

5. Grassroots Economic Activism in Hard Times

Exploring Southern Europe Citizens' Alternative Resilience

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Abstract

According to an authoritative literature (KOUSIS 2017, KOUSIS & PASHOU 2017), citizens of Southern European countries have developed “alternative forms of resilience” to cope with the hardship due to recession and austerity. This Chapter explores and questions this hypothesis. The first section illustrates the “alternative forms of resilience” perspective, second re-frames it into the more complex possible trends of grassroots economic activism in the shadow of crisis, third uses the case of alternative food networks in Italy in hard times to test the “alternative forms of resilience” hypothesis against competing ones. Although limited, the analysis shows that grassroots economic activism in times of crisis present a complex intertwine of persistencies and transformations. Some evolutions appear coherent with the “alternative forms of resilience” perspective, while some diverge.

**Introduction.
Reacting to
Recession, Aus-
terity and their
Consequences**

Ten years ago (September 15th, 2008) Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy. The photos of the bank employees leaving their offices which filled global media told the biggest world economic crisis of the last century, repeatedly announced by dissenting voices after decades of neoliberalism, had begun. From the USA, the financial and economic crises quickly spread to Europe in 2009 and almost immediately the combination of financial turmoil, economic recession and sovereign debt crisis had so serious social and political consequences that Europe experienced a very 'critical juncture'.

The European countries with robust institutions, strong and balanced economies and good welfare systems resisted, whereas those with fragile institutions, weak and unbalanced economies and bad welfare systems collapsed. Here the crisis was tackled through (further) austerity measures and neoliberal structural reforms implicitly or explicitly driven by the European agencies and International Monetary Fund which significantly mobilised to save the economic fundamentals of the Euro Area (COPELOVITCH et al. 2016).

The austerity measures and structural reforms in the PIGS¹ countries were designed, approved and implemented through path-breaking policy processes aimed at giving global markets immediate and unambiguous responses to an unprecedented and contagious crisis. The political processes of austerity in Southern Europe (hereinafter, SE) appeared to raise «serious questions about democratic deficit and domestic sovereignty» and created «the basis for relevant political tensions, protests and (potential) changes» (GUILLEN & PAVOLINI 2015: p. 156).

As well known, the social consequences of economic recession and austerity policies in these countries have been dramatic. Sectorial studies have documented how the living conditions of people have worsened for crucial aspects such as health, income, job, housing etc. (KENTIKELINIS et al. 2014, STUCKLER et al. 2017, MATSAGANIS 2014, MATSAGANIS & LEVENTI 2013). United Nations (UN 2018) has reported a diminishing ability of individuals to exercise their human rights as well as of States to fulfil their obligations to protect those rights, particularly for the

¹ PIGS is the disparaging acronym quoted in a 2008 Newsweek article and widely used in the global media grouping the Southern Europe countries (Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain) which experienced the most serious sovereign debt crisis in 2009-2015.

most vulnerable and marginalized groups in society.

The economic recession and austerity policies have also had a whole array of socio-political consequences. Austerity political processes seem to have radicalised some critical trends of contemporary democracy and the popular discontent (CROUCH 2004, NORRIS 2011, SCHÄFER & STREECK 2013), beyond having further undermined the European integration project (OFFE 2015). Literature showed that SE countries citizens have politically reacted to the general hardship conditions along different paths: they have (1) developed anti-system and Euroscepticism feelings (BRACK & STARTIN 2015); (2) protested against austerity measures (GIUGNI & GRASSO 2015, DELLA PORTA et al. 2017, KARYOTIS & RUDIG 2018, DIANI & KOUSIS 2014, PORTOS 2016, ROMANOS 2017); (3) have supported the anti-austerity parties 2009-2018 elections (DELLA PORTA et al. 2017, MORLINO & RANIOLO 2017, KRIESI & PAPPAS 2015, BOSCO & VERNEY 2012). Beyond these well-documented reactions, some scholars have also advanced the hypothesis that SE countries citizens have developed “alternative forms of resilience” (hereinafter AFR) against the socio-economic consequences of recession and austerity (KOUSIS 2017, KOUSIS & PASHOU 2017).

