



Unmaking capitalism through community empowerment: Findings from Italian agricultural experiences

Alessandra Piccoli^{a,*}, Francesco Vittori^b, Francesca Uleri^c

^a University of Bolzano, Italy

^b University of Verona, Italy

^c University of Turin, Italy

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Community supported agriculture
Participatory guarantee systems
Local food networks
Bottom-up transition
Participatory research

ABSTRACT

Capitalism – in the theorizations of sustainability transformation – has been largely taken for granted for its misleadingly assumed stability and homogeneity, thus limiting the scope for defining alternative futures, policy options and strategies for transformative change. Theorizations regarding sustainable transformative pathways have often overshadowed a nuanced landscape of normative and ontological pluralism thus contributing to generating techno-centric and top-down responses to issues such as access to food, farmers' control over the food-chain and global environmental change. The expansion of capital, under a mechanism of production-reproduction, with a constant attempt to subsume different forms of production into the global market, generates manifold temporal frictions that, on the one hand, contribute to the consolidation of the capitalist model and, on the other hand, give rise to conflicting elements and re-orientation of modernity in a process of “un-making” of capitalism. This article, drawing upon empirical work conducted in Northern Italy, presents two experiences emerging from the scenario of local food networks, namely the “C'è Campo” Participatory Guarantee System and the “Ortazzo” Community Supported Agriculture project. These show elements and mechanisms of local community empowerment for unmaking capitalism from the inside, as steps for a sustainable and bottom-up transformation which do not necessarily imply the generation of socio-economic novelties ex-nihilo. The “conventionalization” of organic agriculture has pushed those actors who participate in local food networks to reconfigure their self-regulation towards a “bottom-up” approach driven by the adoption of PGS or CSA instruments as an attempt to secure or reacquire control over the market and the construction of quality. Convivial tools, in particular, are crucial for understanding - and finding responses to - the social, economic, cultural and environmental crisis that contemporary society is now facing.

1. Introduction

Capitalism appears as a complex historical process (Gibbon and Neocosmos, 1985) entailing movements of expansion and contraction flowing into non-economic dimensions (Streck, 2012) and connecting production and reproduction (Tomba, 2015), within which the agrarian substrates – in coordinated alliances with the consumer sphere – have an active role to play in facing and counterbalancing the progression of capital accumulation. Therefore, although in the mid-19th century Marx and Engels famously referred – as in a prediction – to capitalism's inherent drive to “nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, make connections everywhere” ([1848] 1998) in a sort of global process of ‘making capitalism’ (see Panitch and Gindin, 2012), today we can see that ‘the

making’ is not temporally and spatially homogeneous since we witness tensions, conflicts, or contradictions proper of the uneven and often thorny globalization dynamics (Gindin, 2021). Alternative food networks and other local experiences around food and agriculture seem to be attempts to question capitalism and neoliberalism. Adopting the approach of unmaking (Feola, 2019; Feola et al., 2020, 2021; Koretskaya and Feola, 2020) defined as a

“diverse range of interconnected and multilevel (individual, social, socioecological) processes that are deliberately activated in order to “make space” (temporally, spatially, materially, and/or symbolically) for radical alternatives that are incompatible with dominant modern capitalist configurations” (Feola, 2019, p. 979, p. 979)

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: alessandra.piccoli@unibz.it (A. Piccoli), francesco.vittori@univr.it (F. Vittori), francesca.uleri@unito.it (F. Uleri).

This contribution seeks to improve our understanding of local food networks in terms of their potential to be alternative models to capitalistic production and reproduction (Rossi, 2017; Rossi et al., 2021). To that end, we present two cases of practices of socio-ecological transformations (Elsen, 2018) that are developing ‘in the here and now’, giving rise to the formation of grey zones between capitalist and non-capitalist configurations. The cases identified are in Northern Italy: the first is selected in Lombardy and involves a local Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) for collectively certifying the quality of local organic products, the second, in Trentino Alto Adige, involves the construction process of a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) project. In analyzing the two case studies, the ‘unmaking’ process is conceptualized as a sub-process in the nonlinear evolution of modern capitalism which creates new spaces of interaction, resistance and construction of relative autonomy from commoditization and capital circulation and reproduction logics (i.e., $M - C - M'$) (Marx, 1906; Hean et al., 2003).¹ We start from the consideration that capitalism does not generate its own conditions for existence and reproduction ex-nihilo (Uleri, 2021) and similarly unmaking proceeds through the deconstruction and erosion of existing practices in the framework of sustainable food production (Feola et al., 2020). The article fits into this analytical dimension, trying to provide an answer to two questions: Are the CSA and PGS experiences consistent with the propositions offered by Feola (2019)? How does the empowerment process relate to the unmaking and transformative capacity of the CSA and PGS models? It starts by setting out the theoretical framework, combining the discussion on the movements of making and unmaking of capitalism in the agricultural world and related agrarian complexes. It then goes on to clarify the methodologies and techniques used for gathering empirical evidence from the ground consistent with the specific theoretical framework. Finally, it presents the results in relation to the processes of construction of the two initiatives on which the case studies are based (i.e. the “C’è Campo” PGS and Ortazzo CSA), their peculiarities of unmaking, and the legacy of these experiences regardless of criticisms and temporary apparent failures in order to present the unmaking as a social process, a movement entailing the action of different actors and groups in a necessary procedural evolution – which cannot be crystallized in and limited to single steps and outcomes.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Capitalism and agriculture

