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Community Supported Agriculture as an Emancipatory Tool: A Participatory Research Study

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Abstract

This article presents the results of a participatory action research study conducted in the north of Italy and Germany between 2018 and 2020 to contribute to the creation of a Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) experience. Interviews, focus groups, surveys and autoethnographic participant observation were developed during the three years of activity in cooperation with the group of founders of a CSA, co-planning all the research activities and sharing all the results, including the evidence collected through the study of three other cases. In this contribution, I reflect on the pedagogical outcomes of a community-driven economic activity in terms of what people learn and how the community can develop the capacity to prefigure alternatives to mainstream economics, making sense of those practices otherwise considered illogical through collective intelligence. The results show that community building, as well as shared values from the beginning, is crucial.

Keywords: Community supported agriculture, community empowerment, participatory action research, autoethnography, rural sociology

L'agriculture soutenue par la communauté comme outil d'émancipation : une étude de recherche participative

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Résumé

Cet article présente les résultats d'une recherche-action participative menée dans le nord de l'Italie et en Allemagne entre 2018 et 2020 afin de contribuer à la création d'une expérience d'agriculture soutenue par la communauté (ASC). Entretiens, groupes de discussion, enquêtes et observation participante auto-ethnographique ont été développés pendant les trois années d'activité en collaboration avec le groupe de fondateurs d'une ASC qui a participé à la planification de toutes les activités de recherche et au partage de tous les résultats, y compris les données recueillies lors de l'étude de trois autres cas. Dans cette contribution, je réfléchis aux résultats pédagogiques d'une activité économique soutenue par la communauté, en termes d'apprentissages et de capacité de la communauté à développer des alternatives à l'économie traditionnelle, en donnant du sens à des pratiques autrement considérées comme illogiques grâce à l'intelligence collective. Les résultats montrent que le renforcement de la communauté et le partage de valeurs dès le départ sont essentiels.

Mots-clés : Agriculture soutenue par la communauté, autonomisation des communautés, recherche-action participative, auto-ethnographie, sociologie rurale

1.0 Introduction

The economy can be a space for the construction of meaning and for sharing meta-economic knowledge and social practices, including those of an environmentalist nature. The underlying question that this article seeks to investigate is whether and how an individual and a community living in a capitalist-liberal market economic (and social) system, grounded in consumerism and the drive to overcome ecological limits, can develop a mindset, and hence adopt a set of behaviours characterized by growing awareness of the environmental impact of their actions through an experience of community supported agriculture. The contribution this work aims to offer to the field of rural studies is the recognition of its pedagogical value and the meta-economic effects of activities involving the production and exchange of agricultural goods. The uniqueness of participatory action research, by its very nature situated and unrepeatable, might deserve to be documented. However, this work intends to propose an interpretation based on the principles of agroecology and grounded in the author's autoethnography, which distinctively combines theoretical framework and methodology to address the theme of participants' self-education within a social and solidarity economy organization. This research project is characterized by a participatory action research (PAR) approach, considering the whole study as a support to the establishment of a CSA in the province of Trento, Italy. Every part of the research work, from the research design to the literature review topics, and from the methods adopted to the research questions and presentation of the results—has been negotiated with the *co-researchers*, the members of the association. In this article, I provide evidence of the study conducted in support of the creation process of a CSA in the north of Italy and of the analysis of three other cases considered as comparative cases and sources of information. The author has taken part in all the activities as a full member of the group, with observant participation (Mason, 2015). During the three years of co-creation of the Ortazzo CSA (O. CSA), the CSA I was member of, research became a support tool for collecting information and allowing a better understanding of the phenomenon underway, while the researcher was not only a resource for data gathering but also a facilitator in community building and community empowerment.

Bearing in mind the peculiarity of PAR, this article first discusses why there is such an urgent need to shift perspective from capitalist-driven behaviours to socially-environmentally sustainable ones, a concept shared by the O. CSA community. It goes on to explain how the development of collective knowledge and the concept of social change provide a theoretical framework to analyse the data. The literature review then considers the issue of CSA practices as social innovation and as a pedagogical space. After the methodology section with details of the PAR, I present the results divided into two parts, one focusing on the supporting cases and one on the main case developed as PAR. The discussion section provides evidence of the pedagogical potential of CSA as an economic practice of solidarity, concluding by addressing the limits and presenting ideas for further development of this research.

