers’ own explanations of their actions. Such worldview is based on the idea that soil and plants are living organisms, and should therefore be treated accordingly, not as inert resources to be exploited. Also key is the idea of farming as just one process among a broader eco-system of processes. Other animals and plants, even when not directly relevant to the goal of harvesting produce, should be preserved in this system (Kaltfot 1999). Underpinning these beliefs is an ethical-normative position that maintains humans should act with, not against, nature: in a collaborative rather competitive manner. As a grower-researcher, Vos writes on this issue:

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<sup>76</sup> Spatial rotations are harder to organize than temporal ones as they require practising *simultaneously* a temporal rotation while moving around (rotating) different crops on the available fields.

The science of agroecology suggests that it is possible to articulate some general principles of organic land husbandry ... . Such principles, based on close observation of, and intimate interaction with, the natural world, may be translated into certain precepts ... about the human relation to nature that lead to the notion of stewardship. (2000: 252)

However, the ethnographic point of view reveals how the above paradigm was not the end of the organic farming story in my field site. Growers' stance to the problem of weeds and pests shows an important shift in emphasis in their relationship to nature.

“Weed control is said to be the most costly component of organic production, if not the most technically challenging [for which] farmers at all scales and all regions rely most heavily on more traditional mechanical and hand controls” (Guthman 2000: 263). As a result, “there is tremendous variability among [organic] growers in their tolerance of weeds” (*ibidem*). The growers I met did not accept weeds unconditionally. Some crops (usually the most vulnerable vegetables) appeared to be tended according to a zero-tolerance policy. Giuseppe was quite annoyed by the weed problem. Francesco, on his part, used mulching. He owned a bigger farm than Giuseppe's, and its layout was also different, with less numerous, bigger and more even plots. These factors probably explained his choice.

Mulching is a practice widely adopted in conventional, large-scale agriculture, and questions have been raised about its sustainability, given the reliance on an oil-derived product—plastic—and the environmental impact of disposing of it. Francesco, however, didn't appear to actually grow plants with the mulch in place (as is often the case on conventional farms, where plants grow through slits in the plastic). He used it only to initially kill off weeds when his crops were germinating, and then removed it. Once, when I saw bits of plastic still lying around on the ground among the plants, I raised the issue with him. He told me that he didn't believe in the biodegradable versions that were now available, as he thought these would leave residues in the soil, and preferred ripping off the normal one.

Growers saw weeds and pests in a very similar way to that of their conventional counterparts, something clearly shown by research on the latter's attitude toward agri-environmental schemes (McHenry 1997) and their opinion of organic techniques (Fairweather 1999). It is the practical conclusions that are drawn by the two actors—

organic and conventional—which differ.<sup>77</sup> Unwanted plants were perceived just as weeds. The agricultural work of pest and disease management, then, made for a very different type of connection with the environment, one based on the idea of human-nature relations as characterised by competition. In this long-established, ‘productivist’ worldview (e.g. Milton 1996), nature is seen only as a set of resources to be exploited and constraints to be overcome. Admittedly, some growers (such as Giuseppe) perceived the contradiction that was latent in organic cultivation as a result of these different paradigms. They accepted it somewhat reluctantly as a necessary part of the job. But not everyone perceived contradiction, as the case of greenhouses makes clear. Their use is another aspect that lets transpire a productivist ideology.

Giuseppe had none, and apparently no intention of investing in them, but for both Francesco and Sandro they were important. As Guthman (2000: 260) writes: “In some areas of farming practices ... almost all organic growers do the same thing, whereas in other areas, there is marked differentiation”. It was Francesco’s anecdote about his greenhouses that was particularly revealing of the ambiguities and blurring of conceptual boundaries in organic growers’ views of nature. Francesco thought the healing of his tomatoes in the greenhouse was proof that nature ‘always won’. But his words had not only been spoken in reference to a summer crop growing in winter in a highly controlled environment, the story itself had actually begun as praise of what his greenhouses—not nature—could achieve.

### **7.3 The system of provision: direct sales, stores, and middlemen**

Throughout the months I spent at Giuseppe’s farm, numerous occasions presented themselves to understand the different marketing channels available to small-medium growers. The ease and frequency with which all informants talked about this issue strongly suggests that distribution was by far the most problematic part of the system of provision.

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<sup>77</sup> The use of weed-killers can be as much a cultural preference as anything else. Fairweather found in his study that some farmers who refused to consider organic agriculture did so because “chemicals provided not only a means to manage weeds or pests but also a means to maintain a standard of farming practice visible to any observer” (1999: 54). He mentions growers who sprayed the areas around their buildings just to “keep the farm tidy”.

On one occasion, I was walking with Giuseppe who, as usual, was surveying his various fields. When we reached a plot of lettuces, he remarked that he was currently selling them to Palermo's specialised organic shops even though the plants were still not fully grown. "Because no one else has them at the moment" was his explanation. He sold them a-piece, not by weight, thus making no loss because of their small size. This episode illustrates the workings of the local distribution channels connecting family farms to specialty stores in Palermo. (The following picture was confirmed in interviews I held with shop-owners.)

Palermo's specialised organic shops relied on the island's major organic producer actors for the bulk of their weekly supply. Shop-owners adopted this system because the "big" players (*i grossi*, as they were referred to) could guarantee them reliable quantities and produce variety. Three 'big' actors were typically mentioned, one in western Sicily (near the farmers I met—see below), and two in the island's east. The one in western Sicily, for example, managed 550 hectares of organic land, pooling the resources of some eighty farmers (it was not a cooperative). Alongside these suppliers, the shops kept a portfolio of much smaller, single family farms, often located closer to Palermo than the large actors.

Almost on a daily basis, the stores inquired by phone on the availability of produce at these farms, either to re-stock certain items, usually during the second half of the week, or whenever their major suppliers did not have a certain food, for whatever reason. (Contacts with the large suppliers were usually dealt with once a week, in advance). I witnessed these phone calls at Giuseppe's farm. When he received orders (usually three times a week), Giuseppe would fill his van with produce and drive the 70 km to Palermo. There he delivered to the shops and to a network of individuals and a few restaurants. Francesco had his own arrangements with specialty stores, both in Palermo and in other smaller centres (see below).

Giuseppe and Francesco (and Benny) also sold directly on their farms to customers who chose to go there. Giuseppe's system was the best organised one, with sales taking place regularly on the third Sunday of the month. He was also the main supplier of one of the two vegetable box schemes mentioned in chapters 3 and 4.

Local distribution channels were not the only direct link to the market that growers made use of. They also sent goods directly to customers and shops on mainland Italy, whenever this opportunity arose and was technically feasible. In such cases, in fact, processed foods were involved, not vegetables.<sup>78</sup> For Giuseppe, such foods were an award-winning extra virgin olive oil from his grove, and different types of red wine from his vines. For Francesco, it was also extra virgin olive oil.<sup>79</sup> Giuseppe told me that he sold the vast majority of his oil “in the north”, in five-litre aluminium cans (though one-litre bottles were available in shops in Palermo, as was the case for his wine). He also sold it online via his farm’s website. Francesco sent a small part of his oil to an *agriturismo* (a mix between a farm and a bed-and-breakfast, currently an extremely popular holiday arrangement in Italy) near Bologna in Tuscany, “where they love it” (*dove va fortissimo*), he said.

Located on the westernmost part of the island, Francesco was farther away from Palermo’s shops. This made for a slightly different situation than Giuseppe’s. Basically, Francesco’s farm was a little too distant from Palermo, by far the most important urban market both in the area and in Sicily overall. The presence of specialty food stores in his nearby towns was negligible, though he did mention one contact. Towards the end of my fieldwork, this situation changed when Francesco bought a “proper van” to deliver more consistently to Palermo. So the Equalis fair-trade coop, which used to be supplied by one of the big producer groups from eastern Sicily, shifted almost entirely to Francesco as its main supplier for their vegetable box scheme.

Francesco’s farm was in the ‘catchment area’ of the large organic producer group mentioned above. Though he was not part of it, his farm was close enough for such group to approach him to sell his produce. Francesco regularly accepted this offer, selling for example both his vegetables and his olives to them. However, he did so reluctantly, given the poor prices that he received and the knowledge that part of his produce was simply being re-sold in Palermo’s shops. Alternatively, Francesco sold his produce to a large supermarket distribution platform (*piattaforma di distribuzione*) located almost next to his farm, operated by the DeSpar chain, which delivered to 36 supermarkets in the area. For

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<sup>78</sup> It is of course possible to ship fruit and vegetables over long distances, but this requires a ‘cold’ (i.e. refrigerated) supply chain, which in turn means a reliance on large scale and technologically-advanced transportation, and large quantities.

<sup>79</sup> Neither of them had processing facilities for these products, and relied on third-parties to have their olives and grapes pressed and transformed into the end product.

this arrangement, though, he was paid the conventional food market price, not the organic one. He also sold, again as conventional, to a single Conad supermarket (another large Italian supermarket chain). This latter arrangement was due to a friend he had working there.

Still, Francesco owned 20 hectares of land, a considerable amount for a family farm in Sicily; this gave him options and a bargaining power that others did not have. Indeed, when he mentioned his links with both DeSpar and Conad, he appeared aware of how lucky he was to have them, notwithstanding their occasional and idiosyncratic nature. The story of another grower makes for a useful contrast here. This was an occasional supplier of the Equalis coop. He had been put in contact with Gabriele by a certifier at the organic certifying body with which both Gabriele and the farmer were registered. The grower was having particular difficulties in selling his product. His farm was too far away from any significant urban centre, and he had no personal contacts in other types of market (locally, or in the rest of Italy). As a result, the previous agricultural season he had seen all his broccoli go to waste for lack of a worthwhile outlet. He was thus being forced to sell to large actors, such as the one which bought also from Francesco, or to companies from the Calabria and Campania regions, which forced on him very meagre prices. In the end, this person decided to stop cultivating his land, and moved north to look for other sources of employment.

Selling their produce as conventional on the local wholesale market was the last resort for growers. One day, sitting at his kitchen-table having lunch, Giuseppe told me that even though driving to Palermo three times a week was annoying (*una scocciatura*), it was unavoidable if he wanted to get a decent price for his produce. The other options were selling to the large groups, as Francesco did, or ultimately, taking his food to conventional spot markets. He said the biggest of such markets was Palermo, but there were also smaller ones in every main town of the province.

Wholesale spot markets are called *scari* in the local dialect, and work through a complex system of intermediaries, closely linked to each other (see Bacarella 1966). Farmers bring their produce to wholesalers that rent spaces in the market, and who resell it from there (hence the term ‘spot market’). In exchange for this service, wholesalers receive a commission on the price obtained for the goods (*commissionari* is thus one of their

names). Growers wait to know how much has been sold and at what price.<sup>80</sup> Buyers are usually local grocers, who go to spot markets to resupply their shops, or another kind of intermediary: *commercianti*—‘traders’—as they are universally referred to by farmers. Traders buy at smaller spot markets to then transport and re-sell the goods on bigger ones, usually Palermo. Clearly, everything in this arrangement constantly pushes down the farm-gate price obtained by growers.

### *Coping with market distance and its effect on food prices*

Researchers have noted how organic foods have constituted until recently one of the fastest-growing sectors of the food industry, despite the lack of significant consumer research, advertising and discounting aimed at them (e.g. Hill & Lynchehaun 2002 specifically for the case of milk; Guthman 2004: 27-32; Lockie et al. 2006a). Such trend can be largely explained by the media’s portrayal of the organic choice as the best alternative to the food risks created by industrial agriculture.

In strictly economic terms, “th[is] ‘demand-pull’ perspective on organic sector growth would suggest that growers have been in the enviable position of being able to concentrate their energies on expanding their farming operations while receiving premium prices for the products” (Lockie et al. 2006b: 250). Regardless of the extent to which this explanation implies a unrealistic view of unfettered consumer sovereignty (Lockie et al. 2006 *ibidem*; also Guthman 2004: 27), this model glosses over a more important question. What share of this growth is actually captured by family farms? And what, instead, by the actors who increasingly control the food industry (both the organic and conventional one): wholesalers, processors, supermarkets, etc? Obtaining a fair price for their produce, and the difficulties this entailed, was arguably the most pressing concern for the growers I met. It was the main criterion they used to judge the different selling strategies outlined previously.