The economic dimension of agriculture, in its connection with capitalism and neoliberalism, has attracted attention since the origins of political economy (Brass, 2014). Marx (1951 [first published 1863], pp. 193–194) argued that the peasant was destined to become an agricultural entrepreneur, and therefore a capitalist, or a wage-earner under other agricultural entrepreneurs, already foreseeing a substantial disappearance of the small farmers who produce to meet their own needs and those of the family. The process of commoditization of labor and land, as highlighted and criticized by Polanyi (2001 [first published 1944]), at best expresses the nature of capitalism itself and yet, precisely in agriculture, it demonstrates its limits as much for liveability (Shiva,

¹ The classical Marxian formula of circulation of capital ($M - C - M'$) refers to the unlimited cycle in which money (M) is transformed into commodities (C), and the conversion of commodities back into money (M) of altered value. For Marx, capital is in the first place an accumulation of money, but it is not just money, it is a relation. The distinction between money and capital derives from the difference in their circulation: money is acquired and used to buy something, as an instrument to facilitate the exchange of commodities (Marx Represented this with formula $C - M - C$, namely Commodity – Money – Commodity) while capital is reintroduced in the economic cycle to produce surplus value.

2013) as for the reproduction of capital itself (Luxemburg, 1968). Furthermore, the impact of capitalism on agriculture is not limited to the purely economic aspects but extends to the knowledge and social organization of agricultural communities (Feola et al., 2015), oriented and shaped as means of value production (Peluso and Lund, 2013). Extractivism, which now seems to be the hallmark of globalized neoliberalism, raises serious doubts as to the sustainability of the very ability to continue producing economic value in the long term (Robinson and Acemoglu, 2012). The urgency of finding alternatives is recognized on multiple levels (Elsen, 2018; Bauhardt, and Harcourt, 2018; Utting, 2018; Irving, and Helin, 2018; Jackson, 2009, among others).

Agriculture is one of the areas that has seen not only the diffusion of capitalism, with the transition from the peasant to the capitalist economy already highlighted, but also of movements of resistance and counteraction (van der Ploeg, 1986) towards real practices of de-commodification of food (Vivero-Pol et al., 2018) and experiments of degrowth and anti-utilitarianism (D’Alisa et al., 2014) as well as different power relations (Johansen, and Chandler, 2015). The agricultural question thus becomes central both to set the ecological transition within the fundamentals of political economy (Dombroski et al., 2018; Gaard, 2015) and to address social justice and livelihood (McGuire, 2017; Mellor, 2018). The movements for food and food sovereignty are primarily aimed at guaranteeing this food security, as discussed as early as 1996 at the World Food Summit although expectations for its achievement currently remain largely low (Vivero-Pol et al., 2018). The failure of states and international organizations to respond to those declarations has led many to join radical social movements that no longer attempt to modify forms of domination and exploitation but seek to generate completely new ones (Day, 2005). The latter also include those practices that are not completely new with respect to neoliberalism but are capable, rather, of unmaking some components of it in order to “make space” for something new. Koretskaya and Feola (2020) have shown how in Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), capitalist, alternative-capitalist and non-capitalist elements coexist, with broad differences in each individual case.

2.2. Unmaking of capitalism

Research about global environmental change is shifting more and more from mere observation of socio-economic and technical solutions to action in support of effective transitional practices (Feola, 2015). In order to understand how to achieve existentially and environmentally sustainable societies, it is useful to consider the current discourses about the ecological and cultural transition in economic, political and cultural spheres with an alliance between the Global North and the Global South (Escobar, 2015). Feola (2015) demonstrates that the concept of “transformation” is a “prominent theme, but no clear conceptual basis was provided for its use” (p.379), leaving space for misunderstanding and manipulation; however, it is always defined as “a process involving the interaction of units at different levels [...] all concepts of transformation recognize that transformative processes are characterized by discontinuities, ruptures, or thresholds, and do not generally proceed smoothly” (p. 381). In this sense, transformation is something that affects the structure of society and organizations, engaging several dimensions, from physical to symbolic both at the individual and the collective level.