This Chapter explores and questions the AFR hypothesis. The first section illustrates the AFR perspective, second re-frames it into the more complex possible trends of grassroots economic activism in the shadow of crisis, third uses the case of alternative food networks in Italy in hard times to test the AFR hypothesis against competing ones.

In the last years, SE sociologists and political scientists interested in social movements have robustly increased the attention on the

diverse repertoires of citizens' direct solidarity actions and aims, with economic as well as a socio-political transformative capacity, which are alternative to the mainstream/dominant capitalist economy, or aim at building autonomous communities (KOUSIS & PASHOU 2017: p. 140).

In empirical terms, KOUSIS and PASHOU (2017: p. 138) refer to a wide variety of solidarity practices, such as solidarity bar-

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tering, Local Exchange Trading Schemes, local currencies, ethical banks, local market cooperatives, cooperatives for the supply of social services, alternative forms of production, critical consumption, housing and anti-eviction citizen initiatives etc. Although “grassroots economic activism” (D’ALISA et al. 2015) pre-existed the crisis, its relevance has been peculiarly interpreted within/against the context of the critical juncture SE countries have lived in the last years up to cluster these initiatives under the term “Alternative Forms of Resilience” (AFR). In AFR advocates opinion, the recent wave of solidarity economy practices would contrast the economic hardship conditions SE countries citizens have lived in the last years. According to the data of the LIVEWHAT European Project, in 2007-2016 Mediterranean countries witnessed the creation of a higher number of alternative organizations and groups centred towards covering urgent needs, compared to the non-South European countries (KOUSIS 2017). The context of the economic crisis has been considered «reinforcing and broadening the scope of such actions» (KOUSIS & PASHOU 2017: p. 142). They would «offer alternative ways of enduring day-to-day difficulties and challenges under hard economic times, related mainly to urgent needs» as well as «carve out a new type of politics through the creation of bottom-up participatory initiatives promoting a ‘solidarity economy’» (KOUSIS & PASHOU 2017: p. 141-142). AFR are then conceptualized as

nonmainstream/- capitalist economic and noneconomic activities through which citizens build community resilience when confronted with hard economic times, austerity policies, decreasing social welfare policies and threatened economic and social rights (KOUSIS & PASHOU 2017: p. 148)

Following the recent trend towards a better consideration of macroeconomic features in collective action literature, the AFR hypothesis is intended as a way to boost the attention on the political aspects of these practices. The emergent collective pattern and the political ethos would differentiate these initiatives from the usual practice of resilience.² While the latter has

² Born in the ecology and material sciences fields, the concept of ‘resilience’ has been largely used by psychologists to describe how individuals cope with major life traumas, shocks and disasters by strategies of adaptation. Extensively, also community resilience has been mainly connected to an idea of adaptation after a stressful situation (NORRIS et al. 2008),

been mainly considered in terms of individual and community strategies and significantly associated to the idea of adaptation and back to the pre-shock situation, AFR would be «bottom-up, resilient participatory initiatives promoting an alternative, solidarity economy» (KOUSIS 2017: p. 126). The anti-austerity orientation and, more importantly, the popular constituency would differentiate AFR from previous grassroots economic activism. While the latter has mainly developed in the culturally and economically richer areas and involved the politicized and socially central middle-class (FERRER-FONS & FRAILE 2014, GRASS-ENI 2014), AFR would engage the impoverished middle-class and working-class hit by recession and austerity (CRISTANCHO & LOUKAKIS 2018).

The political statute of these activities – as well as the theoretical approaches to study them – is however differentiated along a continuum between critical/autonomous and reformist extremes, where first are «formed by ideologically committed participants aiming to construct autonomous communities with collective identities (...) [and] tend to centre on mutual help and communitarian values at the grassroots level» (social movements orientation) and second seek «collaboration or partnerships with state and economic actors, and are supportive or remedial to existing and conventional structures, with less critical orientations» (policy orientation) (KOUSIS & PASHOU 2017: p. 141-155).