2.0 Conceptual Framework

2.1 *The Need for Socio-Economic Change and Collective Knowledge Generation*

In order to understand the urgency of addressing the topic of the solidarity economy, I have to consider how the capitalist, liberal, market economy is a critical social and environmental factor. Rosa Luxemburg (1963), as early as 1913, evidenced the harm it caused to traditional societies and to the European ecosystem, while Polanyi (1957/2001) highlighted its negative impact on the Western social fabric and Arendt (1999) pointed to the dangerous link between the free market economy and totalitarianism. More recently, Schnaiberg has described the treadmill of production with its effects on social justice and the environment (Schnaiberg et al., 2002; Gould et al., 2015). Dandy (2021, p. 145) stated that we need “ways to pivot away from dominant capitalist economic systems towards more social and ecologically just approaches.” Arnold (2018) and Gombert-Munoz (2018) have connected it to contemporary populism, while Felicetti (2021) has pointed out its connection to systemic unsustainability. Acemoglu et al. (2013) outline the risks arising from the increasingly extractive nature of market society, while Sandel (2012) denounces its moral consequences. Although many possible alternatives have been put forward—notably the civil economy proposed by Zamagni (2004), the call for moderation voiced by eco-feminism (Bauhardt, 2014) and degrowth and post-growth, including post-growth based on the social and solidarity economy (SSE) posited by Jackson (2009) and the human–nature relations of degrowth (Heikkurinen, 2021)—the capitalist-liberal market economy seems to persist as the only dominant model.

The distortive impacts of capitalism are also clear in agriculture, particularly in driving out of the market (Struś et al., 2020) and reducing the income (Czyzewski et al., 2019) of small-scale producers who adopt lower-impact farming practices (Altieri, 2018), and “account for 70% of all agricultural production units, but control only 7% of all agricultural land” (Lowder et al., 2021, p. 4). All this points to the urgency of imagining less destructive, and even socially proactive, economic mechanisms for securing people’s wellbeing and a balanced ecosystem. At the same time, many of the above-mentioned contributions agree that the economy does play a role in social reproduction (Mincyte, 2024), albeit mostly highlighting the negative impact.

The structural change in socio-economic practices has to be considered in all its complexity (Brand, 2016), knowing that social change and innovation play a key role in the development of social justice (Avelino et al., 2019), in human development (Greenfield, 2018), as well as in fulfilling the need for knowledge in order to understand and interpret reality (Fontan et al., 2013), which in turn leads to collective action (Doetsch-Kidder, 2012). Ecology (Elsen, 2019) and the social and solidarity economy (Gibson-Graham & Roelvink, 2013) provide particularly fertile ground for social movements and civil society initiatives.

Social change is characterized as a discontinuity in people’s social condition, a discontinuity that is not always positive, however, and indeed is frequently stressful for the individuals affected by it. The presence of organized structures, such as associations and cooperatives, helps significantly to cope with its psychological as well as its economic and social impact (Reicher & Haslam, 2013; Shove, 2010). The community dimension is therefore crucial to such change since

the best promoters of change are, in fact, those communities which actively engage the stakeholders who will be impacted by the change itself, thereby making it acceptable (Voorberg et al., 2015).

Alternative forms of collective knowledge and learning have gained increasing importance in tackling the issue of sustainable development. Kim et al. (2019) have conducted a study in order to understand the management and governance of the community-building process, showing how it is virtually impossible to achieve when a sense of community is absent, i.e., when there is no perception of a *common identity* as a community, even where there is strong commitment and investment by local authorities.

In collective economic activities, as in CSAs, a major role is played by intelligence as the ability to learn (Kee et al., 2015), understand and adapt to external situations not as individuals but as a community (Leimeister, 2010). The collective dimension is also essential for opposing epistemic injustice, particularly hermeneutical injustice, which leads to denying one's capacity to produce knowledge, that is, when concepts capable of explaining the experience of the individual are absent and where there is a perceived dissonance between the shared narrative and the individual's experience (Fricker, 2007), including cases of epistemic environmental injustice (Gendreau, 2016). It is, therefore, clear that eradicating hermeneutical injustice is crucial for dismantling many systems of power (Kim & Moonhee, 2019)—which is why it makes sense to set this issue within the wider context of the solidarity economy as a pedagogical tool. In the mainstream economic system, oppression is chiefly sustained by the fact that the oppressors and the oppressed—who switch roles and are thus one and the same—are not conscious of this condition and lack the words to articulate the difficulty with which they stay within the system. As will be seen in due course, SSE and CSA experiences can help bring about significant change in this respect.

2.2 CSA Experiences as Learning Spaces for Social Change

Social and solidarity-based agriculture has a preferential outlet in the market of alternative food networks, which have a broad range of action (Corsi et al., 2018)—from merely constituting a system of supply and sale of agricultural produce to being instruments of political opposition (Manganelli et al., 2019)—and in recent times have grown from niche experiments to widespread experiences (Phillipov et al., 2018). The example of *political consumerism* (Graziano & Forno, 2012) illustrates how everyday choices are perceived and enacted as political choices by many consumers (Forno & Weiner, 2020). More generally, in the West, alternative food networks lie at the intersection between the economic, political, social and anthropological dimensions (Ebel & Thornton, 2023) and, as such, are seen as reactions against the capitalist system whose utilitarian logic they reject (Biolghini, 2019). The needs they meet are certainly, on the consumer's side, to buy high-quality food, and on the producers' side, to sell their produce at a higher than average price, but in neither case are these the exclusive or main rationale (Corsi et al., 2018). The dimension of opposing and rebelling against the capitalist system thus becomes a form of resistance (Wilson, 2017), counteracting the logic of exploitation and profit maximization at the global level by focusing on the issue of food sovereignty—even considering the criticality of this term (Monaghan & Smith, 2018), seen as the right to self-determination in food production and food choice and the idea of food as

commons (Vivero-Pol et al., 2018)—and Alternative Food Networks (AFN) as a driver of counteraction to capitalism (Koretskaya & Feola, 2020).