According to Elsen (2018), eco-social transformation “will not be the result of an evolutionary societal process. It has to be a reflexive and planned change of nearly all pillars of modern industrial societies: of production, consumption, sociocultural and individual lifestyles” (p. 5), with a re-modelling of economies and societies all around the world both in processes and in sensemaking out of reality. Some scholars have started to point out the difference between transformational adaptation, which means a reactive change trying to maintain as much as possible of the previous order, and eco-social transformation, aimed at redesigning the socio-economic order, including the whole imaginary (Feola, 2015). In this sense, the idea of decolonizing the collective imaginary, as

postulated by Latouche (2009), needs stricter theoretical boundaries. Deconstruction of the imaginary is a tool to create spaces for innovation, change, transition and transformation through “processes of deconstruction, rupture and disarticulation as conditions for rather than consequences of social transformation, and they can be used to inform thinking about the role of unmaking of modern capitalist relations in sustainability transformation beyond capitalism” (Feola et al., 2021, p. 3).

Further insights might be offered by the concept of ‘unmaking’, as “a diverse range of interconnected and multilevel (individual, social, socioecological) processes that are deliberately activated in order to ‘make space’ (temporally, spatially, materially, and/or symbolically) for radical alternatives that are incompatible with dominant modern capitalist configurations” (Feola, 2019, p. 979). Unmaking does not, in and of itself, necessarily mean degrowth, transition or eco-social transformation, it involves first and foremost the demolition somewhere and somehow of capitalistic and neoliberal practices in order to make space for those alternatives called degrowth, transition, and so on. In some cases, in relation to agriculture, unmaking processes may lead to “deliberate refusal and unlearning of development imaginaries [...] Peasants explicitly refuse the dominant development paradigm based on material accumulation by dispossession, violence, the imperative of endless economic growth and profit-seeking, and the reduction of people and nature to commodities” (Feola et al., 2021, p. 9). As previously mentioned, we are proposing to adopt the five propositions offered by Feola (2019) to consider whether CSA and PGS experiences are capable of promoting eco-social transformation. The propositions are.

- “unmaking is a combination of situated processes” (p. 992) able to ‘make space’ in capitalistic societies and economies for a radical alternative in the specific here and now
- “processes of unmaking involve both symbolic and material deconstruction” (p. 992)
- “unmaking is a contradictory personal experience” (p. 992) that needs a personal, inner change
- “unmaking is often hidden but can be used strategically” (p. 992) with a large variety of actions and logics
- “unmaking is generative” (p. 992), it involves not only the interruption of capitalist reproduction but also the intrinsic ability to let something else sprout.

2.3. The concept of empowerment

The term *empowerment* comes from the verb *to empower*. The concept of “power” to which it refers is not dominating or imposing-oppressive. Rather, it is the power to open up new possibilities and opportunities to others and oneself (Francescato et al., 2007). It is a generative and constructive power that makes people and groups able “to do something”. Rappaport (1987) defines empowerment as a process by which individuals, organizations and communities gain greater control over issues that are crucial to them. Recently this concept has been used in various disciplines: from political science to educational sciences, from management to the psychology of work and organizations, from medicine to community psychology (Amerio, 2000; Converso and Piccardo, 2003; Griffin, 1991; McWhirter, 1991; Thomas and Velthouse, 1990).

The best-known theoretical framework is certainly the one developed by the psychologist Marc Zimmerman. He defines empowerment as a process operating at three levels: the individual level, when dealing

with personal variables; the organizational level, when dealing with mobilizing resources; and the community level, when dealing with socio-political structures and social change (Zimmerman, 2000). Underlying this model are three main elements that define empowerment: *control* (the ability to influence decisions), *critical awareness* (understanding power structures), and *participation* (individual and group activation). These three aspects are crucially important for citizens’ capacitation and activation, especially if related to the idea of Community of Practice (CoP) as postulated by Wenger (1998), where learning practice is understood as both an experiential and a social process [Lipari, 2010] in which new meanings are negotiated within a community characterized by strong relational interactions [Lave and Wenger, 2006]. Interweaving these two visions, what emerges is how the transformative character of empowerment connects with the idea of CoP defined as a social place in which shared identities, objectives, and practices are developed. If the CoP refers to actions and processes, empowerment is what follows on a psychological level within the CoP, where the members, once the *praxis* has been built, gain awareness of their ability to make an impact on a transformative level.

The origin of the concept of empowerment dates back to the era of the large-scale protests of the 20th century, especially widespread in the US, where many individuals took action concerning civil and social rights, such as the anti-racist, feminist and LGBTQI + movements that sparked the great protests of the Sixties and Seventies (Amerio, 2000). At that time, as well as today, being part of the struggle made individuals aware that they could change the world and self-determine. Individual and collective capacity is built step-by-step within the spaces inhabited by resistant communities, where skills and abilities are acquired in order to feel politically incisive. This enabling aspect is established through the definition of practices, common objectives and mutual help and listening. To do this, however, shared times and places are needed to create relationships of learning and community capacity-building. Often, the activities put in place to achieve these objectives range from simple requests for information to conflict management, and active participation in the cultural and recreational life of the CoP. This dynamic is useful to understand the large-scale mobilizations of the 20th century, but also to explore in more detail and identify points of connection between the most recent experiences that have denounced the ecological and social risks of the neoliberal economy.