This conceptual framework appears to have marked a promising and original research path in the field of collective action. Nevertheless, research on AFR seems also charged with some problems. As AFR advocates recognize (KOUSIS & PASHOU 2017, KOUSIS 2017), the use of 'resilience' term is contested and ambiguous: it risks to collude with the mainstream discourse and practice of neoliberalism, neo-philantropism and 'compassionate conservatism'. They also acknowledge that the resilient initiatives existed before the crisis and sometimes originated in a distant past: since they are not a novelty, the question is rather how the crisis impacted on grassroots economic activism and its initiatives. This seems a crucial point. As some empirical studies within AFR perspective show (CRISTANCHO & LOUKAKIS 2018, UBA & KOUSIS 2018), the impact economic recession and austerity politics have had on grassroots economic activism is likely complex.

Beyond the Resilience Hypothesis. Citizens' Grassroots Economic Activism in the Shadow of Austerity.

As a way to contribute to this debate, one can better frame the AFR perspective into the debate on the transformations of grassroots economic activism in hard times. As elsewhere I contributed to show (GUIDI & ANDRETTA 2015), economic recession and austerity policies in SE countries could have impacted on grassroots economic activism in very different ways. To summarise a very complex scenario where multiple interactions probably exist, here I briefly contrast different hypotheses. I start from a 'no impact' one (Hp.0), then follow by confronting two hypotheses (Hp.1 Vs Hp.2) focused on the impacts of hard times on the grassroots economic *activists*, and finally, further two (Hp.3 Vs Hp.4) centred on the impacts of hard times on the grassroots economic *activities*. While Hp.0 is considered as itself, Hp.1 and Hp.3 as well as Hp.2 and Hp.4 can also be coupled so to shape the assumption that the critical juncture of the last ten years boosted citizens' grassroots economic activism (Hp.1+Hp.3 = boosting assumption) or restricted it (Hp.2+Hp.4 = restriction assumption) in SE countries.

→ Hp.0: No (or marginal) impact of crisis.

Considered that grassroots economic activism initiatives in SE countries started-up and developed before the crisis (LEKAKIS & FORNO 2018), they could have followed their own development path with almost any connection to recession and austerity.

Similarly to the pre-crisis context (MICHELETTI 2003), they could be considered within a post-materialist frame – that is as a way to mobilise in non-institutional forms and by prioritising goals as environmental protection, self-expression, quality of life, gender equality, democracy, honesty and transparency (INGLEHART 1990). Since the post-materialist values have generally proved to further spread in our societies in the years of recession and austerity too (INGLEHART 2018), the expectation grassroots economic activism in hard times has followed unaltered the alternative consumerism culture of the mid-1990s/first 2000s could be founded.

Moreover, one could also doubt that recession and austerity have constituted the most important source of change of grassroots economic activism initiatives. Coherently with path-dependency hypothesis (MAHONEY & THELEN 2009), grassroots

economic activism could have transformed mainly because of evolutions ‘from within’. Marginal could be the actual impacts of the macroeconomic and political features.

→ Hp.1: Reduction and/or elitism - Vs. → Hp.2: Increase and/or popularisation

It is reasonable to advance the hypothesis that some changes in grassroots economic activism can flow from the exceptionally hard and stretched context of crisis. Nevertheless, the latter can have affected it in different ways so to generate divergent results.

First (Hp.1), one could suppose that grassroots economic activism decreases when the available economic resources of its typical socio-economic constituency (middle-class) reduce. This hypothesis would be coherent with the well-recognised importance social movements scholars have given to resources as crucial means for mobilising (MCCARTHY & ZALD 1977) and would also be compatible with post-modern theory (GUIDI & ANDRETTA 2015, GIUGNI & GRASSO 2016: p. 453). Following this perspective, middle-class economic activists – once impoverished by recession and austerity – would reduce their engagement because they no longer would have resources (money, time, security etc.) to mobilise. As a result, grassroots economic activism would decrease on the whole (reduction) and/or concentrate among the more affluent societal segments (elitism).