Giuseppe and Francesco both engaged in farm sales and box schemes as marketing strategies that put them directly in contact with consumers. These arrangements generated some annoyance, mainly frequent deliveries and having to deal with ‘private’ individuals

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<sup>80</sup> For those farmers who are unable to bring their produce to the market (for lack of adequate means, geographical distance, or excessive quantities), a further layer of intermediaries is active. Their job is to collect goods from farms and deliver them to spot markets. This was not the case for the organic growers I met.

(referred to as *i privati* to distinguish them from the shops' clients, who were *il pubblico*—the wider public). One day, for example, Giuseppe received a call from a woman who wanted him to drive to Palermo for a single delivery. When, after much pressing, he refused and they hung up, Giuseppe said: “What a pain in the ass [*che camurria*]! People try to abuse you”. Still, it was clear from how little, overall, growers had to say about these very direct contacts that they were satisfied by them.

Their main advantage was clearly to circumvent intermediaries such as the specialised retailers and particularly the larger producer groups (see below). Avoiding these market actors allowed growers to increase their food's farm-gate price, and thus capture a greater share of the value generated through their labour. The only real drawback of direct-to-consumer arrangements was the small quantity of produce sold (see also section 7.4). Comparative evidence shows a very similar picture everywhere in industrialised economies (e.g. Andreatta 2000 for the US; Gilg & Battershill 1998 for France; Lines-Kelly & Mason 2001 for Australia; Murdoch & Miele 1999 for Italy; Sage 2003 for Ireland; Winter 2003 for England and Wales).

The second-best option for growers was to sell directly to retailers, usually small organic food stores (though some, like Francesco, had personal-commercial relations with supermarkets). In terms of the commodity market distance, this option was a step away from consumers. One of the key factors in the farmer-shop relation was logistics. The large producer groups that supplied Palermo usually delivered only at the start of each week. If a shop began running low on a particular food, therefore, it called one of the smaller near-by family farms to check if the product was available, so as to avoid completely running out and damaging its reputation with customers. In contrast to the larger suppliers, growers like Giuseppe and Francesco would simply take their van and deliver the necessary goods.

On paper, this system appears more exploitative than it was in practice. During the course of the fifteen months I spent in the field, I noticed how arrangements between growers and shops were indeed informal, based on single contacts and the supply of small quantities, but they also appeared to be long-term. Growers took advantage of market opportunities offered by their vicinity to Palermo, and by the apparent unwillingness of shop owners to scale up orders from their main suppliers, probably for fear of ending up throwing away (expensive) produce. In fact, one shop-owner once told me: “The problem

with all the growers that are close-by is their lack of organisation, otherwise it wouldn't be necessary to order from Messina [a large city on the easternmost tip of Sicily, where one of the island's largest organic producer groups is located]". Chang et al. (2003, quoted in Lockie et al. 2006b: 119) also report that it is often difficult for specialty stores to source goods directly from multiple small farmers due the irregular supply offered by these (also Halweil 2004).

For their part, growers had little sympathy for organic food retailers. Both Giuseppe and Francesco complained about local shop-owners, criticising heavily the mark-ups they practised on their food as completely excessive. This was also the opinion held by Benny, one of the smaller farmers I met, who in the past had been in charge of the retail operations of Sandro's producer cooperative (he had since left the coop). Benny described how he fought (*litigavo*) with shop-owners, telling them to lower prices. But the growers' judgement of specialty shops was complex, and revealing of the different dynamics at play in the organic system of provision.

In the first instance, shop mark-ups were perceived as unreasonable because they constrained (in growers' eyes) demand from the general public. Secondly, growers felt that what they were being paid by the shop-owner was unjust when compared to the final retail prices of his business. When I first visited Francesco's farm, he and his mother lamented the absence of a law that would force retailers to indicate farm-gate prices. I had gone there with Gabriele and Antonella of Equalis, who were slightly mocked for having a shop as the only ones who could make something out of organic agriculture. The term employed by growers to characterise specialty retailers was 'jewellers' (*gioiellieri*), a clear reference to their exorbitant prices. This was true of all but those with whom one was able to develop a 'reasonable' relation. Francesco specified that this happened only with a few individuals, and that the quantities involved were always small.

But the negative perception of specialty stores seemed of no importance when the discussion shifted from producer-retailer links, to those between producers and larger growers acting as wholesalers. It was clear that growers preferred by far interacting with the shops than with the big producers active in their area, about whose practices they expressed bitter feelings. This was especially the case for wholesale prices (see Guthman

2004: 158; Lockie et al. 2006b: 106-7). The following two paragraphs give some examples of the price differentials confronted by growers on the various markets they accessed.

In September, Francesco had a field of considerable size full of sweet green peppers ready to be picked. However, he was adamant he would not sell them to the large producer group mentioned above, because of the poor prices they were offering him. He told me sarcastically how, some time before, the group's president had visited his farm and complemented him on exactly that particular field. Francesco didn't mention what price they were proposing; however, Gabriele of Equalis was able to shed light on these issues. Running a vegetable box scheme, he dealt both with individual growers and with the larger wholesalers. So one day he told me how a farmer (not Francesco) had told him he had sold his peppers to the above mentioned group for 0,50 €/kilo, when Daniele had seen the same item on the group's wholesale price list for 2,40 €/kilo.

Francesco was also scathing of the grower group in question when he talked about how it marketed olive oil. He accused it of buying cheaper foreign oil ("Spanish or Greek") and mixing it with the more expensive, and higher quality, Italian one. When I asked him why he thought this was the case, he answered that he was sure about it for the simple reason that he sold his oil to them for 6 €/litre, and they sold theirs wholesale for 4 €/litre.<sup>81</sup> Giuseppe, who appeared to deal more sporadically with larger growers (probably due to his smaller farm and better links to Palermo), made the example of his main vegetable crop, pumpkins. Wholesale asking prices from Palermo's organic stores were usually between 1,40 or 1,50 €/kilo, while from the larger groups around 0,40 €/kilo.

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<sup>81</sup> There are, of course, other possible explanation for this evidence. For example, the large producer group might have simply been able to produce the oil from its farms at a lower cost, and bought Francesco's at a higher one because otherwise he would not sell (the fact that they would buy outside of their own farms seems to indicate an occasional demand that could not be satisfied, and would justify their willingness to buy from Francesco at a higher than usual price).



Figure 11: rows of green peppers on Francesco's farm, and olive trees in the background (source: the author).

Given this state of affairs, it is hardly surprising that growers constantly tried to move closer to the more direct distribution chains in the organic system of provision, and away from those that involved numerous passages to reach the consumer market. In the final section I analyse the factors at the production and consumption levels constraining growers' desired agency.

#### **7.4 Between fragmented production and insufficient demand**

The life of small-medium organic farmers in northwest Sicily was influenced by a number of concomitant factors. It is important to appreciate the interplay between these, and how it explains the evidence discussed thus far.

Farmers preferred the most direct form of marketing possible, which given they produced fresh foods, meant selling face-to-face to local consumers. This strategy was valued because it allowed them to secure a greater share of the price than with other market

relations. Another important aspect of such direct links is that it influenced cultivation techniques positively towards sustainability. As Guthman writes, in fact: “The sort of small block diversity of several species is found only on small to mid-size farms, and is as much guided by marketing strategy as anything else” (2000: 264). Growers didn’t mention this aspect as influencing their cultivation practices, perhaps because they lacked awareness of it, or because they were wary of openly stating financial motives as an influence. The point, here, is not to deny the role of personal values in farmers’ agency, but to reveal a less simplistic, more nuanced view of organic agricultural work.

But the availability of the type of consumer willing to enter in direct-sales relations with farmers was problematic. When my informants spoke of the problems affecting the local consumption of organic foods, in fact, they unanimously lamented a lack of customers as the key problem. The reasons given for this lack generally centred on two related aspects. First, that the market for organic foods on the island was small due to a ‘cultural problem’ (*un problema culturale*) affecting Sicilians. This factor was often mentioned as self-evident, and defined as a lack of interest (*non gli interessa*) towards organic. Secondly, growers spoke of organic food as being considered a niche product (*un prodotto di nicchia*). They explained that consuming organic was viewed as characterised by four traits: young age (*per giovani*), high education (*per colti*), left-wing values (*di sinistra*), and illness (*per malati*).

That the problem was not so much a lack of customers per se, but of those suitable to direct selling, is shown by the fact that informants’ were pushed out of Palermo’s organic fresh produce market, which was occupied by larger local actors. The reason for this was the productive capability at growers’ disposal, which was too small (see below). Which marketing strategies are feasible is itself determined, in fact, by the available forces production. There is considerable comparative evidence for other European countries showing how, when the local-direct organic market reaches saturation (as is the case with Sicily, where there are great numbers of growers and small ones of consumers), small-medium farmers producing perishable goods have to rely on intermediary organisations. Holt et al. (2004: 147) write for the UK: “This is likely to be because farms are ... producing greater volumes that can’t all be marketed directly to consumers”. (For Spain, see Briz & Al-Hajj 2004: 258; for California, see Guthman 2004: 54-56.) Farms can thus be

too big for direct marketing as a result of a ‘lack’ of customers, but also too small to act more consistently on the local retail market (or indeed the national one).

The growers I met agreed that one particular feature of organic agriculture’s productive base represented the biggest challenge the sector faced. Giuseppe thought quite simply that “organic producers are all too small”, mentioning, to make this point, how the average conventional farm size in Sicily was five hectares. (This was actually an overestimate, as the average farm size is roughly 3 hectares; see chapter 2). Sandro, on his part, emphasised that “on this side of the island there aren’t enough producers, so you can’t reach meaningful volumes to work with”.<sup>82</sup> Their opinions clearly point to Sicilian agriculture’ fragmentation as one of the worst problems affecting also the organic sector.

When I first visited as a guest Giuseppe’s farm on one of his ‘third Sundays of the month’, I was given a plastic map of the site. This was a photocopy of the area’s cadastral sheet. Giuseppe’s various fields had been highlighted with different colours to show both the boundaries of the plots and the different uses to which they were devoted (olive grove, vegetable production, grapevines, etc). What I immediately noticed looking at this map, was that the cadastral area consisted in a myriad of different plots forming a collage all over the surrounding territory.<sup>83</sup> Giuseppe’s plots were on the whole almost all adjacent to one another, though they clearly exhibited different shapes. But some fields were separated and were farther away, surrounded by other people’s plots. Many of these appeared to be extremely small. Overall, the cadastral sheet was a hard-copy confirmation of the historic problem of fragmentation (see chapter 2).

I was initially surprised by growers’ reference to this issue, which links back to a history of more than fifty years. Prompted by this ethnographic evidence, however, I came to realise my informants’ rationale. Converting to organic farming entails ‘only’ changing a set of cultivation techniques and technologies. The process leaves unaltered other important aspects of the forces of production. The size of land holdings is among the most important of agrarian productive factors (Guthman 2004: 91-2, 108). Organic agriculture in western

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<sup>82</sup> The other two problems he listed were the ‘old style’ farming that growers were still accustomed to (see section 7.1) and a lack of sought-after, high-quality food produce, which could generate added-value on the market. Honeydew melons were the only exception to this lack. He also mentioned lemons and oranges as possible candidates, but concluded with resignation that these had “disappeared from this territory”.

<sup>83</sup> A cadastral sheet shows an area according to which individuals have taxable rights of ownership to the land.

Sicily, then, inherits the land distribution pattern of its conventional counterpart—of which it is but a fraction—and this is unfortunately characterised by high fragmentation.

This is especially the case for horticulture. As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, the average size of a Sicilian organic farm is 23 hectares, which is a considerable amount. But averages are not an accurate indication of the complexities of agrarian economies, because they gloss over the variability generated by the cultivation of different crops. The island's organic sector, in fact, is dominated by fodder and cereal production (see above); this skews any average, given cereal cultivation is intrinsically extensive. It thus makes more sense to look at averages stratified by agronomic class. Citrus and olive farms, the best proxies available, have averages of approximately 8 hectares (Chironi & Galati 2005: 32-5). Though this is more than double the regional average of a conventional farm, it should be noted that the highest number of citrus and olive farms (31% and 30% respectively) still falls within the 2-5 hectares farm-size bracket. This data highlights two aspects. Firstly, that the problem of fragmentation, if less pronounced, remains also within the organic sector. Secondly, that the farmers I met were better endowed overall than most organic ones.