Developing this further, one particular form of alternative food network is CSA. The 2016 European Declaration on CSA, approved in Ostrava, Czech Republic, defines the CSA as: “a direct partnership based on the human relationship between people and one or several producer(s), whereby the risks, responsibilities and rewards of farming are shared, through a long-term, binding agreement”.¹ CSAs were first established in Japan during the 1970s, but their initial theoretical foundations were developed by the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner as early as the 1920s (Steiner, 1919/2017, p. 15–16). He posited the establishment of associations, driven purely by economic considerations, in which consumers, traders and producers would come together in order to determine the appropriate payment for the work performed through price regulation. Since they first emerged several decades ago, CSAs have become very widespread around the world and, to a much lesser extent though steadily growing in numbers, in Italy (Piccoli et al., 2021). The main characteristics of CSAs as identified by Struś et al. (2020) are: the principle of collaboration or partnership between producers and consumers; solidarity, based on consumers sharing business risks; closeness and proximity in supporting the local economy; support for sustainable agriculture with a focus on biodiversity; and a direct and personal relationship between the consumer and the producer. Therefore, motivations to take part in a CSA are wide-ranging. The desire to have fresh organic food is balanced by the aspiration to orient the food chain (Savarese et al., 2020; Nowack & Hoffmann, 2020), and CSA members seems to be oriented towards conservation and self-transcendence (Diekmann & Theuvsen, 2019). In this sense, Hvitsand (2016) has aptly described the drive towards social change in CSAs, struggling for environmental and social justice, health, empowerment and active participation. Cox et al. (2008) have already demonstrated how participation in an AFN-CSA leads to a wider change in consumption behaviour at the individual level. However, the political capacity to institutionalize these behavioural characteristics is still unexplored and needs a deeper knowledge of collective action in AFN (Bonfert, 2022). This emerges clearly while considering examples such as CSA networks and degrowth movements (Spanier et al., 2024; Pixová et al., 2025).

This is not the case with agroecology, with strong recognitions of agroecological principles included in CSA networks (Wezel et al., 2018). Wezel et al. (2020) have defined 13 consolidated agroecological principles: recycling; input reduction; soil health; animal health; biodiversity; synergy; economic diversification; co-creation of knowledge; social values and diets; fairness; connectivity; land and natural resource governance; participation. According to these principles, agroecology has to be considered in its full combination of agronomic and political stances. The role of AFN and CSA in agroecological transition is based in the possibility to concretely support the transformation of farms from simple organic production units to socio-environmental point of a political empowering network (Vicente-Vicente et al., 2023). The CSA’s political role in questioning power relations is emancipatory in the nature of its inclusivity (Parrot et al., 2024), although hardly to be achieved (Egli et al., 2023).

I can heed the suggestion offered by Ostrom (2007) that CSA is not the ultimate panacea for agriculture, nor is it suited to every farmer and every consumer. It still has to be ascertained to what extent this model has the educational potential for

¹ <https://urgenci.net/the-european-csa-declaration-adopted-in-ostrava/>

fostering a more aware and more responsible approach in economic and civic life. This is the focus of the research set out below, which seeks to fill a substantial gap in our understanding of the pedagogical dimension, and hence the social reproduction potential, of solidarity economy experiences such as CSAs.

Although eating is a natural act tied to our survival, the production, processing, and commercialization of food worldwide are complex issues. The increasingly evident contradictions of the global agri-food market in terms of environmental and social sustainability have led to the development of agroecology movements (Gohn, 2011) and critical consumption experiences (Stolle et al., 2005), seen as convivial alternatives (Illich, 2005; Vittori & De Vita, 2022) in response to the Green Revolution and Globalization.

The political importance of collective learning processes was already highlighted in early 20th century by Dewey, who described the intrinsic link between democracy, citizenship, and education (Waks & English, 2017). Later, Freire (1975; 2008) emphasized the pedagogical dimension of every political action, where participation in a political experience builds social bonds and strengthens relationships of trust. In the early 1990s, Mezirow (as cited in Biasin, 2016) focused on adult learning, theorizing ‘reflection’ as the mechanism through which individuals construct and validate the meanings they attribute to themselves, to culture, and to history (Mezirow, 1990). This leads to the development of critical consciousness and awareness of the meanings underlying individuals’ lives. Reflection enables people to make sense of the complex set of prior premises—cognitive, volitional, ethical, behavioral, socio-linguistic, psychological—used and understood in their actual, everyday consequences (Mezirow, 1991). Learning, both individual and collective, is a conscious, critical, and reflective process through which adults construct new and/or updated interpretations of the meanings attributed to past experiences or thoughts, in order to guide the present and orient future action (Mezirow, 2003).