Second and conversely (Hp.2), grassroots economic activism could develop in times of crisis. This hypothesis would be coherent with the grievance and breakdown theories in social movements studies, recently reconsidered through the frame theory (GIUGNI & GRASSO 2016, VAN STEKELENBURG & KLANDERMANS 2017, DELLA PORTA 2015: p. 81-85). Within this perspective, better than other mobilisations economic grassroots activism initiatives in times of crisis could have expressed both a self-interested and material reaction to the personal sufferings due to the crisis (loss of income, job, house, growth of precariousness, mistrust etc.) and a system protest against conventional economic actors (banks, large retailers, corporations etc.) and political authorities (government, central banks etc.). Middle-class and working-class – once impoverished by recession and austerity – would have reacted by participating to the existing grassroots economic initiatives or constituting new

ones. As a result, one can expect an absolute increase in the number of activists and/or a growing presence of impoverished middle-class, working class and underprivileged statuses having a high level of politicization in the constituency of economic grassroots initiatives. The aforementioned AFR hypothesis appears well situated in Hp.2.

→ Hp.3: Conventionalisation Vs. → Hp.4: Radicalisation

With or without changes in activists' number and profile, crisis and their economic, social and political consequences could have significantly contributed to produce some transformations in the economic grassroots initiatives, also in the interplaying with the changes other relevant actors have experienced under the pressure of crisis. Different trajectories can be hypothesised.

First (Hp.3), under the pressure of crisis economic grassroots initiatives could have been "conventionalised" – that is they could have lost their original grassroots characteristics and adopted some of the typical elements of conventional market (economic intermediations, professionalisation of activism, de-politicisation of exchanges etc.) or non-market economy (assistance logics, divide helper/user etc.). Within this perspective, the introduction of conventional market instruments the economic grassroots initiatives would compensate the fall of activism due to the economic hardship. Similarly to what happened to the organic movement (see GUTHMAN 2004), this process would move them toward conventional economy. The economic grassroots initiatives could also have been pressed by the crisis to adopt the assistance and philanthropic logics and practices so to help the impoverished (former) activists. Similarly to what happened to the co-operative and mutualistic movement (FORNO 2013), this process would move them toward conventional assistance economy. In both cases, economic grassroots activism would lose its own political ethos.

Second and conversely (Hp.4), economic grassroots activists could have reacted to the crisis by radicalizing their own action both somehow transforming the existing initiatives and launching new ones. The impoverishment of people could have urged to transform current initiatives up to reshape them as anti-crisis livelihood collective projects. Against the austerity politics, activ-

ists could have moreover developed existing initiatives toward more protest-oriented attitudes, both by launching new original campaigns and joining the wider anti-austerity movements. The aforementioned AFR hypothesis appears well situated in Hp.4.

The consideration of the possible multiple effects of hard times on economic grassroots activism allows to observe that AFR perspective situates within a peculiar interpretation which considers economic recession and austerity policies «as opportunities for the rise of collective action initiatives outside the mainstream economy» (KOUSIS et al. 2018: p. 734). Taking MOULAERT and AILENEI (2005) as a general reference, KOUSIS and PASHOU (2017: p. 143-144) assume that solidarity economy practices are anti-cyclical, that is they emerge and re-emerge «in reaction to economic threats, exploitative relations and poverty faced by considerable segments of populations».

The prefigured hypotheses can be tested into specific contexts and for peculiar forms of economic grassroots activism in hard times. A telling case is represented by the so-called Alternative Food Networks (hereinafter, AFNs) in Italy.

In the field of economic grassroots activism, food issues are centre staged (SCHLOSBERG & COLES 2016). The most relevant initiatives have dealt with the reconnection between the rural and the urban, the production and consumption, 'the economic' and 'the political' and have shaped what are called AFNs, that have been defined as emerging networks of producers, consumers, and other actors that embody alternatives to the conventional mode of food supply through the building of short food supply chains (RENTING et al. 2003: p. 394). According to BRUNORI et al. (2011), the different experiences of AFNs can be considered commoned by some pivotal constitutive elements:

- a conception of food production and consumption not as private actions but as being simultaneously political, ecological and economic acts (PETRINI 2001);
- the collaboration of a plurality of actors and artefacts that come together to build systems of food provision (GUTHMAN 2002, ROEP & WISKERKE 2005);
- new livelihood strategies for farmers (RENTING et al. 2003,

Italian Alternative Food Networks in Italy in Hard Times: a Multifaceted Scenario

GOODMAN & GOODMAN 2007) based on the search for autonomy from conventional chains;

- a search for new trust relationships with consumers (GOODMAN 2003), in order to respond to the increase in food anxieties;
- performance measured not only in terms of purely commercial benchmarks, but by the capacity to modify existing consumption, production, technological norms and to establish a 'food democracy' (HASSANEIN 2003, JACOBSEN & DULSRUD 2007).