Many scholars have devoted themselves to the analysis and description of movement experiences culturally linked to the mobilization for Global Justice, showing how critical (political) consumption practices were then the basis for building sustainable communities and what Forno and Graziano (2014) defined as Sustainable Community Movement Organizations (SCMOs), an umbrella definition that covers experiences such as Fair Trade, the Degrowth Movement, Alternative Food Networks, Ecovillages, and so on. In Italy, the most extensively studied SCMOs have been the Solidarity Purchasing Groups (in Italian “Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale”, GASs) which, since the mid-Nineties, have progressively forged relationships with producers and ethical distributors at the local level, creating an economic-cultural substratum that has led to the construction of Solidarity Economy Networks and Districts, Biodistricts and, in some cases, local food policies (Dansero, E. et al., 2019). What unites SCMOs is the shared practice of rethinking the world starting from consumption practices, from rethinking personal lifestyles and from the resignification of the role of consumers (no longer passive acceptors but active in co-producing values), including through self-production and alternative presumption practices. The autonomy

that comes from self-production and self-sufficiency, from the interaction between producers and consumers, are examples of how an individual acquires autonomy through “do-it-yourself” practices.

The reappropriation of knowledge and individual and collective practices create and strengthen social and relational bonds between the participants. At the same time, it makes individuals more “capacitated”, self-determined, and therefore, emancipated (Rivera-Ferre et al., 2021). This is the case for the so-called CSA alliances based on co-construction of trust between producers-consumers and the capacitation of consumers concerning the complexities of the productive activity. The same reasoning can be applied to *peer-to-peer* certifications such as Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGSs). These instruments, adopted primarily by socio-political and economic initiatives more exposed to neoliberal aggression, clearly express the pedagogical and transformative character aimed at making smaller producers “stronger”. Looking at the best-known case study, namely the Brazilian Rede Ecológica (Rover et al., 2017; Niederle et al., 2020), since its establishment it has been able to organize farmers into groups and has developed a legally recognized PGS (Loconto and e Hatanaka, 2018) that allows producers to certify themselves with less bureaucracy and lower costs. Since its beginning, Ecológica has developed an aggregating and capacitating methodology, where producers supervise the work of peers within the same territory and where even consumers themselves could participate in the control process, thus becoming a CoP that aims to build a sustainable value chain that protects everyone’s work. However, consumers have been progressively excluded from control at the same time as the institutionalization of the PGS (Lemeilleur et al., 2022). The interest in doing well is collective and learning is likewise collective. The legally recognized official status of the PGS makes Brazil an international reference (Sacchi et al., 2015), as well as India, Pacific Territories and Central-South America (IFOAM, 2023),² because it is a tool capable of protecting and promoting the agroecological activity of small producers and of strengthening their autonomy (Montefrío and Johnson 2019). On the other hand, Nature et Progrès continues to integrate them but without the endorsement of public authorities as previous experiences indicate (Niederle et al., 2020). Similar examples of PGSs (Katto-Andrighetto et al., 2019) have now been established all over the world, despite the lack of official recognition by local authorities. In Italy, for example, thanks to solidarity economy networks such as Campi Aperti (Alberio e Moralli, 2021) and Genuino Clandestino (La Trecchia, 2020), there are several PGSs already in place (Vittori, 2018). In response to this progressive diffusion, the European Union has recently welcomed the requests of stakeholders and international organizations such as the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) and the European Organic Certifiers Council (EOCC), opening the possibility for the establishment of group certifications. However, it is difficult to apply the latter to the PGS framework, because group certification imposes collective sales, a limit on the size of producers and an internal control system with a single person in charge and remains within a purely liberal logic with the re-inspection of an independent certification body.³

3. Participatory action research and data collection for the “C’è Campo” PGS (Lombardy) and the Ortazzo CSA (Trentino Alto-Adige) experiences

This article stems from the dialogue between two research projects, one on PGS and the other on CSA. In both cases, the participatory action research approach has been adopted. This methodology is based on the combination of theoretical knowledge and the generation of theoretical

knowledge with practice in the field and, consequently, on the interaction of academic researchers and activists or experts (von Unger, 2014).