The pedagogical action of the economic sphere can also be considered through the lens of unlearning. Unlearning is defined as an intentional process through which individuals or organizations question, abandon, or suspend the use of previously acquired knowledge, practices, and mental models in order to make room for new perspectives better suited to changing contexts (Van Oers et al., 2023), and to challenge privilege and habits from a feminist and postcolonial perspective (van Oers et al., 2024). CSA initiatives can be privileged contexts for unlearning, as they inherently question the entrenched logics of capitalism and the market by abandoning the concept of fixed prices for agricultural products and embracing the responsibility of fairly remunerating agricultural labor (Rossi et al., 2024). Van Oers et al. (2022; 2023; 2024) recognize experimentation, emotional discomfort, and collective negotiation as central elements of pedagogical unlearning within CSA. This process leads to the development of new forms of participation and co-responsibility, to the recognition of the value of agricultural labor and solidarity among co-producers, and to the redefinition of the “consumer” identity as that of a co-producer.

Alternative Food Networks and Community Supported Agriculture experiences can serve as learning spaces (Vittori et al., 2024), as they are contexts of collective action. This essay specifically aims to consider these initiatives in their dimension as economic exchanges, to assess the pedagogical potential of the economic sphere, rather than the social or community one.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 PAR and Positionality

The empirical research on CSAs was conducted using a transformative and participatory approach in view of the potential to act upon the causes that urgently require an in-depth understanding of the pedagogical and social emancipation dimensions of the social economy.

PAR has been widely applied in the study of environmental and social justice movements (Lykes & Mallona, 2008), with a particular focus on the epistemic dimension and the relationship between knowledge and power (von Unger, 2014). In PAR, the researcher is the first and main instrument of data gathering (Baldwin, 2012; Reason & Bradbury, 2001), making reflexivity, understood as the capacity for self-observation, essential to ensure the credibility and validity of results (Kirby et al., 2006).

According to Chevalier and Buckles (2013), it is important for the researcher to have skills such as mediation, concreteness, the ability to lead the group in action, the ability to act on different levels and scales, the ability to find meaning in things, and adaptability. In participatory research, according to von Unger (2014), the researcher should be able to put him/herself on the same level as the co-researchers. Qualitative research is neither neutral nor immune to the views of those conducting the research; such subjectivity not only cannot be denied but can actually be enhanced (Ronzon, 2008). Thus, for participatory research, it takes reflexivity, i.e., the awareness that one is part of the process, that one does not have superior dignity to the participants but has relevant power to influence (Kirby et al., 2006).

Groups that initiate participatory research engage in a circle of alternating reflection and action, and here self-reflection is a central element in activating co-researchers' empowerment being promoted by involvement in decision-making. Research is participatory insofar as knowledge generation is based on the blending of the academic perspective with that of non-academic participants and not a simple extraction of knowledge pursued by academics on participants. The role of conversations facilitation makes the difference in understanding and building community capacity and effectiveness (Chaisson et al., 2024). Reflection on one's own positioning thus overturned the idea of minimizing subjectivity and the influence it has in both the data collection and analysis phases (Savin-Baden & Major, 2010).

In all of this, trans-disciplinarity (Novy et al., 2013), evident from the desire to combine social pedagogy and management, allows for an articulate approach to a complex reality, such as the one in which we live, overcoming dogmatism based on naturalistic reductionism (Ross & Mitchell, 2018; Werlen, 2015) and the division into disciplines that fragments vision (Kirby et al., 2006). Through this approach, research becomes transformative, that is, able to change the social reality s/he studies (Bradbury Huang, 2010; Pavanello, 2010), overcoming the claim to arrive at an indisputable truth (Savin-Baden & Major, 2010). Learning thus becomes collective and allows different points of view to be brought together in a varied perspective (Brown, 2018) that welcomes the contribution of non-academics (Weichselgartner & Truffer, 2015) and aims for innovation (Johnston & Hauser, 2008) and real-world problem solving (Romm, 2018).

In qualitative, participatory, and transformative research, the life and actions of the researcher are the primary method of data collection (Vicari Haddock & Tornaghi, 2013) and require specific skills and qualities (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013; Yin, 2009; von Unger, 2014). Researcher involvement can be strong, with first-person research, partially detached second-person research, or totally detached, with the use of the third person in academic writing (Baldwin, 2012; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Reflexivity, understood as the ability to self-observe, thus becomes essential to ensure the credibility and validity of findings (Kirby et al., 2006; Ronzon, 2008; Heron, 2001), going so far as to problematize the researcher's role in the field (Savin-Baden & Major, 2010) to avoid bias (Bradbury-Huang, 2010).