In Italy, AFNs have significantly grown in the 2000s mainly through the initiatives of Solidarity Purchase Groups (SPGs) (FORNO et al. 2015, GRASSENI 2013, GRASSENI 2014). They are small, autonomous and spontaneous groups of people aimed at critically reflecting on their own consumption processes and collectively purchasing everyday use products respecting social and environment-based criteria (RETEGAS 1999). They mainly purchase local, fair trade, organic, seasonal, typical, unpackaged, labor-intensive products directly from producers without any intermediation. The long-lasting proximity aggregation between citizens/consumers and the strong relationships between them and producers/providers is the key feature for SPGs. They produce significant social ties through which consumption/production/co-production choices become more coordinated and reflective (ROSSI & BRUNORI 2013, GRASSENI 2014). They also allow consumers and producers to access "food socio-technical environment", challenge their own identities and values about economy and well-being, develop civic awareness and participatory competencies (BRUNORI et al. 2011, FORNO et al. 2015). Such a collective dimension makes AFNs more effective in material terms because it allows marginal producers to be paid more than in conventional long chains of market economy, and consumers to access these products at more reasonable prices.

Although incomplete and only partially updated, the analysis of retegas.org database (managed by the most important national SPGs network) allowed to show that Italian SPGs have increased in Italy almost linearly since 1999 and have further grown in the years of crisis (GUIDI & ANDRETTA 2015). Currently registered SPGs are estimated nearly 1,000, but regional explorations including the non-registered ones would allow to

count about 2,000 at the national level (FORNO et al. 2013). Coherently with Hp.2, this result could give an argument to consider the crisis as a real opportunity for economic grassroots activism.

Nevertheless, SPGs growth has been regionally unbalanced: SPGs appear concentrated in some of the richest Centre-Northern regions (Lombardy and Tuscany) and much less widespread in Southern ones. The analysis also allows to observe that 2012 per-capita GDP is significantly correlated to the 2014 SPGs rate by region (GUIDI & ANDRETTA 2015). Beyond confirming them as a typically middle-class phenomenon, this point would provide evidence to the hypothesis of an elitist concentration of economic grassroots initiatives in times of crisis (Hp.1) and would also confirm their post-materialist foundation (Hp.0).

Quantitative analyses based on such rough models appear however unsatisfying to catch the features of a so fleeing phenomenon. Mixing quantitative and qualitative (in-depth interviews and participant observation) methods gives further and better chances to deepen the evolutions of AFNs in times of crisis in Tuscany, one of the regional champions in terms of SPGs concentration (GUIDI & ANDRETTA 2015, ANDRETTA & GUIDI 2017, forthcoming).

At an in-depth glance, Tuscan SPGs do not seem to be radically changed in the years of crisis. Coherently with Hp.0, 'from within' change processes confirm their importance and the hypothesis of a path-breaking transformation is clearly to exclude. However, Tuscan SPGs likewise experience some transformations. Against reduction hypothesis (Hp.1) and supporting the increase one (Hp.2), activists appear stable or growing in number and more and more motivated to politically act through grassroots economic initiatives in the crisis context. Against the possible trend to the elitism (Hp.1) and supporting the popularisation one (Hp.2), the constituency of Tuscan SPGs in the years of crisis seem composed by more impoverished people than before; nevertheless this probably depends more on the relative worsening in the living conditions of incumbent activists than on the arrival of new working class and underprivileged activists. Against a conventionalisation hypothesis (Hp.3), in the last years Tuscan SPGs have not significantly adopted conventional or non-profit economy logics and conversely have broad-

ened and intensified their own connection with local, small, marginal producers at the expense of a broader networking. Some trends moreover appear existing toward the participation of SPGs into the public local governance of food (CALORI et al. 2017). There is instead clear evidence that conventional economy logics and actors have increased their own weight in the field of alternative food: small organic short-chain producers have evolved toward home delivery 2.0 suppliers, medium size organic retailers have significantly expanded, conventional large retailers have launched new competitive food product lines to catch the preferences of critical consumers.