Land fragmentation, however, is a complex phenomenon. In chapter 2 I described the cultural, politico-economic, and historical processes that led to the reduction in plot size in Sicily. But my informants owned farms that were bigger than both the conventional and organic average. Why, then, did they talk about small plot size? There are two answers to this question, which are not mutually exclusive. On the one hand, growers referred to this issue as an undeniable problem of Sicilian agriculture, one that is widespread even though it did not affect them directly. This feeds back to the discussion of socially constructed views of the farming world, in the sense that organic growers held small plot size to be a characterising feature of the sector in general. On the other hand, their words emphasised a second side of agrarian fragmentation—fragmentation as a 'state of affairs'—that impacted specifically their situation. As Davis (1973: 108-10) originally noted for the case of Calabria, in fact, there are two ways of approaching this issue. One is to view fragmentation as a temporal process: the reduction in average plot size across generations. The other one is to view it synchronically as a state of affairs: a condition that acquires significance vis-à-vis the political economy of the present, regardless of its possible past origins. From this

perspective, land holdings are too small in the relative sense of being unable to support certain activities. One of these is the desire to sell produce on a target market: local, non-local, with more or less customers, etc. As the two explanations act at different scales, they can co-exist analytically.

Individual organic farms in western Sicily are generally small as a result of historical processes, but those that are larger than average, such as my informants', are affected by fragmentation as a state of affairs. This was the meaning of Sandro's comment on the impossibility of reaching the necessary economies of scale ('meaningful volumes') to intercept more customers. Keeping aside direct sales, the quantities of fresh produce that growers obtained from their acreage were too small to allow them to deal more fully with local retailers, and also, inevitably, with the national market. This situation forced them to enter in arrangements with the island's large producer groups. Such groups bought growers' produce and then re-sold it either locally or through the national marketing channels in which they were able to compete thanks to their size. As a result, the prices paid to farmers left them little to show for their efforts. In contrast to fresh produce, growers did manage to place their *processed* organic food (olive oil and wine) outside of Sicily. When cold storage was not required, market distance was recast. Sending even only a few bottles of oil or wine to far-away regions was not particularly problematic.

## **Conclusion**

Western Sicily's organic farmers inhabited a complex world of belief constructs and social and economic structures, no differently from what I have shown in the previous chapters for ethical consumers and fair-trade retailers. Their worldview was shaped by many factors. They had opted for organic cultivation out of concerns over the ingestion of risky food and its effect on bodies, and a willingness to behave in what they thought was a more ethical manner, compared to the standard of the wider agricultural sector. These values, together with those on the 'qualitative difference' of organic foods, were all in all consistent with ethical consumers' own discourses about organic, analysed in chapter 3.

The relation(s) with nature entertained by organic farmers were based on two different paradigms. One of collaboration with nature, which stressed a role of stewardship and care. The other, one of competition between humans and living organisms, in which the latter were seen mainly as resources. The interplay between these two paradigms was not, in fact, one of opposition, at least not in the sense that the presence of one excluded the other. If, in a sense, the two were indeed at odds, in actual farming work they were also inseparably woven together.

Financial reasons, and the values attached to them, were also present. It is important not to conceive of the two motives—commitment to health/nature and financial gain—as mutually exclusively. It is more fruitful to think of them as overlapping layers that are prioritised differently depending on external circumstances. As Hariss et al. (2008: 108-9) demonstrate in a study of farmers who *abandoned* organic certification, farmers took such decision for financial reasons but *still* agreed with its principles. Categories such as ‘environmental’ or ‘financial’ are too generic and cannot convey the complexity of people’s real-life motivations (as was the case for consumers). Fairweather plainly but perceptively argues: “People usually do things *for a number* of reasons or motivations and this is no less true for farmers” (1999: 55, italics added). Also, farmers mainly took issue with a system of provision that didn’t allow them to keep hold of what they thought was their fair share of food prices. Their concerns were never about profit per se.

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **SOME CONCLUSIONS ON SICILY, CAPITALISM, AND MORAL ECONOMY**

In this final chapter I reflect on two order of issues. The first one is the most recent history of north-western Sicily and Palermo, as it is illustrated by the ethnography analysed in the thesis. The second one are the common themes pertaining to moral economy and embeddedness that emerge from the views of ethical consumers, fair-traders and organic farmers, and the dissimilarities that were inevitably at play among them. Connections, in fact, cannot be found for all the three actors, mainly because they represented, after all, different sorts of people. However, this impossibility is in itself of significance, as it reveals where the contours of different value systems were located. The aim of these conclusions, then, is not to find a single, higher rationale for all the previous chapters, as each offered key insights into the life-worlds of the three actors. Nor does this chapter simply 'summarise the results'. Rather, it brings the analysis one last step forward.

The first section discusses the social, cultural, political and economic changes that have taken place in Sicily in the past thirty years or so, as they are exemplified by the ethnography analysed in the thesis' core. This is the historical period that most of my informants would identify with their actual life trajectories. After this section, in the following four I look at the complexities of moral economy and political economy that this case study has pointed to. Linking back to my initial discussion of embeddedness and the temporal and geographical transition to capitalism (chapter 1), these four sections will argue that the Sicilian field site shows how capitalism is not 'all there is' even in an advanced capitalist country like Italy, and that 'old' and new moral-economic values are present alongside prevalent politico-economic ones. This conclusion upholds the approach to the embeddedness of economy and society that I outlined in chapter 1, which stressed processes over domains and spheres, and posited the overlap of 'economic' logics in space and time.

## **8.1 Western Sicily and Palermo: the histories of now**

What do the fair-trade and organic movements tell us about the most recent history of north-western Sicily and Palermo? The answer to this question is very complex. One can start by noting that the presence of the two movements points to the spread in the island of cultural and political values that originated from the transformations of Euro-American societies after 1968. The same is true of new forms of collective organising that also took shape during the 1970s. As I wrote in the first chapter, in fact, though both organic agriculture and fair-trade were born further back in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they assumed their defining characteristics in the decades after 1968. Adopting this date as a symbolic one is also warranted by the earthquake that struck western Sicily that year, which, as Booth argues, “often serves as a historic watershed in popular thought, marking the irrevocable transformation of conservative Sicilian society” (1999: 142).

Edelman (2001) reviews important socio-cultural, political, and organisational themes that emerged from the ‘long 1960s’, and eventually led to the alter-globalisation movements (AGMs) of the present. Such themes relate to my ethnography in significant ways. As I discussed in chapter 1, while ‘old’ working-class movements posited economic inequality as the central issue for activists, after the crises of 1968 concerns for gender, race, and identity rose to prominence, especially among the middle classes (e.g. Melucci 1996). Counter-cultural expressions in art and education, new strands of pacifism linked to the cold war, and environmental politics also all constitute important aspects of these movements. Scholars have identified new material ‘support systems’ of this popular discontent, born to channel protest into organised form and mobilise resources towards specific goals: NGOs, third sector associations, etc. (see Della Porta & Diani 1999; McAdam et al. 1996, 2001). These actors, often declaring themselves non-party political, act mainly as interest groups. Their protest strategies, organizational forms, social constituencies and relations to politics represent a major part of post-1968 movements (Edelman 2001: 288).

Important sections of fair-trade and organic agriculture clearly fall into the category of such organisations. Both movements also still represent, at least for some individuals, an expression of the social and cultural values that rose to prominence in the 1970s. This was

the case for many of the individuals I met in Palermo. As I've shown in the thesis, in fact, many of my informants were involved, or had been in the past, with NGOs, associations, and social movements whose ideals closely resembled the ones outlined above. For example, during their student years Palermo's fair-traders took part in protests against the influence of big business on culture. The Panther student movement of 1989-90 was formed not only by groups still linked to the Italian Communist Party (PCI), but also by groups with no parliamentary allegiance, originating from squatter social centres or pacifist, women's and other grass-root networks.<sup>84</sup>

Fair-traders and ethical consumers also had a continuing interest in environmentalism, global justice, multiculturalism, and nonviolence. The associations and NGOs with which they were involved, such as Jambosana, Al-Janub, and the Lilliput Network, are all examples of organisational forms belonging to the third sector and civil society (Osborne 2008).<sup>85</sup> Organic farmers also took part in this social change. The farmer's market mentioned in chapter 2, which was created thanks to a collaboration between a growers' non-profit group (AIAB) and one of Palermo's environmental NGOs, shows this. Such engagements are hardly surprising, as the third sector and social movements have historically been closely entwined with organic agriculture and fair-trade.

The fair-trade coops in this case study highlight particularly well the transformations in question, as they were also deeply affected by them. Though Thornley (1981) writes of new trends in the English cooperative movement during the 1970s, her analysis closely resonates with my own Sicilian case. She (pp. 30-45) tracks the emergence of a new kind of worker cooperative: small and dealing in services such as whole-food retailing, printing, bookselling and publishing, or with professions such as architecture and computing, rather than in production. According to her, this trend proves the desire in these coops to provide new products and services, not to just mimic, in a cooperative form, established economic practices. This is strongly reminiscent of fair-trade, especially during its formative decades

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<sup>84</sup> The Panther student protest, which was a national movement, began in Palermo. This is rather surprising, given a widespread image of the city, especially amongst its citizens, as a place where not much happens. The movement was kick-started by the occupation of the University of Palermo's Faculty of Humanities in December 1989. The first national assembly of occupied campuses was also held in Palermo, which would also be the last city to suspend occupations in early April 1990.

<sup>85</sup> Anthropology has shown how the relationship between social movements, third sector organisations, and what may be seen as the wider 'civil society' containing them, is complex (see Alvarez et al. 1998; Cohen 1995; Comaroff & Comaroff 1999; Tarrow 1989). Without downplaying this complexity, here I prefer to adopt a unitary analytical perspective.

(see Fridell 2007: 22-51). With regards to the new coops' politics, Thornley writes: "[Members] ... want more control over their working lives. ... [They] are disillusioned by party politics or trade unionism, and have few links with these organizations or with the consumer co-operative movement" (1981: 43).

Change in the social constituency of coop members is also an aspect of the broader transformation I have been analysing. Until the 1950s, members of producer cooperatives in Europe were almost always of very humble status, both in terms strictly of income, but also of other indicators, such as education. This picture began to change from the late 1960s. Holmström notes of the Italian case how a younger generation, from the middle-class and with higher qualifications, joined the movement and changed it:

Social conflicts reached their climax in the 'hot autumn' of 1969. In this decade the co-ops ... changed ... the social composition of their work force. [They] recruited university graduates and people with high qualifications from technical schools into management, technical and office work. (1989: 27)<sup>86</sup>

One of the characterising features of the most recent AGMs has been a reliance on a-cephalous and horizontal modes of activism, and on information technologies. Examples such as the Panther student movement and the Lilliput Network illustrate these developments for Sicily in different ways. With a diffused constituency in faculties along the country, and the need to coordinate actions quickly, the Panther made use of new communication technologies in a way that anticipated current developments of reticular protest and the network society (e.g. Castells 2004).<sup>87</sup> The Lilliput Network, a much more recent example, relies almost entirely on the internet to coordinate its many 'nodes'.

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<sup>86</sup> This change in social composition was also the consequence of the substantial expansion of the cooperative sector during the post-war decades, especially in construction and its connected manufactures, when coops started to own considerable capital assets and employ thousands of workers (Bartlett 1992). This process created an important element of discontinuity, which I already mentioned in chapter 5, between mainstream Italian coops and the kind represented by Palermo's fair-trade ones: size.

<sup>87</sup> The movement relied heavily on fax machines linked in an ad hoc network to mobilise students, communicate the protest's latest developments and spread the huge amounts of documents produced in the occupied faculties. This use is basically identical to the one made today of the internet. But there were even more interesting developments. A network called *Okkupanet*—roughly 'Occupied-net'—was created using (at the time) advanced VAX machines connected in a system called 'DECnet'. This system allowed accessing remote hard drives and setting up virtual chat-rooms. When the Chinese Communist Party severed all communications to the country during the Tiananmen Square events, it left DECnet running (probably out of ignorance). *Okkupanet* thus began receiving almost instantaneous reports from Chinese students and passing them on to the media (Mazzucchi 2009).