3.2 Methods

The research design was developed in collaboration with the co-researchers, namely the members of O. CSA, and submitted for ethical approval to the association's board of directors. The main objective of the overall research was to find the best way to establish a CSA, supporting the process with a literature review focused on CSA and AFN, interviews, questionnaires, focus groups and, more generally, a reflection on the meaning of what was taking place (BradburyHuang, 2010; Merriam, 2009). The research phases were as follows:

- 2018 observant participation in all meetings of the founders' group and a round of interviews (7)²;
- 2019 observant participation in all meetings of the founders' group, a second round of interviews (10), an online survey (38 completed questionnaires), participant observation and interviews (27) conducted by three other established CSAs to collect insights and treated as case studies (Yin, 2009); and
- 2020 observant participation in all meetings of the founders' group and a third round of interviews (5).

Interviews and survey questions were co-defined with the members of the O. CSA founders' group, all results were shared in their raw version first and after analysis and review by the researcher. As a data collection source, interviews have been recorded and transcribed, and the researcher has taken minutes of each meeting and fieldnotes after each event to fix her personal point of view.

Aside from the main case, I conducted three case studies in Germany and Northern Italy to identify the strengths and threats of the model to better support the process. Following Yin (2009), the research in the first two cases involved visiting and conducting participant observation of daily activities in each CSA for three to four weeks during the spring and summer of 2019, with interviews conducted with both members and farmers, as well as an analysis of official communications to members. Regarding the third case, the COVID-19 pandemic made it impossible to carry out direct observation, so an online survey was developed to obtain the relevant information from the participants. The characteristics of the three cases are summarized in Table 1.

² In the results section, I will refer to these sources as: I = interview, S = survey, FG = focus group, FN = field notes, + N = the consequential numbering of interviews, + LETTER = the CSA where I was conducting the interview, and + YEAR = the year of data collection. As an example, the coding: I+3+O+2018 refers to the third interview of 2018 conducted within O. CSA.

Table 1. *Side Case Studies*

Acronym	Location	Year of establishment	No. of members
SM Hof	Northern Germany	2002	150
W. Hof	Southern Germany	2017	35
L.T.	South Tyrol, Northern Italy	2018	45

Note: These three experiences were analysed during the PAR to offer a wider perspective to the O. CSA group, exposing them to practices and providing them with examples and even tips to reinforce the process.

3.3 Analytical Framework

This article synthesizes data from this extensive research study to answer one specific question: If and how an economic experience can have a pedagogical dimension enabling people individuals and communities to make sense of alternative food practices that diverge from mainstream ones. To answer this question, I have collected information from all the different stages of the PAR, adopting the analytical framework of critical discourse analysis (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000) and autoethnographic writing (Mackinlay, 2022; Pensoneau-Conway et al., 2017), specifically considering the way people engaged in the CSA through meaningful symbolic behaviours while communicating their views about the ongoing economic experience as disruptive of conventional habits or practices.

Fieldnotes were written as the first step in ongoing analysis by reflexively exploring the internal dynamics of identity and power relation co-construction, rule definition, and collective knowledge building through a feminist autoethnography process of writing. The writing process is, at the same time, a data collection method and an analytical tool to give voice to otherwise inaccessible information (Hornbuckle, 2024). In a context of contesting the mainstream economic practice, Mackinlay (2022) proposal to emphasize research and writing as acts of love, vulnerability, and ethical responsibility fits my position of scholar activist, making the personal political even in economy and farming.

Interview transcriptions, fieldnotes, and minutes have been analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, with some insights from critical discourse analysis, specifically in its discourse-as-discursive-practice and discourse-as-social-practice frameworks, considering ideological and cultural contexts as layers of the discourse. I have tried to understand, through this approach, how participants represented their lived experiences and identified the changes in their everyday practices during the CSA establishment process in relation to food sovereignty and power relations within a capitalist market.

4.0 Results

4.1 Three Supporting Cases

In this section, I present some insights from three CSAs from the German-speaking world, two in Germany and one in South Tyrol, Italy. Germany is the European country where the CSA model had its earliest and most rapid development. According to a census published on the website [Solidarische Landwirtschaft](#), in

2020, there were 286 registered CSAs—Solidarische Landwirtschaft (SoLaWi)—in Germany.

During my stay at two German farms, I observed a variety of behaviours and attitudes toward the participants. Self-interest was always mixed up with curiosity, pleasure and solidarity. Although in the majority of cases, members are there to have fresh organic food, other motivations were at work. Some of them openly express recognition of a political action, “For a long time I was thinking about how people could come together to do something against the capitalist economy and I found the idea of Gela pretty appealing, doing something outside of a big political party” (personal communication, interview 3, SM Hof, 2019) This seems to be consistent with Forno and Weiner (2019).