The action research process is therefore democratic and horizontal. It involves the co-construction of theoretical and practical empirical knowledge, rejecting the notion of objectivity and instead valuing an explicit and reflective political and social engagement towards a transformative practice of research as a practice of radical democracy for the promotion of social justice and ecosystem balance (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003). As Bradbury-Huang clearly specified (2010; p. 93), “action research represents a transformative orientation to knowledge creation in that action researchers seek to take knowledge production beyond the gate-keeping of professional knowledge makers”. Starting from the increasing awareness of how modern societies and economies are destructive to the biophysical environment, more and more scholars, including in the social sciences, have adopted a more active approach to research, considering that:

There are two fundamental challenges to which the social sciences are called: on the one hand to help understand human–environment interactions, particularly the persistence and change of human activities that are the cause of, or emerge in response to, environmental change, and, on the other hand, to contribute to identifying transformative human responses to GEC [global environmental change] (Feola, 2015, p. 384).

Action research therefore seems to share the consideration of how the social sciences, when applying rigorous methods for the production of factual knowledge, are not:

designed to lead to collaborative action of the kinds now urgently needed. Because collaborative action tends to be an afterthought of conventional knowledge creation, radical shifts are needed to encourage production of more inclusive knowledge forms capable also of supporting desired action and change (Bradbury et al., 2019, p. 5).

Moreover, participation allows agroecology-based assumptions and paradigms to be put into practice (Cuéllar-Padilla and Calle-Collado, 2011). As has already been proved, Participatory Action Research (PAR) seems to be suitable for constructing a ‘commons’ (Poteete et al., 2010; Lemeilleur and Sermage, 2020). This is even more true when commons are linked to agroecology. Méndez et al. (2015, 2017) underline the convergence of PAR and principles of agroecology, in as much as both aim for empowerment, embodiment and adaptation to local environment, and take into account multiple scales and long-term benefits, as well as the heterogeneity of actors and shared knowledge. Nevertheless, PAR is useful for opening up to learning on the ground, looking back, looking forward, encouraging self-awareness and self-reflection, stimulating peer-to-peer work and fostering relationality (Van v an Dyck et al., 2019). Consistently with this, since the experiences considered are collective and grassroots processes, as well as innovative processes, also in terms of “novelty”, the choice of the PAR method derives from the fact that the projects also saw the universities themselves as partners, designers and activators of innovation. In the research presented in this study, the rigid application of the qualitative methods of data collection typically used in the sociological sciences has been put at the service of the process of establishing a PGS and a CSA project, negotiating with co-researchers, non-academic participants in the research, subjects, and non-objects of the research, questions and themes to be investigated, to arrive at the co-construction of knowledge useful to the experiences in progress.

The theoretical framework proposed above is therefore not restricted to the experience conducted and the clues useful to clarify some issues will therefore be extracted from the collected materials, putting the two cases in a dialogical relationship. In the course of analyzing the data collected through the two projects, we will try to answer the following research questions: Are the CSA and PGS experiences consistent with the propositions offered by Feola (2019)? How does the empowerment process relate to the unmaking and transformative capacity of the CSA and PGS models? From a strictly methodological point of view, the two

² PGSs Worldwide: https://pgs.ifoam.bio/pgs_groups/map last access 04.02.2023.

³ <https://www.ifoam.bio/our-work/how/standards-certification/internal-control> last access 04.02.2023.

investigations have been structured on participant observation throughout the construction process of the PGS and the CSA project, supporting the process with individual interviews, focus groups, moments of shared reflection and online questionnaires. The researchers participated from the early beginning of each case study, taking field-notes, helping the personnel involved toward self-reflexivity, increasing self-awareness, and encouraging peer-to-peer work and negotiation. The decision to compare and use these two initiatives as key examples to analyze in order to bring to the surface the concepts of unmaking and empowerment is closely related to their innovative potential for agroecology development, because Lombardy and Trentino are both socio-spatial contexts strongly characterized by conventional agriculture, agro-business and competitiveness.

For the PGS research, overall.

- The research group consisted of two researchers (a social psychologist and a social pedagogist), who followed the construction process internally, and two more researchers (an economist and a sociologist) who helped externally to review field-notes and observations, to assess the process and coordinate the research project⁴;
- Overall: 14 producers and 14 consumers/experts (technicians) from the Bergamo Local committee; 8 producers and 12 consumers/experts (technicians) from the Como Local committee.
- Monitoring of the construction process in all its phases of establishment was carried out. It began during the design of the path (from May 2014) and the definition of the roles and actions, and then continued with the participant observation of the process in place from January 2015 to March 2016 in all its actions (starting up, technical training, establishment of local committees, visits to producers, conclusion, and awarding of certifications).
- 3 Focus Groups were held – one with the Bergamo local committee (FG_1), one with the Como equivalent (FG_2), and one with the PGS interterritorial coordination body (FG_3) – at the end of the visits and shortly before the conclusion of the process (March 2016). The FGs were audio-recorded, transcribed and analyzed thematically.
- The observations described below are therefore the result of the combination of the participant observation, FGs and the materials produced by the interterritorial coordination body to set up the process. Thanks to what was collected during different moments in the two observed provinces, such as local committee meetings, visits to farmers, training and interterritorial coordination, it was possible to find similarities also with the other territories involved in the project and add new considerations making the reflections richer and more complete.
- Finally, together with the participants, the research group disclosed the research report (Salvi and Vittori, 2017) containing the observations regarding what emerged along the process among both local committees and interterritorial coordination bodies. This step was the self-reflection activity that allowed us to construct better future steps for the PGS path and to plan the experience's horizon.