The elements discussed thus far all paint a picture of Sicily as a region that has undergone rapid change in the past three decades, quite different from the one found in popular discourse and some academic literature (see chapters 1 and 2). The period between the second half of the 1980s and the early 1990s seems to have been particularly important for the actors of this case study. Many of them entered adulthood during those years; others, like the farmers, converted to organic agriculture. That the period in question constitutes one of social transformation is also confirmed by diachronic survey data on the rest of southern Italy. Diamanti (1995: 19-21) shows a vast increase in the number of third sector and non-profit organisations established during those years, far more than in previous decades.<sup>88</sup> His study confirms how the image of a ‘social disaggregation’ (see chapters 1 and 2) no longer holds true, despite modern versions of this argument still being put forward (e.g. Putnam 1993).

With regards to Sicily specifically, the study’s survey reveals important characteristics in the geographical distribution of the organisations in question, and their socio-economic traits. In 1992, the region had the highest percentage (31) of non-profit groups south of Rome, and was fourth in terms of the number of groups per overall population. Among its provinces, Palermo scored fifth on the number of groups per overall population, with a difference of only 0.65% from the province with the second highest score (see Diamanti 1995). A quantitative study of Sicily’s areas of rural specialisation by D’Amico & Sturiale (2002) also shows that the north-western, coastal part of Palermo’s province, where I carried out fieldwork, presents higher levels of human capital compared to its south-eastern, mountainous part. Of course, surveys are very static tools, and their numbers may not necessarily hold true on the ground. Still, these data cannot simply be dismissed. What is particularly interesting is that the periodization of the fair-trade and organic movements in Italy as a whole can be matched, to a considerable degree, onto these transformations of political forms of engagement in Sicily. The first Italian alternative trade organisation, for example, was founded in 1989; organic agriculture, though already present

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<sup>88</sup> Without playing into views of southern Italy and Sicily as a place of ‘delayed development’ (*sviluppo ritardato*), one can argue that the social and cultural changes of the 1970s took hold on the island somewhat later. This was an interpretation also held by some informants. Riccardo of the Sodalità coop, for example, spoke of the difficulty that NGOs had in spreading in southern Italy during the meeting I recounted in chapter 5.

in the country for some time, considerably increased its strength after 1991, when the European Union passed legislation promoting it.

Diamanti (1995) also confirms an ambiguous dependence of ‘new’ politics on the middle classes, which I mentioned above is typical of post-1968 politics, and was widespread in my field site. The socio-economic profile of the realities he looks at shows that individuals with high school diplomas and university degrees are the most active members, and usually belong to intellectual, scientific, and technical professions. Crucially, the level of per capita consumption, a primary indicator of affluence, was relatively high among those involved (also Ramella 1995).

The relationship of the fair-trade and organic movements to the middle class in north-western Sicily and Palermo was a complex one. Some of the socio-economic and political features of the 1960s and 1970s (see chapter 2) have persisted in the area to the present day. In one of the latest monographs on Palermo, Cole writes: “Several consequences of the patronage system merit attention. For the populace ... generally poor and selective provided services; a bloated, inefficient, and corrupt bureaucracy; a deteriorating historic center; unregulated urbanization; inadequate infrastructure” (1997: 31). This picture is clearly reminiscent of the one painted by Chubb (1982). But as one local critic recently argued, it is also undeniable that the “city has undergone a deep process of social transformation” (Butera 2007: 191), particularly with regard to its economy and middle classes, who now form a broader, more diversified group “on which we basically have little information” (p. 97).<sup>89</sup> This thesis has been partly an attempt to fill this gap in knowledge.

To understand these changes, one has to look first at the historical trajectory of the middle class in Italy as a whole. In this regard, Ginsborg has illustrated the emergence, since the 1980s, of two quite separate voices. One was

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<sup>89</sup> A recent and engaging example of the long-standing North American scholarly tradition on the city (Schneider & Schneider 2003), although dealing directly with the cultural politics of the middle class, appears to have relied on studies of Palermo that still use data from Italy’s 1981 general census. The 2001 general census (Comune di Palermo 2007) shows that 2% of those in the labour market are employed in agriculture and fishing, 11% in industry and 87% in services. The census does not, however, tell much about Palermo’s stratification, as it classifies the population into categories of ‘entrepreneurs and professionals’ (8%; hereafter ‘bourgeoisie’), ‘public and private sector employees’ (79%) and ‘self-employed individuals’ (11%). This classification does not distinguish between the middle class and the working class. The formally unemployed in 2001 were 29% of the active population.

heavily concentrated among small entrepreneurs and shopkeepers, was localistic, consumerist, strongly oriented both to self-interest and an overriding work ethic. The other, prevalent among those in education and the social services, in reflexive fringes of the professions and the salariat (all areas where a new female presence had made itself most felt), spoke a different language, not puritan but critical, not rejecting of modern individualist consumption but seeking to place it in a social context. ... The first [one], given the way in which state and economy had developed in Italy, was structurally much stronger than the second, and was destined to triumph, in political terms, at the beginning of the new century. (2001: 66)

Sicily and Palermo have been fully part of this process (see also section 5 below). I suggest the three actors I looked at broadly fall in Ginsborg's second category (where fair-traders, as shopkeepers, form something of an exception). Throughout the thesis I showed the ways in which the actors tried to place organic and fair-trade consumption, and the livelihood practices that were attached to it, 'in a social context'. Ginsborg's reference to reflexivity is also particularly consonant with the dynamics of environmentalism and risk analysed in chapters 3 and 7.

As we have also seen, politics was another important factor at play in the ethnography. In the above quote, Ginsborg refers to the 'triumph' of the first type of middle class, making a point about the political vicissitudes of Italy in past fifteen years. After the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) voted to transform itself into a more 'democratic' force. It thus effectively ceased to exist in its previous form, as many of its members broke away at the time to create their own new (much smaller) parties. Immediately afterwards, between 1992 and 1994, the historic parties of the centre (the Christian-Democrats, or DC) and non-communist centre-left, which had governed together for decades, were crippled by a series of scandals linked to illegal funding (*tangentopoli* or *mani pulite*). As a result, they too ceased to exist. These events led to a change in the electoral system, which moved away from proportional representation. What is particularly interesting about these events is that they took place exactly during the period mentioned above as being formative for my research participants.

Two consequences of the political changes of 1991-1994 merit attention here. The first one is the creation of a new party, *Forza Italia*, by media mogul-turned-politician Silvio Berlusconi. This was a direct consequence of the power vacuum created by the collapse of the old parties (as Berlusconi himself admitted; e.g. Mammone & Veltri 2010).

*Forza Italia* has undoubtedly been the prevailing force in Italian politics since its formation, and has led, with various interruptions, three governments to the present. The second consequence was the redefinition of the relationship between left-wing and Catholic political ideology and activism, which had been diametrically opposed since the second world war. This process of cross-fertilisation had already begun in the 1980s, partly in response to the terrorism of the years of lead (*gli anni di piombo*) a decade before. The simultaneous disappearance of the DC and PCI culminated the trend and allowed it to move even further. In Sicily, and Palermo particularly, the partial overlap of left-wing and Catholic politics and activism was a crucial factor in giving rise to the antimafia movement that swept through the city from the second half of the 1980s.

This movement was inspired by “a loose set of universalizing values that include gender equality, human rights, and respect for the environment” (Schneider & Schneider 2003: 216), which at the time represented the blossoming of new, progressive beliefs largely drawn from continental Europe’s cultural milieu. Such values are largely compatible with what the actors of this thesis saw embodied in fair-trade and organic farming: justice, responsibility towards people or nature, altruism, sustainability, ‘caring’, and so forth. Also, as I showed a mixture of left-wing Catholicism and post-communist left-wing beliefs was exhibited by many informants.<sup>90</sup> The actors, then, share a link with the ‘political generation’ of the antimafia movement. For older informants, this link was a material one, in the sense that they had lived through the events in question as adults. For the younger ones, it was mostly a symbolic link. I suggest this is another instance of how changes in political (and religious) cultures and repertoires of actions on the island created a milieu that was particularly welcoming to the organic and fair-trade movements. As I mentioned above, in fact, these were becoming more and more established in the rest of Italy at the time of the Sicilian events in question.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> In the case of the fair-trade coops, this mixture was a sign of how Italy’s changing politics impacted on the cooperative movement, which had also been heavily divided along Christian-Democrat and Communist lines.

<sup>91</sup> With regards in particular to the domain of religious culture, one should note the promulgation in 1991 of the encyclical *Centesimus Annus* by John Paul II. This work was the latest addition in a long tradition of Catholic social (corporatist) doctrine beginning at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In it, issues such as the fair wages and the rights of workers are discussed at length. This document, then, might be thought of as fostering the climate that saw the establishment of alternative values about economy both in Italy more generally and in my field site, where the period of the encyclical’s publication was crucial.

The connection between the social transformations brought on by the antimafia movement and the phenomena I witnessed is also testified in the almost universal scorn harboured by informants for Berlusconi and his party. The antimafia was viscerally opposed to the DC, as the party was extensively infiltrated by organised crime and relied heavily on clientelism. Today, *Forza Italia* is widely recognised as the DC's heir on the island, partly because it has dominated the region's politics since 1994, partly because of its right-wing elements (Padrut 2007). Thus the actors I met opposed the local coalition headed by Berlusconi. Clearly, the antimafia movement sowed many of the seeds of today's activism in Palermo, especially in terms of the emergence of new social groups and the effects of cultural variation on successive generations. The Schneiders describe those taking part in the antimafia thus:

A more or less gender-integrated, urban, and educated middle-class [constitutes its] core ... . This is not to say the core is homogenous. Some activists come from comfortable and long-established professional families ... . Others are of a more plebian origin, their peasants or labouring parents not having gone beyond elementary school and their living situation quite modest. (2003: 161)

This is also an apt description of the actors in this case study.

The Schneiders' reference to gender integration leads us to one last change among those highlighted by the fair-trade and organic movements in Sicily. This pertains to the economic, social and cultural role of women on the island. As I showed in chapter 2, until the 1960s Palermo and north-west Sicily were characterised by low levels of female alphabetisation (or by its lack, for the poor); by a strong separation of the genders, both in spatial and socio-economic terms, which relegated women to housework or jobs with little social recognition; and more broadly, by a patriarchal ideology underpinning the former elements, which assigned to women only the values of familial and religious allegiance.

As I discussed in chapter 4, the vast majority of ethical consumers I met were women; among the fair-trade cooperatives, the balance between men and women was roughly even. The organic growers were probably the actors among which a female presence was less felt (though Giuseppe's daughter had decided to take charge of his farm). There are, however, clear signs that during the past two decades women have become increasingly involved in Sicilian agriculture as protagonists (e.g. Mottura & Mingione 1989). This is another aspect that points to change also in the island's less urbanised parts.

For example, in 2009 the Department for Agriculture of Sicily's Regional Assembly, together with the local chapter of the Italian Farmers' Confederation (CIA) and a non-profit organisation called 'Women in the Field', launched an official guide of local farms led by women (see <http://www.altrametadellaterra.it>). That women took part in all these activities contradicts many of the historic elements of Sicilian gender relations.

My female informants were usually well educated, they worked in full-time jobs outside their homes (often in very public arenas, such as welfare provision, services, or the professions), they had economic power as a result of this employment, and showed a interest in cultural values—those of organic and fair-trade—that were greatly different from the familist ones with which Sicilian women have been historically identified. These elements are a manifestation of the spread of feminism in the region, and of the changes in economy, politics and culture that have accompanied it. During the 1970s, in fact, the struggles of radical students and workers took place on the island alongside those of feminist activists. Arguably, it was the latter who achieved the greatest impact on everyday aspirations and routines. The dominant institutions of Sicilian society—the Catholic Church and the DC, and the mafia—posed huge obstacles to the establishment of feminism in those years (see Cutrufelli 1975; Mafai et al. 1975). But change took place nevertheless. With regards to the segment of the female population relevant to this case-study, Booth writes:

Middle-class women received higher education, and mainly trained for professions outside the home. These are the women who spearheaded the feminist movement in the South. They now work as clerks and professionals outside the home, entering previously restricted spaces of work such as offices, schools, clinics, and town halls. (1999: 143)

Women have also made their presence felt in the island's political life, which was probably the quintessential male-dominated public space, both physically—think of the old public square—and ideologically. Schneider & Schneider (2003: 216), for example, note that when municipal elections took place in 1993 after a reform allowed the direct election of mayors, twenty towns in Sicily elected female candidates, the highest percentage in Italy. The two authors also say that informants they met in the 1990s were “tolerant of premarital cohabitation among young people, tolerant of divorce and homosexuality, and most tellingly, they [were] critical of patriarchal arrangements” (p. 217). However, in chapter 4 I argued in regard to my sample of consumers that the exploitation of women, even of

educated and economically independent ones, continues in various domains. The thesis highlighted in particular the problems linked to women's contemporary dual role, which arose alongside the changes brought on by feminism. These resulted in a situation where women are often still burdened by (some of) their traditional household and familial roles, and also by the newer demands of formal, full-time employment.