Through the CSA scheme, people found a way to counter capitalism (Feola et al., 2021), offering the possibility to unlearn the inevitability of market relations (van Oers et al., 2023) and build something different that once was only dreamed of.

The desire to be part of a community is crucial at W. Hof, where people are strongly aware of the practical consequences of economic practices, as proposed by Elsen (2019):

Certainly the possibility of having organic, seasonal, regional products, without transport and without packaging is very important; however, the desire to work together, to be part of an association, to be a community, to take decisions together, to be part of a group of people who share values and ideals, as well as the two together, the idea of cultivating together the food that you then eat, the care of your territory through plants that favour the presence of insects and bees and the aesthetic attention towards the field are equally important .(personal communication, interview 1, W. Hof, 2019).

During my conversation with the farmer, I became aware of the fatigue and effort required both by farmer and co-producers/consumers to build the desired community. In the summer, they typically have campfires in the evening by the orchard, inviting neighbours and CSA members to join. However, some people, like M, have never attended these events due to various constraints. From the beginning, she has tried to create a circle of friends within this community.

This attempt of reciprocal care relationship emerged in W. Hof CSA interviews as a concern that the farmer was not adequately remunerated. This was the subject of a discussion during an afternoon of community work, demonstrating a tendency to link environmental sustainability and social justice (Avellino, et al., 2019). This case was very inspiring for the O. CSA because of the members’ moral stance and their desire to act quite consciously to bring about social change.

There was the case of more “conventional” learning processes within the CSAs, with members willing to learn new practices. The acquisition of skills and competences had then turned into a transformational action involving the whole life comprehension as emerges in Mert-Cakal & Miele (2022): “My intention is to find the place where I want to study, I want to study agriculture and I am particularly looking for places that involve the community and practice organic farming in a way

that has the potential to transform the world, basically” (personal communication, interview 13, SM Hof, 2019).

The dimension of being a community is crucial in the process of collective learning and practice transformation. L.T. (anonymized name of a CSA) has collapsed because it lacked this sense of belonging, as proposed by Kim and Moonhee (2019):

Our experience has not really achieved brilliant results up to this point; it started with great enthusiasm on the part of the promoters, including F., but has met with a great many challenges, probably in understanding what ‘us’ means [...] A connection between us is clearly missing. In my opinion, it’s something that is difficult to structure because if the person goes to the farm and sees how the work is done, and maybe he works there too, even just on a day off, but he likes to go, he likes to work, then he creates a bond. Otherwise it remains something that isn’t part of you: it’s like going to the market, you can have a chat, you can also feel sympathy for the person who sells you the product but you don’t create the necessary bond [...] L.T. was not a community, it was not possible to create a community, it was more to do with individual contacts (personal communication, interview 1, LT, 2020).

This comment seems to encapsulate the entire history of L.T. and of many CSAs—the enthusiasm, the values, the hurdles and disappointments, and the challenge of creating a community out of a group of individuals who care about these issues but are frequently engaged on many different fronts. Here, the fragmentation of personal experiences and lifestyles has hindered the process of community building and collective envisioning of other futures, as proposed by Campbell (2020), as well as reflecting on and making sense of shared experiences (Mezirow, 1991).

4.2 The O. CSA Case Study and PAR

The O. CSA experience has been grounded in agroecological principles with a major attention to fairness, participation, biodiversity, and land protection (Wezel et al., 2020). For this reason, an initial element emerging right from the first phase has been a strong sense of the consumers’ responsibility to support farmers so that they can take care of the land, and an awareness that the farmers would be unable to survive in the marketplace without that support, in line with the intuitions of Vincent and Feola (2020):

We start out from the fact that small, seasonal, artisan peasant agriculture has no chance of making it, of staying on the market, unless a community takes it upon itself to establish an agreement of this type which will always be outside the market. The market is now distorted, it has incurable distortions and literally throws out all those who are inspired

by other principles, so we must all concentrate and play our part (personal communication, interview 1, O. CSA, 2018).

This understanding was not completely shared between the members, with some of them much more aware and others less. The participation in the scheme has led to a significant increase in critical comprehension of peasants' challenges. The local authorities likewise show awareness of the value of small farmers' control over the land, combined with the perception of missing tools of support. There is also a generalized drive to support a sustainable agricultural model and respectful farming practices to counteract intensive farming, in line with Struś, et al. (2020): "It overcomes the sense of loneliness of the farmer, who is also the one who has control of the land, control over the well-being of that land" (personal communication, interview 3, O. CSA, 2018).