Coherently with Hp.4, some relevant cases of radicalisation of AFNs in Italy exist. The most significant experiences are the “Genuine Clandestine” network and the “Mondeggi Common Good” Campaign on the hills around Florence (ANDRETTA & GUIDI 2017, forthcoming). Established in 2014, this Campaign has blocked an insolvent public agricultural enterprise was sold to private economic actors through a radical and original protest. Food activists – the most youngsters having an agriculture university education and SPGs members – have “occupied” the lands and buildings of the former public agricultural enterprise, reformed the plots, re-launched the productions and converted them in agroecological terms, involved community in cultivations and have accompanied the productive project with intense political activity. The latter has been intended to contribute to reshaping the relationships between producers and consumers, rural and urban, economy and nature and has also included the design of methods and regulations aimed at managing the self-managed farm as a common (ANDRETTA & GUIDI 2017, forthcoming).

Discussion and Conclusions

Economic recession and austerity politics have dramatically impacted on Southern European (SE) countries and exert a long-lasting influence on their society and politics. The adverse context seems to have also contributed to reshaping their economy. Among other consequences, the crisis has given economic grassroots initiatives a further impetus to such an extent that, according to CASTELLS et al. (2012), the alternative economic sector would be one of the emerging layers of European and North American economies. Social movements’ scholars (KOU-

SIS 2017, KOUSIS & PASHOU 2017, UBA & KOUSIS 2018, CRISTANCHO & LOUKAKIS 2018) have interpreted economic grassroots initiatives in SE countries in times of crisis as Alternative Forms of Resilience, an original citizens' collective reaction to hardship contributing both to tackle personal material pain and to protest against unfair capitalist economy mechanisms. The crisis would peculiarly have been an opportunity for developing this form of collective action.

This way of conceptualising grassroots economic activism in times of crisis appears nevertheless challenged by other competitive configurations of the impacts of crisis context on economic grassroots initiatives and activists. Recession and austerity politics could have unsustainably raised the cost of economic grassroots collective action with the result to decrease the number of activists and concentrate them in the most privileged classes. In the adversities, the initiatives could also have limited their scope, gone towards a routinisation and conventionalisation. The quali/quantitative analysis of initiatives' clusters in context can help to better assess if and how hard times contributed to reshaping economic grassroots activism. Taken as case-study, Alternative food networks (AFNs) in Italy in times of crisis present a complex intertwining of persistencies and transformations. Structurally concentrated in the richest regions, they have continued to be a typically middle-class based phenomenon in hard times but they also have been able to involve middle-class activists, once impoverished and stressed by recession and austerity. Although they did not significantly take the form of conventional economy actors, we have assisted to a growing presence of conventional actors in the field. The latter did not colonise AFNs niches but they interfered and got in competition with them, significantly captured the trend toward local, organic, peasant food and obstructed their further developments. Italian field of AFNs in times of crisis also seems to have become more plural and differentiated. Usual and moderate initiatives - such as Solidarity Purchase Groups - have proceeded, sometimes in a routine way, sometimes by extending and deepening their relationships with farmers. While first path risks to depoliticise economic grassroots initiatives, the second one confirms their potential in terms of Alternative Forms of Resilience in so far as in times of crisis AFNs have more and more been the crucial infrastructure for the livelihood

of a growing number of small and further marginalised food producers. Another confirmation of AFR potential comes from the radical and particularly innovative AFNs initiatives. The case of 'Mondeggi Common Good' campaign shows that recession and austerity – once tackled by processes of collective framing and coalition-building – have actually represented an opportunity for new, radical, popular grassroots economic activism. Radical initiatives experience nevertheless a peculiar problem of durability, mainly because they are somehow illegal and their relationships with institutions appear highly problematic.

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