As we have seen, then, the fair-trade and organic agriculture movements reveal in fascinating ways the most recent history of north-west Sicily and Palermo, with its many unexpected transformations. I now turn to the discussion of the shared themes emerging from the moral-economic networks that I analysed.

## **8.2 The mythology of alternative foods**

The moral-economic networks that I followed in this case study were centred on the production, exchange and consumption of two distinctive foods: organic and fair-trade ones. These foods were laden with particular meanings and symbols by those who dealt with them. As I noted throughout the thesis, this process of signification happened in different ways (see also below). This was because the three actors all brought to bear on the foods different personal preferences and social and economic positionalities. The meanings and symbols themselves varied according to which food one focused on. But the fact that the same individuals bought both types, and that there were organisations selling both, reveals the presence of certain underlying values.

In the conclusions to chapter 3, I began to address the issue of the common ground between organic and fair-trade by noting how the various constructs attached to them by informants shared an 'oppositional politics'. Dualisms of health/illness, industrial/natural, justice/exploitation and so forth, were all examples of this fact. Here we can immediately spell out certain similarities, but also differences, with the arguments of the moral economists discussed in chapter 1. With regards to the similarities, one can note the presence in the ethnography of a set of ideas about food production, circulation and consumption that mediated wider ethical concerns for the relation between persons, especially in the 'realm' of economy. Both Thompson, in particular, and Scott discussed

similar evidence; the wider scholarship on the role of objects in the creation of social ties—from Mauss, passing through the substantivists, and at least up to Sahlins—also clearly bears positively on the ethnography. However, important differences were at play.

First, the morality that food practices mediated and expressed further was not directed exclusively towards humans, it was thought to be relevant also for human-nature relations. This aspect of the ethnography calls for other analytical frameworks, which I suggested can be found in the scholarship on risk, both its sociological version (Beck and Giddens) and anthropological one (Douglas). Second, while the early moral economists showed how food could be used, both symbolically and practically, as a tool to oppose certain undesired societal arrangements, they did not find ideas about food to be themselves organised along oppositional categories. This facet of the evidence also requires changing lenses somewhat, and putting aside the classic moral economy approach. As was the case above, the work of Douglas and of other anthropologists who share part of her interests proves particularly helpful here.

Douglas (1970), and also Levi-Strauss (1966), noted how the cultural meanings expressed through food are often organised along binary oppositions, something especially true of beliefs that relate to a culture's symbolic repertoire (for example, its myths).<sup>92</sup> This analytical lens is particularly apt to interpret the fair-trade and organic movements. Atkinson (1980, 1983) was among the first authors to apply the insights of Levi-Strauss and Douglas to the 'whole foods' movement.<sup>93</sup> His quote below captures nicely the nexus between the dualisms inherent in organic foods' imaginaries:

The imagery [is] that most contemporary foodstuffs ... have been tampered with, adulterated ... . Poor food and poor health are held up as both cause and symptom of much 'modern' malaise ... insofar as modern living is unhealthy and stressful in general. [These categories] draw on a wealth of imagery of rural and urban living, [of] the contrast between rural order and urban chaos. (1983: 14-15)

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<sup>92</sup> Levi-Strauss in particular has argued that the two most important dualisms are those of Nature/Culture and Elaborated/Not Elaborated; such common themes are then displayed through diverse variations. For Douglas, the binary status of these systems of representation creates the possibility for its antithetical categories to be confused, ultimately resulting in what she calls 'cultural abominations'. The issue of food risk discussed in chapter 3, then, is one particular manifestation of this wider aspect.

<sup>93</sup> Atkinson's work lies at the beginning of a genealogy of anthropological scholarship on food that includes, for example, the works of James (1992) and Willetts (1997).

Many of the scholars who engage with these issues today still adopt this perspective, though references to Levi-Strauss and Douglas are now usually bypassed. Pratt, for example, speaks to both, though he mentions neither, when he writes of a

contrast between food, which is artificial or adulterated, and the genuine or authentic. Culturally, this reconnection takes place in a kind of pre-set discursive field, that of the natural, the organic, the local, the rooted, the distinctive, the authentic ... . This field is established in opposition to ‘modernity’, it opposes quantity to quality, diversity to singularity, favours metaphors of the timeless, of the circular. (2008: 56)

For Atkinson, health foods acquire cultural significance as commodities “in a broader context, which incorporates a *Gestalt* of ‘alternative’ and ‘unorthodox’ movements and ideologies” (1980: 82).

The fair-trade movement is also clearly part of such a context, as recent studies consistently demonstrate (e.g. Bryant & Goodman 2004, especially pp. 344-5, 347-349). As I showed in chapter 1, the organic and fair-trade movements were transformed during the tumultuous years of the 1970 decade. Belasco (2007: 44), commenting on the food activism of that period, writes that “deviant subcultures are especially dependent on ... oppositional language”. Investigating fair-trade discourses, Johnston concludes that “although definitions vary, fair trade is generally presented *as an alternative* to the global trading system” (2002: 43, italics added), and is inspired by an ideal of ‘alternative development’. Goodman (2004) reaches the same conclusion, and talks of an ‘alternative politico-ecological imaginary’ at play in fair-trade consumption. These insights are especially relevant to the Italian case. Proof of this is found in the great number of products, groups and campaigns that make use of terms containing the semantic root ‘alter’ in some form (for their names, manifestos, mottos, in educational material, etc.). Three of the main Italian fair-trade organisations, for example, are called: *CTM Altromercato* (‘Another-market’), *Commercio Alternativo* (‘Alternative trade’), and *Roba dell’Altro Mondo* (‘Stuff from Another World’).

According to Atkinson, this alternative *gestalt* is nothing else but an “opposition to modern, industrial, scientific, western culture” (1980: 86). I therefore suggest that what the constructs of fair-trade and organic food found in this case study show is a desire for alternatives to capitalism, and that the core dualism they share is one between the ideals of Capitalism and Not-capitalism, or Capitalism’s Alternative. In the case of organic

consumption, the pole of Capitalism was identified by participants as a generator of personal and environmental risks, which they tried to escape by consuming healthier, more natural and traditional foodstuffs. In fair-trade consumption's case, Capitalism was mostly trade, international or domestic-local, whilst the value construct of 'justice', together with its accompanying elements of fair pay, worker rights, etc., connoted the Alternative pole of the dualism. From this point of view, the purchasing and eating of organic and/or fair-trade foods constituted an act against capitalism, given such foods embodied alternative(s) to it.

Insofar as these behaviours re-acted to the industrial agri-food system, to globalisation, to corporations and governments' collusion with business, they were acts against the negative impacts generated by the institutions of modernity—industry, science, the state—or against what Beck (1992) calls the 'bads' of late capitalism, contrasting them to the alleged 'goods' of modernity (also Kaltoft 2002). However, attributing the complex system of beliefs at play in the ethnography entirely to an opposition to risk modernity would be reductive. Constructs of fair-trade food cannot be easily viewed as stemming from risk. Ethical consumers were not threatened, objectively or subjectively, by the forces that impacted negatively on producers. In fact, they didn't talk about this possibility, compared to the preoccupations they voiced for personal health when talking about organic. In fair-trade's case, the opposition to capitalism was an exclusively moral one, based on grounds of principle rather than personal danger.<sup>94</sup>

Though no single term can fully convey the texture of the values in question, the use of 'alternative' is preferable to that of 'anti-capitalist', given the latter term could lead one to assume a level of engagement and objectification that was overall absent. Among those I met there were certainly some that could be defined as anti-capitalists, and a few participants appeared happy to self-identify with the 'no-global' label (in a nonviolent

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<sup>94</sup> A possible connection with risk modernity here is argued by Lash (2000), when he writes that individuals react to risk emotively as acculturated beings, drawing upon *moral* codes that are the result of membership in particular social sub-groups. Also, the element of reflexivity, which accompanies closely that of risk, was indeed present also in participants' understandings of fair-trade (such reflexivity was often connoted by feelings of guilt and a desire to avoid it).

way). However, giving for granted a general, explicitly anti-capitalist attitude would overdraw the data.<sup>95</sup>

What I have been discussing was eminently a consumers' domain; but the other two actors seemed to adhere closely to it. There were many examples of this. Organic growers' concerns about the quality of food and its link to health, the state of nature, and their fear of chemical inputs, were all aspects they shared with consumers. With regard to the fair-traders, the values that underpinned their involvement in social movements, civil society groups and third sector associations (leaving aside their job itself), were all consistent with the consumers' opposition to dominance by the market. Yet fieldwork, thanks to its long-term and in-depth nature, revealed that this sort of engagement was not the main concern of organic farmers and fair-traders. In their day-to-day life, they were more preoccupied with the many difficulties of producing and selling the two commodities, rather than with the commodities' expression of values. This fact is telling of the distance between those who practise moral economy exclusively as a form of commitment to certain ideals—as a simple desire to do so—and those who are involved in a moral economy as a form of livelihood.

To conclude this section, I want to offer a few words of reflection on the issue of value. In a comprehensive account of the value literature, Graeber (2001) argues that theories of value have been dominated since the 1960s by two approaches: economics' formalism, and Saussurean linguistics. The latter speaks to the ethnography analysed in this section in important ways. Value as a Saussurean code, argues Graeber, "is simply meaningful difference, a matter of placing something in a set of categories" (2001: 43). As I have shown, the dualistic, oppositional nature of much of the constructs that people used to explain their engagement with organic and fair-trade foods seems to fall in this framework. As Pratt writes about contemporary food activism's imaginaries: "Often in these matters we get the sense ... that we will only get a handle on [one semantic field] by spelling out what it is defined against" (2008: 62).<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> In fact, the politics of my sample were probably already skewed towards the left by the interview process. It is likely that only those who were very keen about ethical consumption agreed to be interviewed, and these are usually individuals of left-wing beliefs.

<sup>96</sup> Of course, both Levi-Strauss and Douglas, whose approaches highlight this oppositional nature, own a theoretical debt to Saussure.

### 8.3 Just exchange, fair prices, and the value of labour

Another common theme to emerge from this thesis has been a concern with ideals of justice and moral rectitude in reference to agency in the economy. These ideals centred on the problematic of how different types of exchange between people determine different prices—just and unjust ones—and on the role that ethics have in guiding these behaviours. Such concerns were shared by ethical consumers, fair-traders and organic farmers to a very similar degree, though sometimes the points of reference for each actor indicated slightly different perspectives. This was the case most of all with the issue of work. Its primacy in all considerations of the equity of exchange was clear. However, of the three actors, one—the consumers—looked at work from an outside perspective: as the work of others (producers). The other two—the fair-traders and farmers—saw it ‘from the inside’: as a concern for their own livelihood. Thus the ways in which labour was activated as a value generating (or not) justice in economy were complex and changeable, a fact reminiscent of those approaches to the study of commodities, reviewed in chapter 1, that in the past twenty years or so have highlighted the contested nature of objects’ values.

Ethical consumers, fair-traders and organic growers were united in their opposition to what they saw as profiteering in trade, exemplified by the unjust prices paid to workers. As I discussed in chapters 3, 5 and 7, this opposition held true both with regards to international commerce (fair-trade producers), and to what can be roughly termed ‘local’ trade (organic farmers). The way in which they approached these issues was reminiscent of an aspect of Aristotle’s (1984) argument about economy in the *Politics*. In this work, Aristotle insisted that the correct aim of economic activities was the achievement of an autonomous and independent household. Production should only be geared towards the creation of sufficient means for family members; the same was true of exchange, for example of the sales performed by farmers, artisans, and also merchants. This was the domain of *oikonomia*, on which the Scholastics relied for the bulk of their theories (see chapter 3). To take part in exchange with the intent of ‘getting out of it’ anything else—a monetary gain not anchored to family needs—was called *krematistike*, and was morally wrong (see also Gudeman 2001: 60-63; Gudeman & Rivera 1990: 145-49). Throughout and after the Middle Ages, this second domain represented an important point of reference for the moral judgement of economy, but it was not considered to be the dominant one. In the

19<sup>th</sup> century, Marx's (1999) discussion of two circuits of exchange, Commodity-Money-Commodity and Money-Commodity-Money', also fell into this Aristotelian tradition. Today, suggest De Neve et al., "this *alternative* economic legacy underpins fair trade and local food movements" (2008a: 12, italics added).