With respect to the analysis of needs and the CSA's potential to foster empowerment and self-determination, the results from 2018 point to a desire for change, for coming out of the niche and creating a community of people who share values and goals, in parallel with the wish to have healthy, locally grown food (Mouleart, 2016). As to the CSA's ability to fulfil these needs, the evidence suggests a suspension of judgment and, in some cases, a perceived inadequacy. Considering that when the experience began in 2018, no one knew what a CSA was, the opportunity to support the community by choosing to buy from and support local farmers seems to be a clear and definite step forward for the participants, consistent with Brunori et al., (2011):

Interacting and sharing experiences with producers is mentally refreshing, it's what I've been doing for a long time, I'm doing it for myself, I'm doing it for my daughter, I'm also doing it for a better world, we might say. Yes of course, we need to widen it, we need to cast the net much wider, and make sure that people come and that they say to themselves 'I've heard about this, I'd like to participate' (personal communication, interview 4, O. CSA, 2019).

The reflective opportunity provided by the participatory action research during the first year has created the space for building awareness of the change embodied by the CSA. During meetings, we were discussing how provocative the initiatives should sound in the eyes of conventional agro-industrial farmers. Sometimes, it seemed that one involved farmer was not able to believe the possibility of being trusted by consumers to pay in advance. The market mindset was so strong, that in the end, I concluded that a full pre-financing approach (where CSA members/consumers pay the whole annual amount at the beginning of the year) was impracticable, unless the sense of being a community became stronger.

The idea of being a community is such a powerful and core aspect of the respondents' outlook that it also drives their answers as to the negative aspects, as already noted by Kim and Moonhee (2019). In this respect, beyond the logistical challenges, the lack of or inadequate progress in building a real community is a key issue:

...instead, the idea of a small farm was perceived as a chance to sell a product and not so much as providing a sense of solidarity... If solidarity lies in the commitment to buy, then this did happen, and I can't say whether it was more than that... The issue is partly this: if you don't start by already engaging and feeling what the group is going to create, a group that will have to be supportive, and which will eventually form a group of consumers ... there needs to be a "glue" (personal communication, interview 6, O. CSA; 2019).

However, the evidence from the interviews also clearly shows that the most important need is not for food. The most deeply felt need is for values, giving people the opportunity to fulfil an ethical dimension that has no place in a market-driven society as underlined by Avellino, et al. (2019):

A. understood, she understood much more than many others. A. and F., too, have understood this and in fact are among the most loyal members. It's precisely the system, the format: order, pre-order ... all of this is not user-friendly, but they have fully embraced the project itself, because they are always here (personal communication, interview 8, O. CSA, 2020).

This is not the case for the majority of the O. CSA members, showing a clear problem of low engagement, a critical point in several CSA experiences (Mert-Cakal & Miele, 2022). Several members have not developed an awareness of the potential for social transformation enabled by CSA. The self-interest and market mindset were not dismantled through the practice. However, in a few participants, discussions and thought sharing have led to a deep process of restructuring their worldview, with an enthusiasm for understanding the potential of a community of practice.

The issue of community empowerment in an anti-market sense was raised during several interviews, sometimes in the context of what has been done to try and develop the organization, but most often through the awareness of how sharing choices that go against the tide is a strengthening factor:

What is different here with this attempt is precisely the idea of seeking or creating a community, I realize that. It's almost like trying to expand one's beliefs: in this case it has to do with eating clean food and behaving in an environmentally sustainable way. But in my opinion it should be carried on because, even if it's sometimes a bit difficult and outside the standard canons, alas the experience of this virus may have helped this CSA (focus group 3, O. CSA, 2020).

Here, there is also the issue of unlearning standard practices and values (van Oers et al., 2023) fostered by an external unplanned situation like the Covid epidemic, considering the difficulties in changing one's mind with respect to habits, consumption practices and relations with producers.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusions

The main case study, the O. CSA, is critically grounded in the collective effort to generate a viable alternative to the capitalist market (Vincent & Feola, 2020) and the treadmill of production (Gould et al., 2015). Other Italian CSA cases have similarly shown the commitment of this model to overcome systematic market practices (Rossi et al., 2024). The collateral cases demonstrate how people acquired a significant amount of knowledge about gardening, production practices, and environmental habits, confirming findings presented by Cox et al. (2008) and Hvitsand (2016). Starting from Mezirow's concept of reflection, which is understood as the mechanism through which individuals construct and validate the meanings they attribute to themselves, to culture, and to history (Mezirow, 1990), I argue that the proper practices of CSA, specifically co-planning and shared responsibility, foster a lived theorization of non-capitalistic economic relations.

In the later years (2019 and 2020) of the O. CSA experience, the learning process triggered by setting up a CSA is characterized by the level of awareness shared by all participants at the outset, all of whom are members of an environmentalist association that promotes organic farming and sustainable lifestyles. However, through their CSA experience, they have become aware of the importance of the community dimension and the significance of being part of a group with shared concerns about and regard for the environment. This awareness, also in the sense of collective intelligence (Yu et al., 2018) about food practices (van Oers et al., 2023), seems to offer a way to achieve knowledge co-creation (Kee et al., 2015) and knowledge sharing (Nowotny et al., 2006), preventing that form of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) based on the impossibility of prefiguring alternatives to current capitalist agri-food chains (Vincent & Feola, 2020).