For the CSA research, overall:

The researcher organized all the data-collection activities (interviews and focus groups) involving the co-researchers in the definition of aims, methods, questions, and themes. The role of the researcher was similar to that of a facilitator in a process of reflection upon the experience, guiding the group in understanding what was going on, how and why. In particular, data collection involved the following.

- one researcher took part in the PAR, co-constructing the research plan with CSA members, participating in all phases and meetings

- the Ortazzo CSA group in the period 2018–2020 consisted of 10 families and 3 farmers living and operating in the area of Alta Val-sugana (province of Trento - Italy)
- 22 semi-structured interviews were held with the co-researchers at three different times: 8 at the end of the first year of work (2018), 10 at the end of the second year (2019), and 4 at the beginning of the third year (2020).
- 28 online questionnaires with closed and open questions were distributed at the end of the second year (2019).
- 4 Focus Groups were held, three at the end of the second year (one with consumers only, one with producers only and one with the two combined groups) and one at the beginning of the third year (2020).
- Participant observation was carried out in 12 meetings during the two-and-a-half years of action research in support of the process.

The data and findings emerging from the research have been analyzed following the Thematic Analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2012), highlighting everything connected to the common construction of the market, quality, empowerment and acquisition of knowledge, and practices of unmaking.

4. Results

4.1. The “C`è Campo” PGS construction process

Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) are officially defined as follows:

PGSs are locally focused quality assurance systems. They certify producers based on active participation of stakeholders and are built on a foundation of trust, social networks and knowledge exchange. (IFOAM, 2008).

The object of this case study, the “C`è Campo” PGS, is one of the few Italian PGSs registered in the official IFOAM database.⁵ The first effort to set up a PGS in Lombardy (Northern Italy) began in 2012 with the aim of creating a new form of guarantee ‘from below’, created and modulated for and by the actors involved, capable of strengthening relations between producers and consumers, to eventually reinforce the short food supply chain by making it more respectful of the land, the economy and the local communities. The first attempt was led by the Solidarity Economy Districts (DESSs) of Como, Varese and Monza-Brianza. Each territory formed a local committee, within which dozens of people (consumers, producers, and technicians/agronomists) deepened their technical knowledge of organic production and shared ethical values and principles and went on to define experimental protocols that resulted in the creation of the first PGS in Lombardy. The project was then relaunched thanks to a public grant.⁶ In 2015, in fact, the PGS expanded, involving the territories of Bergamo, Milan, Valtellina (Sondrio) and Valcamonica (Brescia). AIAB Lombardia⁷ was the project leader and main technical partner, giving assistance to the local committees engaged in the project. Thus, all these actors started this new PGS in order to: strengthen local food networks and increase individual and collective participation; improve the local communities’ resilience; and eventually consolidate and raise awareness at the regional level around PGSs’ practices, in order to strengthen bottom-up practices (Signori and Vittori, forthcoming). At the end of the public grant (2016), the project was transferred to the newly-established RES Lombardia

⁵ https://pgs.ifoam.bio/pgs_groups/77 last access 07/03/2022.

⁶ Fondazione Cariplo.

⁷ See The Italian Association of Organic Agriculture. Official website: <https://www.aiablombardia.it/> last access 03/03/2022.

⁴ Prof. XXX from the University of Bergamo and Prof. XXX from the University of Trento.

(Solidarity Economy Network, in Italian “Rete di Economia Solidale”).⁸ Then, the volunteers of the local committees continued to meet to redefine the projects. To better understand the organization of “C’è Campo” PGS, the table below summarizes its structure.

4.1.1. Unmaking in the PGS

The PGS construction in Lombardy has highlighted some significant pedagogical, transformative and innovative aspects (Signori and Vittori, forthcoming). Taking up the concept of *unmaking*, it is considered a process of deconstruction of elements strongly linked to the neoliberal system. Feola (2015) defines unmaking processes as a combination of located processes capable of opening spaces that include material and symbolic deconstructive actions that require personal change, where the unmaking is something that is often hidden, contradictory and generative. The PGS framework itself can definitely be examined under the lens of unmaking, as peer certification tends to redesign the socio-economic order behind food quality assurance and the ‘fiscal’ control that structure conventional third-party certification body. As Lemeilleur et al. (2022) stated:

Participatory certification represents a real paradigm shift compared to third-party certification because, contrary to the latter, it believes that proximity, regular exchanges to improve practices and social control guarantee the effectiveness of compliance with the standard (Lemeilleur et al., 2022, p. 932).