That this paradigm of production and exchange inspired by self-sufficiency should be described as 'alternative' in De Neve et al.'s quote is due to the fact that since the 19<sup>th</sup> century an altogether different one became dominant. This latter paradigm was first outlined by Smith (1998), who famously emphasised humans' allegedly natural propensity to 'truck, barter, and exchange', and who believed markets could achieve greater prosperity for all. Luetchford highlights the issues raised by Smith for the study of moral economies thus:

Market capitalism draws on the metaphor of an invisible hand that guides outcomes and determines our economic fortunes. Because the economy is impersonal, it offers a specific notion of moral responsibility; for it to function properly the only economic imperative is self-interest. In looking after ourselves and disregarding the needs of others, it is thought, we promote general economic growth and, paradoxically, benefit everyone. ... The morality lies in the impersonality. (2008: 153-153)

Smith's argument was a perceptive reflection on rapidly changing times at the end of the 1700s. This is exactly the period that Thompson looked at in his work on the protest movements of the English commoners, and on which basis he initially contributed the notion of a moral economy. Soon afterwards, the world Smith described in his seminal text, and the real one outside of it privileged by Thompson, appeared to converge and match perfectly. That a millennial intellectual history on morality and economy came to an end is undeniable. But as Gudeman and Rivera note: "Among the folk ... the voice and the angst [about just prices and usury] have lasted well beyond this" (1990: 149). The ethnography I discussed in the substantive chapters not only confirms the line of argument regarding market exchange found in Thompson (and Scott),<sup>97</sup> it advances this by showing the very ancient roots of some of its core ideas. Today, maximisation and formal-economic decision making co-exist with moral economy in the same subjects, a phenomenon I underscored continuously throughout the thesis.

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<sup>97</sup> The similarities between my data and the evidence provided by Scott are somewhat surprising, given he deals with a geographical area whose history is largely separate from that connecting Aristotle's classical Greece to the development of capitalism in Europe (which might explain the similarities between Thompson's work and this case study). Unfortunately I cannot address this interesting issue here.

The rejection and moral condemnation of middlemen, both in international commodity trade and national commerce, stood at the centre of informants' beliefs about market (in)justice. But somewhat different perspectives were at play. The consumers' position was that of an ethical choice, a moral commitment to act in accordance with specific values. For the fair-traders, one can only assume this concern was an important one, given their choice of livelihood and their participation in the civic activities discussed in chapter 5; but the issue was not reflected upon in day-to-day practice. Finally, for the organic farmers, a combination of sorts between the consumers' position and the fair-traders' one was apparent. Farmers were constantly reproaching middlemen and intermediaries of all kinds as these threatened not only their sense of moral justice, but also their immediate livelihoods. As I already mentioned above, these intersections between what from one perspective were clearly closely related ideas, but from another one were also different, points to the mutable way in which values combine with objects (food) and economic practices. Such evidence highlights nicely the nature of embeddedness as a process, which is one of the key contributions of my work.

Consumers deemed normal (non-fair) trade, at all scales, unjust because it invariably resulted in the producer being given too little remuneration for his work. In chapter 3 I analysed this data following an important strand of the anthropological literature on gift exchanges, that represented particularly by Sahlins and the reciprocity theorists, and thus indirectly by Polanyi, Mauss, and Marx. Now I want to expand on such literature in one particular direction: a discussion of the ethnography vis-à-vis the tenets of mercantilist economic doctrine, which is an instance of negative reciprocity (as highlighted in chapter 3), and Marxian political economy. Such comparison is particularly pregnant in this chapter because it sheds further light on the links between the data, the idea of moral economy, and the history of capitalism (and thus the idea of embeddedness).

Consumers saw intermediaries as following the 'one man's gain, another man's loss' rule, which is, not surprisingly, one of the cornerstones of mercantilism (Heckscher 1935). The importance of labour was paramount in determining the correct perspective from which to judge the activities of exchange, retail and consumption. When informants looked at the value of a food commodity in terms of its price to the public, they immediately took into consideration whether or not the person who had produced it had received fair monetary

compensation for it. (This was true even when the amount constituting a just return remained entirely vague, as was the case with the consumers. When they were asked what the fair price of a good should be or how it should be calculated, in fact, most of them simply replied that it should ‘cover the producer’s needs’.)

As I noted in chapter 5, the primacy of work in creating (ethical) value in economy speaks to Marx’s (1999) labour theory of value. Elements of two different politico-economic discourses appear to be simultaneously at play: Marxism and mercantilism. This co-presence is interesting, as the two theories are in opposition on some key planes. Marx believed that value was created by workers, and profit extracted by capitalists, all in the realm of production. Mercantilists held that value was fixed and could not be created (or increased), and that as a consequence of this, profit had to be extracted in exchange (see Gudeman 2001: 99-101). Combinations of these two perspectives are however possible.

For their part, informants seemed to think that value was not fixed and *was* created by workers, but that once the productive stage was over, there was a fixed amount of it, so that profit was not extracted also in production, but through *trading* goods between parties as a zero-sum game. This combination follows Marx’s emphasis on the primacy of the worker, but not his theory of surplus extraction in production. I would suggest this is due to the fact that mercantilism’s zero-sum dynamic is by far more intuitive than Marx’s one of profit accruing through the capitalist’s purchase of the worker’s labour power, and the control he thus gains also on the latter’s higher-yielding actual labour.

Scholars have also tried to adapt the Marxian approach to mercantilist issues. This has been the case particularly in the study of *campesino* economies, with their problems of family production and trade intermediation. Discussing one example (that of Bartra 1982) as paradigmatic of this trend, Gudeman & Rivera write that

in [Bartra’s] view, the sole difference between the [house and the corporation] lies in the fact that surplus is appropriated from the *campesino* through market exchange, while corporate appropriation takes place in production. Not surprisingly, his model leads right back to the medieval concern with establishing a just price in the market. ... Not without reason did Tawney once remark: “The descendant of the doctrines of

Aquinas [on the just price] is the labor theory of value. The last of the Schoolmen was Karl Marx” (1926: 36). (Gudeman & Rivera 1990: 154-5)<sup>98</sup>

More recently, Gudeman (2008) has talked of ‘price fetishism’ as the core of market capitalism, mentioning economic movements like fair-trade as possible alternatives to it (2008: 66, 113). Gudeman’s interpretation differs from the one just discussed in two ways. Firstly, he rejects Marx’s labour theory of value as a means to commensurate goods in exchange (which explains his rejection of the definition of commodity fetishism); secondly, he says that price is empty of substantive content, so that the value of goods is entirely arbitrary (see pp. 51-58). However, in an attempt to salvage some of Marx’s insights, he does acknowledge: “An alternative approach would be to say that Marx provides a critical perspective on what *ought* to be rather than what is. The metric of labor time and labor value provides a *moral analysis*” (Gudeman 2008: 72, italics added).

This interpretation offers another angle from which to understand the issues at stake, and enrich the overall picture. Following Gudeman, informants in this case study could be considered as being aware that it is exclusively the market that determines prices (establishes commensuration), and that prices are therefore entirely artificial (are empty of substantive content), but as refusing this state of things, and arguing that value should be based on labour. Gudeman says that in a market economy “to provide an anchor, we invent stories that legitimate prices—by narratives, such as fair trades, just prices, fair exchange, labor value, supply and demand, and free choices” (2008: 63).

Regardless of the exact ways in which the relationship between market exchange, prices and work was articulated, the remuneration of work was deemed by all actors part of an individual’s basic rights. This aspect manifested itself in different ways, but the similarities were striking. Sometimes, they involved an almost identical vocabulary. In chapter 3, for example, Giorgio, one of the ethical consumers, was quoted as saying: “Who produces must have his just return, because he’s the one who does the work. I’m old school: you earn by working”. These words parallel Franco’s ones, quoted in chapter 5,

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<sup>98</sup> Gudeman & Rivera “hesitate to embrace these several and discordant texts” (1990: 155). Still, the case of peasant household economies and their subsumption in international commodity trade provides fertile ethnographic ground for the articulation of the two politico-economic paradigms in question. Gudeman himself provides another interesting example, in which Panama small sugar cane *producers* made “a mercantile profit ... through exchange by having control of a resource and taking over part of existing value, not by adding to it” (2001: 105).

about his coop's struggle to create incomes. The duty to justly remunerate (both from the perspective of the consumers and the fair-traders, given in a coop workers pay their own wages) and the right to have one's own labour justly remunerated, stood at the centre of both Giorgio's and Franco's beliefs. This is also the rationale from which the refusal of charity (as 'payment' from the consumers' perspective, and as voluntary labour from the fair-traders') stemmed.

Another example was the use of the words 'correct' and 'correctness'. As I mentioned in chapter 3, the consumer Lorenzo told me: "I want to do this because it's correct [*é corretto*]", in reference to repaying justly the efforts of labourers. Again, Franco spoke at length of the ideal of *correttezza*: 'doing the right thing' towards his fellow coop workers when difficult marketing decision had to be taken. Organic farmers clearly shared the belief that labour should be adequately remunerated, both in monetary terms and in a more social, public way. This was shown, for example, by Francesco's family's complaint about the lack of a law that made farm-gate prices known to the public. At a very general level, then, one can say that ethical consumers were socialising commodities and exchange in the same way as fair-traders and farmers were socialising (commodified) work.

#### **8.4 Economic scale, imagined society, and class**

Many, if not all, of the issues I analysed in the previous section can be seen as stemming from a desire to redefine the distance between actors in the economy. This is another emergent theme of the ethnography. Underlying such redefinition was a belief that the shared humanity of all those who participate in economic activities should bring actors closer together. Informants were aware that the capitalist market creates subjects that are as impersonal and as socially distant as possible, and they wanted to counter this by positing the need for a recognition of the economic 'Other' based on a set of fundamental rights. Chief among these was the right to see labour remunerated fairly, as I discussed in chapters 3, 5 and 7. This process resembled an effort to make impersonal subjects a little more like one's kin or friends (see especially chapter 3).

In a sense, therefore, the data points to the reaffirmation of ‘old’ moral-economic sensibilities—à la Thompson—such as the rejection of trade intermediation among physically close-by subjects (e.g. local organic farmers and consumers). For example, in a study of the history of retail trade in England, Carrier (1995) shows that until the 18<sup>th</sup> century both the moral and legislative dimensions (the latter as a reflection of the former) favoured local actors. Laws existed to promote the self-sufficiency of a locality, usually defined as the area of a market town, and limit selling by outsiders. Priority was assigned to people who sold goods they had worked upon themselves, an arrangement which favoured farmers in their dual role as sellers. The rationale behind these practices is closely reflected in contemporary forms of farmers’ direct marketing (Hinrichs 2000), of which I discussed many examples in chapter 7.

But the data also reveals what may be defined as an ‘expansion’ of these values into new areas, such as those that comprise subjects who are both socially and physically distant (fair-trade’s case). In a sense, this is a somewhat inevitable reaction to the market’s rendering of *all* subject as distant: if one wants to apply morality to economic exchanges, then this should be done irrespective of the parties’ physical location, as the economy itself has no defined location. But it also raises interesting questions as to how informants justified such an expansion. Sahlins, for example, argued that: “It is not only that kinship organizes community, but communities kinship, so that a spatial, coresidential term affects the measure of kinship distance and thus the mode of exchange” (1972: 197). If one were to follow the latter rule (community organises kinship), the application of moral-economic sentiments to subjects whose lives were so separate from those of my informants would appear impossible.