What is being envisaged is clearly a radical social change, characterized by a discontinuity which can be intrinsically traumatic for those affected by it. A key role in supporting change, making it possible and tolerable for people, seems to be played by solidarity-based associations and other social organizations, because the community dimension is crucially important when change occurs, particularly when the change is planned, sought after, managed, and inclusive with respect to the stakeholders involved. Social innovation is a particular type of social change that aims to meet the needs of individuals and groups while at the same time promoting their empowerment. The social and solidarity economy is largely the product of successful social innovation processes (Elsen, 2019), and has promoted the values of democracy, freedom and equality. Alternative food networks and CSA projects themselves originated as social innovation experiences, which were eventually institutionalized and have become part of the social order (Kim & Moonhee, 2019). Through the analysis of change and social innovation experiences, it has been possible to show how the social and solidarity economy and CSA projects can lead to the ecological paradigm shift described earlier, which, as I saw, is so necessary.

Mezirow (1991, 2003) offers a point of view useful in answering the underlying question, whether and how an individual and a community living in a capitalist-liberal market economic (and social) system, grounded in consumerism and the drive to overcome ecological limits, can develop a mindset, and hence adopt a set of behaviours characterized by growing awareness of the environmental impact of their actions through an experience of community supported agriculture. The experience of setting up a community-supported scheme has, first of all, offered the opportunity to develop critical consciousness and awareness of the meanings of everyday life

activities, such as buying food. The need to take part in planning the harvest, budgeting farming activities, and taking action in case of climate adversity has been a key turning point. The complexity of the premises, again on several levels from ethics to cognitive, and the complexity of the scenario have called for empowerment as agents in the market and the community. What has emerged during this study is specifically the collective construction and interpretation of the meanings attributed to the CSA building process, taken as an explicit opposition to market logics.

The emotional discomfort experienced during the collective negotiation of CSA procedures speaks to the need to unlearn the business-as-usual practices of consumer-producer relationships, as already shown by Van Oers et al. (2022, 2023, 2024). CSA members have had the opportunity to learn together how to negotiate the sharing rules by abandoning the principle of individual utilitarianism, which is the basis of the capitalist market. This has produced profound discussions. In this sense, the pedagogical function of the collective initiative finds implementation exactly in the everyday questioning of consolidated market practices. The cohesion of the collective, the self-perception of being a community, is crucial in this process of awareness raising through reflection.

Turning to my final conclusions, although attempting to demonstrate the pedagogical potential of the solidarity economy is challenging, the evidence from the material set out above suggests that a community can only play an educational role when it is a real community—when its members feel they are truly part of a unitary entity with its own inherent goals and intentions. Failing that, it continues to operate at the level of exchanging goods, without undermining the utilitarian logic of healthy, organic, locally grown food. By contrast, when there is an understanding that one is part of a group that has its own specific ambitions, the contribution of the individual gains strength as each member becomes engaged in working towards those shared goals, drawing on the community to give direction to and strengthen their personal beliefs. That way, the co-construction of meaning begins to take place, responding to the hermeneutical injustices which conventional society brings upon those who do not conform.

In this research study, I have investigated and gathered evidence on the topic of the social and solidarity economy as a pedagogical tool. It was, however, impossible for the work to be exhaustive, and many limitations clearly remain. Firstly, the field was narrowed down to one type of SSE experience: CSA. In Italy's case, CSA is not particularly representative of the Third Sector, which encompasses a multitude of experiences across diverse economic areas. Furthermore, the study focused almost exclusively on the perspective of those who live on the inside of these movements while entirely excluding the external effects of this model on those who are not part of it, from producers—organic and conventional alike—outside the GAS (Solidarity-based Purchasing Group) or CSA supply chain to conventional food consumers. The only, albeit minor, exceptions in this regard are the interviews held with the political decision-makers of the Trentino Region as part of the action research. Finally, reviewing the literature, no evidence or counter-evidence was found on the pedagogical dimension of the free market economy.

These limitations suggest many additional lines of inquiry for further development of the research. An area that warrants closer investigation is the assessment of the systemic impacts of the social and solidarity economy as a whole, particularly in terms of its pedagogical potential and support for social reproduction, in light of the recent crisis in the healthcare system. Moreover, widening the focus to include the

external effects, even just of critical consumption on society as a whole, would definitely provide a more comprehensive picture, including a better understanding of its capitalist-liberal market economy counterpart.

Finally, another way to develop this study would be to investigate the knock-on effects of the CSA model and related communities in terms of their resilience in coping with external crises and shocks, a highly topical subject in recent years. These suggestions clearly illustrate how much work still remains to be done in the study of the social and solidarity economy as a key factor in social reproduction and social innovation.

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