The participatory approach and stakeholder involvement that define the PGS exactly reflect Feola’s definition (2015). Specifically, the “C’è Campo” PGS had all these features, although some moments in its construction process, such as the visits to the farmers, highlighted the deconstructive and generative potential more than others.

As mentioned above, the project started from a trial that had previously involved three Provinces of Lombardy. Among these, the Como local committee played the role of implicit project leader since the person who coordinated the project in the first trial came from that territory. However, in the second process this same person played the role of de facto coordinator (as a member of AIAB Lombardia). This subjectivation generated a certain degree of subjugation on the part of the other participants. This person facilitated the flow of information and knowledge and, since he had been a local animator in Como in 2012, he made it easy to communicate with the other local facilitators. The interterritorial discussions were mostly related to updates between local committees concerning the project phases, while the critical issues of the territories tended to be discussed and explored on a case-by-case basis directly by the coordinator elsewhere. This occurred especially at the beginning, where it was necessary to train and educate the PGS community on the PGS practice, but also on its nature and quintessence. Therefore, some technical and “socio-political” training meetings were organized. The first meeting was aimed at making known the main experiences of PGS and their functioning, as well as to stimulate the actors to be engaged and possibly involve other people. The second meeting was organized to learn about the visits – previously designed during the first trial – and to define methods and update the protocols. Those who structured the training underlined the difficulty in conveying the importance of PGSS, especially as the producers were accustomed to being third-party certified.

What is difficult to understand, and what we have not yet managed to get through, is the importance of a second-party guarantee. Here we are used to being certified by “third bodies”, which is different from the countries of South America. It is more a problem of training

than of education. [FG_3 Technician / AIAB Interterritorial coordination]

Initially, there were also strong doubts about who were the recipients of these training meetings (local facilitators, participants in local committees, or all those interested).

I expected the training to be much more technical. I found it very confusing and impractical. I expected it to be easier but technical at the same time. Who was meant to be trained? If it had been an open discussion to inform, it could have been fine. But for the people involved it was not effective. The producers were disoriented. [FG_1 Technician / Bergamo Local committee]

However, it was clarified that the first meetings were addressed to those interested in the project also because of the possible participation in local committees, even though the training was still perceived as “too technical”

The AIAB coordinator then organized dedicated meetings to better convey the necessary skills for moving on to next steps, namely the establishment of local committees, the visits to the farmers, and the awarding of certification. Turning to the practice of the visit, and with the intensification of relations between the actors, the transformative and community character of the PGS emerged more strongly. The visits were considered by the participants functional with respect to the objective of carrying out a project that was transformative and deconstructive. Compared to the “technical” training, the visit gave the impression that everything had taken place in a more flexible, elastic and welcoming way. Despite some mistrust in the control methods experienced as not very rigorous, the visit was the moment of pure relational and competitive exchange. Friendships and commercial collaborations were also born between some producers (Signori and Vittori, forthcoming).

It highlights the generative dimension of unmaking in the PGS construction process. Moreover, for consumers and producers, it was a moment of peer training and mutual learning and exchange between people with different knowledge and languages.

The visits are very positive since you create the relationship. You feel alive, you have the feeling that something is happening [FG_3 Bergamo Local facilitator].

I participated less, but I was interested even if I was already a certified organic producer. Although I had a bit of a thought about getting out of organic certification and doing something for the territory. The outlet (catchment area) is perhaps different from the Corto Circuito Guarantee Committee. For the producer, it is interesting to visit for the exchange of ideas, but also for the GAS members (consumers) to realize how organic food is produced, where it is produced, and what factors affect the price. Less value is placed on control. One can also become aware of the differences in company organization. Being a farm or a cooperative entails different choices and management methods. Understanding these diversities, for us both (producers and consumers), can be very important. [FG_2 Producer 2 / Como Local committee].

The pedagogical roots of the visit show the hidden dimension of unmaking. Most of the participants learned from each other. But there were some complexities. While on the one hand the visit was the convivial moment (Illich, 1973) and the concrete step of collective

⁸ <https://economiasolidale.net/res-lombardia> last access 07/03/2022. Currently, most of the PGS C’è Campo partners have launched the RIES Italian Network of Solidarity Economy, in Italian ‘Rete Italiana di Economia Solidale’. For more details, see: <https://rete-ries.it/i-soci-ries/> last access 16/02/2023.

unmaking of capitalism combining situated processes and knowledge, and symbolic and material deconstruction (Feola 2019, p. 992), on the other hand the adoption of un-convivial tools did not really create a friendly atmosphere. During the visit, too much time was spent on filling in reports, taking time away from the essential relational exchange and mutual learning.