I suggest that a certain awareness and understanding of globalisation was crucial to this application. Recent work carried out on alternative economic practices (e.g. Bryant & Goodman 2004; Goodman 2004) and on the interface between globalisation theory and philosophy (e.g. Corbridge 1993; Smith 1998), have highlighted the formation of an expanded moral community in the popular consciousness of sections of society in the West. Corbridge, for example, writes:

The facts of globalisation compel us to take seriously new ideas on the nature of moral communities and their boundaries (and thus of humanitarian obligations to the

needs of distant strangers); ... the present distribution of rewards and powers is unjust and can be shown to be unjust in ways which have definite ... political implications. (1993: 461)

For informants, it was the belief that globalisation brought together—often forced together—on unequal terms people of different continents that justified the need to act ethically also towards those who were, at face value, physically distant from them.

It is logical to intersect these ethical dilemmas raised by globalisation, and the moral-economic sentiments analysed above, with Polanyi's notion of a historical counter-movement to domination by the market. In doing so, we can appreciate better not simply the links between the themes reviewed in chapter 1 and the ethnography, but how the latter sheds light on Polanyi's contemporary relevance, and its limits. Edelman (2005), noting likewise the importance of globalisation, moral economy and counter-movements, writes: "Polanyi saw the 'countermovement' or resistance that always accompanied the advance of 'market society' as largely local or perhaps national in scope ... . Scott, similarly, speaks of the moral criteria of village redistributive norms" (2005: 337). He then shows how certain core values that underpinned the phenomena analysed by these authors, for example that of justice in economic activities, have become transnational in scope: "Some of the actors have changed and the relevant social field has widened to encompass global markets" (p. 339). Inevitably, then, there are differences between the kind of argument developed in *The Great Transformation* (TGT) and the realities I witnessed in western Sicily at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

But Polanyi was not just an historian of economic thought, he was also an activist intellectual who engaged throughout his life with the challenges of the present (Dale 2010). He wrote many pieces, long and short, which were intended as contributions to politics. Surprisingly enough, among them one can find insights that are not necessarily present in his more famous works. Two essays are of particular salience for this case study: the early 'Über die Freiheit' ('On Freedom'; see Baum 1996: 24-35) and 'The Essence of Fascism' (1935; see also Dale 2010: 39-44). In the first piece, Polanyi develops an argument combining philosophy, theology, sociology and history, that recalls closely the issues of personal morality, economic justice, kinship distance and globalisation found in the ethnography.

He begins by noting that in the past, societies were simpler and thus afforded individuals the possibility to understand the consequences of their actions; the social world was ‘transparent’. With the birth of industrial society, human interaction increased to such levels of complexity that this possibility was lost, making the social world largely ‘opaque’. For Polanyi, crucially, people are aware of this process: they still know that their behaviour impacts those around them; he calls this the ‘civil conscience’. It is the nature of such impact—good or evil—that escapes them. From this tension arises the anguish of modernity.

Polanyi believed that the rearrangement of capitalist society along the lines of a socialism inspired by Christian principles would remedy this human condition. While this answer appears distant from today’s world, his description of the separation between persons is still entirely accurate and rings true to much of the evidence discussed above, and throughout the thesis. Even the mixture of left-wing and religious values, particularly Marxian and Catholic ones, still has a place in the analysis. On a number of occasions in the substantive chapters, in fact, I have pointed out how such combination was an important feature in the ethnography. Polanyi, in ‘The Essence of Fascism’, set out a detailed argument to show the roots of the Christian faith in ‘left-wing’ values of equality and co-operation. These were core ones for the vast majority of my informants. He saw his version of a Christian Socialism as the strongest bastion—one could say as a counter-movement *ante litteram*—against Nazi-Fascism, a phenomenon he attributed to the failures of the market utopia. From this particular angle we see yet again how, although the historical panorama has changed, certain moral approaches found in the fights against capitalism of the past have persisted until today.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> In ‘The Essence of Fascism’ Polanyi offered his contribution to a debate that was especially strong in Europe in the 1930s and ‘40s: how to combine Christian thought with the kind of social values embodied by Marxism (if not with actual Marxist politics). His piece appeared as part of a collection on ‘Christianity and the Social Revolution’, published in England in 1935, of which he was one of the editors. Only four years before, the Catholic Church had promulgated its encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, which is a key text in Catholic social doctrine, forty years after the original *Rerum Novarum* (1891) set out the foundations of the Church’s corporatist view of economy-society relations. These were important influences on the debate that Polanyi took part in. What is also interesting for this case study, is that in both encyclicals space is devoted to the issue of justice in economic relations, and particularly to the idea of ‘just wage’ (see also discussion in chapter 3). The same is true of the more recent *Centesimus Annus* (1991) by John Paul II, which, as I already mentioned above, might be thought to have contributed to the spread of certain moral-economic values during my informants’ formative years.

The thesis also shows that the reaffirmation, and transformation, of ‘old’ moral-economic sentiments, discussed in the previous paragraphs, was anything but one of universal applicability. This is why at the beginning of this section I used the expression ‘redefinition’ of economic distance. This process, in fact, exhibited very precise contours, and the domains *not* covered by the renewed moral economy were delineated particularly clearly. Different examples of this can be found in the ethnography. One of the most striking was the issue of market competition among the fair-traders, in respect both to consumers, to whom a strategy of ‘sell everything’ was applied, and to other alternative trade organisations. Competition with the latter was particularly interesting because it raises the question of where fair-trade criteria apply, in what part of the Economy, and thus what is fair-trade’s scope of action. I suggest that, given my data on actual fair-trade retail practices, such criteria were not thought to be relevant in the national economies of the Northern countries where alternative trade organisations are based. In this sense, fair-trade was something one did exclusively elsewhere, in the global South, and once the import phase was over, only specialty-food retail counted. This interpretation is also consistent with the fair-traders’ acceptance of capitalist enterprises as rightful actors in fair-trade, alongside non-profits and cooperatives, as long as they respected the ‘necessary rules’ (in the South).

The problem of the social contours of 21<sup>st</sup> century moral economies was also pronounced in the case of ethical consumers. Grounding an expanded morality of respect for workers and the environment on relations of commodity exchange causes all sort of problems, both conceptual and practical. What happens to those who cannot enter in these relations because they can’t produce, for whatever reasons, the necessary goods? Are they included within the confines of the global community? What about those who cannot enter into such a community on the consumption side of the relation, who do not have the means to pay for the ethical goods on offer?

As I showed in chapter 4, some of my informants were aware of these difficult questions, especially the one pertaining to the possibility of engaging in ethical consumption (see also Orlando 2011b). For these people, economic status was seen as limiting ethical consumption because of the relatively high price of organic and fair-trade goods. But they had no answers to overcome this problem, and admitted, somewhat

reluctantly, that the issue remained ‘outside’, ‘at another level’. This view may be thus called the ‘inapplicability argument’. Others appeared simply oblivious to such questions, eschewing even arguments of applicability. Their attitude resulted in negative views of the consumption patterns of local working-class strata, who were commonly spoken of with statements like “they say they’re poor, but then they have huge cars/a brand new moped/the latest mobile phone”. For these informants, buying fair-trade or organic goods was viewed as a matter of personal or cultural choice, not economic condition; in other words, they made little difference between the middle-class and the less well-off. Both the fair-traders and the organic farmers, though less concerned by these dilemmas on a day-to-day basis, appeared to share one of these two attitudes towards ethical consumption as a strategy for social change.

This facet of the ethnography can be explained, in my view, by informants’ class positionality, which was mostly lower-middle-class (for a few, higher-class). As I mentioned in chapter 2, the middle classes in north-western Sicily are separated and insulated from the lives of working-class people, because they generally escape the scarcity-based clientelism that dominates the *popolari* (but not the one based on the exchange of favours). Although they are describing the difficulty that antimafia activists from the middle class had when they tried to secure support from Palermo’s working class, what Schneider & Schneider say is apt also for my own case: “Working classes are a challenge ... not so much because they hold contradictory values as because these values speak to the precariousness of their lives” (2003: 231). This particular domain of consumer activism, then, reveals how “the silencing of the language of class, not the disappearance of class issues, may be the most significant marker of the ‘new’ social movements of the post-Cold War world” (Schneider & Schneider 2003: 192).

The fair-traders were probably the only other actors who raised the problematic link of class positionality in alternative economies together with that of ‘poverty’; but they did so in reference to their own lives, rather than as preoccupations for others. This is evident in how they charted the value of wage labour, as ‘employment’, on the wider system of social exchange represented by Italy’s unequal national development. Their distaste for a purely voluntary, strictly non-profit fair-trade sector, which has been the movement’s historical set-up in the north of the country, was based on the appreciation that such an option was a

luxury southern Italians could not afford, given their struggle with unemployment. (In a sense, this argument can be seen as paralleling the one held by some ethical consumers regarding the impossibility of working-class people to purchase organic and fair-trade foods.)

That the alternative values about economy discussed throughout the thesis were held by people who were not poor represents a major difference compared to the ‘old’ moral economies studied by Scott and Thompson, for whom class was an important concern, as I discussed in chapter 1. In effect, many of the scholars who have sought to develop further the original moral economy hypothesis have noted how the phenomenon’s actors, though ‘commoners’, were not poor as such, but often slightly better off, for example skilled workers (e.g. Walton & Seddon 1994: 30-36). Still, this picture seems hardly comparable to my informants’. The protean significance that food had in the case study is also of relevance here.

It is obvious from the ethnography that informants were not preoccupied with food as a basic ‘necessity’. This notion is thus called into question and relativised. Different social groups—and different sections within one social group—hold contrasting values about which foods, or food’s characteristics, are important (essential?) to them. In his study of Chilean food riots, Orlove reached a similar conclusion when looking at the role that meat, usually the elite’s food, had in triggering protest from non-poor peasants. He found “a case in which basic necessities are taken as varying, rather than uniform, within a given society. ... this uneven distribution of necessities impl[ies] a profound hierarchy in the case on hand” (1997: 243). I’ve shown at length how north-western Sicily was a very hierarchical site.

The problematic place class occupied throughout the thesis as an analytical category raises also the question of the complex relation between movements for a moral economy and alter-globalisation movements (AGMs). In chapter 1 I explored some of the apparent connections between the two; now we can appreciate also some differences. The social constituencies that compose AGMs is a first point of divergence that can be identified. Depending on what actor one looks at, producers (i.e. workers) or consumers, on what kind of involvement one prioritises (ethical or livelihood-based), what locale (North, South, different regions in these ‘blocs’), etc., diverse conclusions can be drawn. Then there is also

the issue of the levels of organisation and formalisation of the initiatives. Under important respects, one can hardly compare food riots, or other similar forms of protest, to the disaffection channelled through the fair-trade and organic movements. The latter are considerably more organised and stable than the former ever were.

In fact, scholars do agree that more formal protest movements than riots coalesced as nation-states became firmly established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Bohstedt 2010). But the ethnographic evidence seems to contradict also this possible linear trajectory from ‘old’ moral-economic movements to those of the present. My case study shows that today, people thought solutions to the failures of the market could be found *within* the market itself. What has changed, with respect to the old process of moralisation, is the role of the state and of organised politics: none of my informants exhibited any particular faith in them. Scott’s recent reflections are illuminating in this sense:

In the world that Polanyi, Thompson, and I were describing, the remedy for the collapse of local social-insurance arrangements designed to avoid subsistence crises lay in new national schemes of social insurance ... . Much of the history of social struggle from, say, 1830 to 1950 could, in fact, be written as the attempt to create, in place of the wreckage of local moral-economies, an analogous ‘moral-economy state’. (2005: 397)

With regards especially to the fair-traders’ case, as seen above their dismal view of Italy’s national community—enduringly unequal—could explain their lack of faith in the power of the state and traditional politics to make things better. This stance led them to engage with market-driven ethical initiatives like fair-trade itself, and to a belief that forms of state control on capital accumulation were unworkable, as shown in chapter 5.

Then there was the issue of how alternative economic imaginaries of fair-trade and organic were deployed with respect to the local middle classes, that is to say, to informants’ own milieu. As I noted above of references to the working class, ethical consumers were again the actors most involved in this process, with fair-traders and organic farmers seemingly sharing the consumers’ position. According to this, the majority of middle-class people were uninterested in alternative economies because they lacked the necessary values, which brings us back to the issue of distinction (see chapter 4).

Though Thompson noted that “if we employ the terminology of class, then ‘moral economy’ ... may be concerned with the way in which class relations are negotiated” (1991: 344), the main point of reference here is Bourdieu. Bourdieu argued that to understand taste as a product of class, one has to first identify “the set of agents who are placed in homogeneous conditions of existence imposing ... homogeneous systems of dispositions” (1984: 101). He uses occupation as an indicator of objective class, so that different occupations generate different ‘class fractions’ within a standard structure of dominant, middle and working classes. However, fractions are not defined only by occupation. They are also socially constructed “by the structure of relations between all the pertinent properties which gives its specific value to each of them and to the effects they exert on practices” (p. 106). Such properties can include a variety of factors, such as sex, age, education, social origin, ethnic origin, political affiliation and religion (pp. 106-9). Their combination allows class fractions and the individuals within them to move in time up or down the social structure.<sup>100</sup> Using this framework, ethical consumers belonged to Palermo’s middle class, often to one of its fractions that relied on state employment (broadly defined). Among the properties that made it a socially constructed class, the most important were those of higher education, cosmopolitan left-wing beliefs (both religious and secular), female gender and possibly age.

In her insightful monograph on Palermo, Chubb wrote:

Public employees in Palermo have come to constitute the single most important component of the city’s social and occupational structure ... forming the core of the urban middle class. ... The *impiegato* [public employee], in sum, has set the social tone of the city and in large part determined the directions of urban expansion, investment and consumption. (1982: 89)

A quarter century has passed since then. Today, the anthropology of Palermo’s middle class needs to be updated in the face of new economic and cultural trends. The middle class is no longer so uniform or so bound to employment in the public sector. Private-sector businesses in tourism, transportation, communications, informatics and research have been growing in the city since the mid-1990s (Comune di Palermo 2007: 125). Also, there have been political changes at both the local and national level, such as the diffusion of those progressive, ‘European’ values linked originally to the antimafia movement (often led by

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<sup>100</sup> Bourdieu (1984: 107-168) argues at length that the two most important properties of constructed class are cultural and economic capital, but I find this too deterministic (see Caillé 1988).

public employees), and the birth of the new centre-right in the 1990s. These changes have affected the urban cultural milieu, have acted in different ways on various middle-class fractions, and have thus led to further fragmentation.

The middle class, then, is not a culturally monolithic bloc today, if it ever was. Furthermore, considering the low esteem in which public employees are held by Berlusconi's government, it is unlikely these 'set the social tone' any more, regardless of their numbers. In this context, one may reasonably argue that people who work for the state, are left-wing, opposed to clientelism, and feel generally politically disenchanted (perhaps also because of their gender), perceive their position within the urban polity as declining relative to other middle-class fractions. Following Bourdieu, such people may react by distinguishing themselves favourably—in their own eyes—through ethical consumption.

## **8.5 The purpose of Work**

The notion of sufficiency in the alternative paradigms of Aristotle and his epigones, and of common folk in a wide range of locales, leads us to another important aspect of the study of moral economy. This is the theme of Work's ends. As I mentioned in chapter 3, when the consumers were asked to define the amount of a just price, they said it should 'cover one's needs'. The fair-traders shared a very similar position in regard to their livelihood, as the discussion of 'making a living' in chapter 5 shows. In contrast, organic farmers never seemed to dwell on this issue (at least when I was with them). In this section I discuss mostly the fair-traders' position, as I believe its implication for the study of moral and political economy warrant a separate section.

Part of the ethnography of Palermitan fair-traders questions Weber's argument about the cultural changes that brought about capitalist modernity: an inversion in people's attitudes to working and giving, epitomised in the 'live-to-work' ethic. Fair-traders seemed to adhere to an opposite, 'work-to-live' rule, often identified by anthropologists as central to non-capitalist societies (as I showed in chapter 1, Thompson [1991] refers to Weber in his discussion of the moral economy approach). Weber (1930) famously argued that

capitalism arose in consequence of a cultural transformation in the domain of work motivation, alongside other economic factors. According to him, prior to capitalism labour was socially recognised only as an obligation born out of material necessity. Also, people who had to work did so to reach a culturally defined threshold of subsistence, and would rarely work beyond it. Weber observed that throughout classical and medieval times labour was considered to be “necessary only *naturali ratione* for the maintenance of individual and community”, and that “where this end is achieved, the precept ceases to have any meaning” (1930: 158). Because work was understood as a result of necessity, the wealthy, who did not (have to) maintain themselves, saw it only as a matter of choice, one rarely taken.

Under modernity, labour was transformed and became not a means to cope with necessity, but an activity to engage in beyond material want: a live-to-work ethic. In Weber’s words: a “calling” and “in itself the end of life, as such ordained by God” (1930: 158). Weber thought this new ethic to be the result of Protestantism’s idea that worldly success testified election by God. For the faithful, then, labouring became a sacred injunction. Though for the majority of people the need to work for a living continued as it had in the past, the transition to modernity affected the culturally defined thresholds of sufficiency. These were almost erased. Modern society, then, exhibits labour in the form of a double bind infused both by a work-to-live and a live-to-work personal ethic, a bind described by Shershow as one “in which humanity is constrained to labor both by the forever-unfinished coercion of scarcity *and* by some indefinable transcendent value invested in the act of labor” (2005: 142).

Palermitan fair-traders didn’t consider their livelihoods to be inspired by labour as an end in itself. Of course, one could say it is illogical to expect a Protestant work ethic in a region where that religion never took hold, but as Gudeman & Rivera write of Weber’s position: “The particulate features of the Protestant ethic are not unique to it and, once articulated and modelled, the ethic shifts in a secular direction“ (1990: 171-172). This means that wherever a capitalist organisation of labour is found, a live-to-work attitude may be present irrespective of the area’s dominant religious cosmology.

Fair-traders spoke of working ‘to make a living’, a metaphor they contrasted with working to make (more and more) money. These elements are closer to a moral-economic

discourse than a classic politico-economic one, as we see both in Weber's argument and in those of other historians and anthropologists. Chayanov (1986), Scott (1976) and Thompson (1971), for example, all noted that the idea of working for a living and only up to such a point—*naturali ratione*—is a central feature of pre- and non-capitalist societies. Informants' opposition of a wage labour-based fair-trade resulting from 'necessity' to a charitable labour-based one resulting from 'conviction', also seems to contradict the view of labour as a double bind. Fair-traders who worked for a salary did not do so to fulfil themselves, this is what volunteers did. Franco openly said that he would have been happy to volunteer if his circumstances had been similar to those of northern Italians.<sup>101</sup> Harris' reflection on the meaning of work is illuminating in this regard:

The idea that manual labour is a form of servitude runs deep in Western values [despite] all the proclamations of the value of work ... by the Enlightenment and Romantic movements. ... The opposition between freedom and coercion plays a foundational role in Western ideas about work. ... In some senses, work is understood as the antithesis of freedom. (2007: 157-158)

At the same time, though, it is hard not to see informants as considering their work a means of emancipation from southern Italy's difficult conditions.

I am not suggesting that Palermitan fair-traders expressed a 'pre-capitalist attitude' towards labour. The ethnography denies such a simplistic argument. According to Weber, in fact, the transformation of attitudes towards working that contributed to the development of capitalism was inextricable from a corresponding and inverse transformation of the attitudes towards giving. In pre-modern times, charitable giving was something that all those who could afford it were obliged to engage in. Giving was a result of religious injunction. With modernity, charity ceased to be an injunction, becoming optional and the result of a conscious desire to give, whilst labour became an obligation that no person should refuse. However, as a 'free choice' is precisely how informants connoted the decision of their northern Italian counterparts to fair-trade, due to the latter's use of charitable labour.

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<sup>101</sup> His words were: "I know a person who's got an estate agency [...] he's got billions, then on a Saturday he volunteers in a shop. Hello?! I would volunteer as well if I were him! [...] In the north people already have a job, and open a fair-trade shop made entirely of volunteers. They open them out of conviction".

The ethnography, then, suggests that fair-traders did adhere to a capitalist work ethic when looking at ideas of giving. The analysis in chapter 5 *is* consistent with Weber's model of the working/giving dialectic under capitalism insofar as it shows how participants viewed charitable fair-trade as the result of Italy's unequal social and economic conditions, which 'freed' some people to 'choose' volunteering. Bloch's quote below is useful in highlighting this conceptual link:

In the modern world, according to its apologists, there is, on the one hand, the world of money, which pretends it has nothing to do with social obligation, and another antithetical world, the world of charity where those who have benefited from commerce salve their consciences by "free gifts" to inferiors, an act which they see as in no way caused by an obligation on their part but merely as due to the internal prompting of their consciences. (1989: 168)

I believe two important points are raised by this part of the ethnography. First, with respect to Weber's argument, generalising from this case study one would reach the conclusion that for those who have always needed to sustain themselves by their own means, work-to-live remains the most meaningful category. However, once the live-to-work attitude becomes dominant, it stands as a possible repertoire from which those who do not necessarily subscribe to it can also draw. I suggest Palermo's fair-traders reflected this hybrid situation. They did not see themselves as working to make more money beyond what they thought was a threshold of 'living', but when they looked at their northern colleagues, *whom they saw as wealthier*, they did employ a very bourgeois idea of charity as something that the individual carefully chooses to 'do good'.<sup>102</sup> The second point is that the social processes and models of work in question are far too complex for changes in them to be treated according to notions of 'pre-' and 'post-', as if deep historical and cultural transformations were a matter of neat ruptures rather than mixed shifts in degree.

Having said this, the ethnography of actual fair-trading practices, particularly the work-cycle, shows a different picture. The coops increased their workload (and their workforce) to follow market opportunities like Christmas, or tried to create more of these, for example with the customers' parties (see chapter 6). This attitude contradicts Weber's argument about the preference for less work, compared to more profit, in those who held the 'pre-capitalist' work-to-live position. Here Weber meets Chayanov. The issue of the

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<sup>102</sup> There might be an echo here of the scorn towards people of higher social status often documented among workers who are disadvantaged by the system (e.g. Day 2007).

coops' labour cycle, in fact, calls the latter into the debate. As I discussed in chapter 1, Chayanov made a similar point to Weber's in regard to workers' motivation and the culturally defined thresholds of livelihood sufficiency. Crucially, he argued that the organisation of labour in peasant economies responded to the demands of the household and its stage in the domestic developmental cycle. Labour intensity increased if there were mouths to feed, and not to respond to market incentives; this explained why labour often appears to be underutilised among peasants (especially during the off-season). Chayanov felt this indicated the absence of a capitalist accumulative mentality. But for the fair-trade coops in Palermo, the opposite was true: the market determined the need for extra labour.<sup>103</sup> This was, effectively, a maximising attitude inspired by formal-economic decision making, as I already noted in chapter 6.2.

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Each of the previous four sections has illustrated a set of closely related issues that emerged from the ethnography discussed in this thesis. One final theme that linked all four was the discrepancy between values, discourses and ideals on the one hand, and actual behaviour and practices on the other (which sometimes also resulted in a discrepancy between different discourses). Examples of this tension were exhibited by all three actors in the thesis. For the ethical consumers, it manifested itself as their simultaneous desire for organic, natural foods, and easy-to-buy ones with lots of variety; or in the universal scope of the values attached to ethical commodities, and the limited applicability in society of a 'political' strategy based on their purchase. For the fair-traders, the discrepancy was evident in their rejection of charitable, gifted work, and the use they made of it on important occasions; or in their belief that 'Trade' should be fair, but that consumerism and market competition were necessary in the national economy whose sales they relied upon. In the organic farmers' case, there was tension between 'caring for' nature and having to produce to a standard that was marketable.

These are only some of the examples one could find for this type of contradiction. As I have already said elsewhere in the thesis, pointing out contradictions in informants'

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<sup>103</sup> If at all, the coops' stage in their developmental cycle as enterprises determined the *response* to a demand for surplus labour. Different strategies, in fact, were adopted by the larger group compared to the smaller one.

positionalities is not intended to somehow delegitimize them, or diminish the importance of their efforts to improve the workings of economy. Nor is it done to prove that the anthropologist's outside perspective is more objective, complete, or in any sense 'better' than that of the people s/he studies. I believe that highlighting the discrepancy between discourse and practice is useful because only by acknowledging it can we— anthropologists and informants *together*—start to understand the constraints and possibilities under which alternative economies take place (Hobson 2001). At the individual level, in fact, this discrepancy was mostly due to the ontological difficulty of reconciling the normativity of desired ethical values about economy with the material reality of *existing* social institutions and structures.

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