It wouldn't have taken long to make it (the sheet) more schematic and with less room for interpretation. I can go and write whatever I like. It was inadequate. Checklists are needed to guide those who lead the visit, because those who fill in the sheets make the difference. We need more rigor. For example, with respect to business documents, I would like to find them, then I can decide whether to check them or not. "I trust you but let me see that your activity can be trusted". The human component is so strong that you don't know how to tackle it. [FG_1 Technician / Bergamo Local committee]

From the FG organized with the Bergamo and Como local committees, there emerged the need to have the visit materials in advance (already filled in), in such a way as to make the shared moment more like an update and a verification, rather than "an inspection".

Concerning the visit, it is useful for the producer to fill in the visit sheet beforehand. That way, it becomes a verification and an update, because during the visit the technician reads it (the manual) and notes the changes. The rest is the practical visit [FG_2 Producer 2 / Como Local committee]

This highlights the desire to deconstruct the "suspicion and police control" inherent in third-party certification systems. The choice to fill in the visit sheet in advance contrasts with the common idea of certifying practices as something that proves the authenticity of organic farming through control by a third-party certification body. What we are seeing here instead is the will of the PGS to strengthen the trust-based relationship, supervise the process in a community manner, and co-construct a practice that can be improved by the PGS community itself in the present and the long-term future (Home et al., 2017).

The visit is certainly a rewarding moment, a concrete and relational moment, where it is clear that the reasons for this are more relational than technical. There is no third-party certifying, but a network. It's very difficult to understand in depth what you are doing. You are relying on a trust-based relationship. It might take longer. [FG_3 Technician / AIAB Interterritorial coordination]

The proposal to rethink the structuring of the visiting group also emerged. The project provided for the participation in the visit of a group made up of a producer, a consumer and a technician from another territory. This choice was justified by the idea of ensuring greater objectivity, but it was proposed that the members of the visiting group should be consumers and technicians from the same territory as the producers being visited.

Physical distance is sometimes an obstacle. The GAS member (consumer) can say that he might be more interested in visiting the producers of his own territory, the producers from whom he buys his

food, although it is still interesting. [FG_2 consumer 2 / Como Local committee]

This alternative would further the relationship of trust between consumers and producers as GAS members (consumers), with their own needs, would have a chance to get to know and visit the producers. It could bring them much closer together (Home et al., 2017). But when it comes to the technicians – given their impartial position – the assembly participants consider them objective in visiting a producer from the same territory as theirs. This vision suggests that, even if the PGS is presented as a process of exchange of knowledge and trust to give rise to new proactive relationships and resilience, the idea of control is present albeit not very explicitly, confirming that unmaking can start as a contradictory personal experience (Feola 2019, p. 992) that needs a personal, inner change. Finally, it was proposed that visits should take place during the winter, a time of the year that is certainly freer and less limiting for producers and other stakeholders, but in some cases, it would not allow visiting groups in some cases to see the full production activity to be seen. Overall, the "innovative" scope of the process was recognized, without neglecting the complexities, as was voiced by several participants in the various FGs.

We have a good process in hand. I believe that if we join forces we could do much more. For the visits, for example, I agree with Carla [agronomist], we needed a visit sheet with a checklist, etc. The method and organization were lacking [...] You have to believe in these things. Of course, our group also had problems. There is a need to define who does what. We need to make the group a little more structured. Organization is crucial. When money is involved, you have to be careful. In general, there is a good nucleus that can be effectively developed, especially with the support and collaboration of the Como Committee. [FG_1 Bergamo Local facilitator]

The hardest thing was to follow a process made up of many separate pieces that did not follow a chronological order. There are so many separate parts to the project. We were too optimistic. Difficulty networking and coordinating. For the website, for example, this was a big problem. [FG_3 Chief Communication Officer / AIAB Interterritorial coordination]

Bergamo was a nice surprise. They have a lot of people, different farmers' markets, and a lot of producers. It had contributed mainly to including new producers in the committee. Perhaps greater support was needed in the various phases of the process [...] You also understand the critical issues, the bond that is created. For me, always going back to take stock of the situation from one day to the next is a bit difficult. During the work in progress, I discovered that I needed help (Como Facilitator helped him) [...] In general, it was difficult to hold the reins of the project, not just doing this in my own life. It was a bit complicated. [FG_3 Project Leader / AIAB Interterritorial coordination]

A total of 16 visits were carried out across all the PGS areas (Salvi and Vittori, 2017). As for the territories specifically observed, the Bergamo committee carried out 5 visits plus an "experimental" visit to train the visiting group in the practice. As for the Como committee, 6 visits were

Table 1
PGS partners. Source: Salvi and Vittori (2017).

TYPE OF BODY	SUBJECTS	FUNCTION AND ACTIVITIES
PROJECT LEADER PARTNERS	AIAB Lombardia L'isola che c'è (COMO) Mercato & Cittadinanza (BERGAMO) DES Brianza (MONZA) DESVA (VARESE) DESR PASM (MILAN) C'è una valle (SONDRIO) Valcamonica bio (BRESCIA)	FUNCTION: Technical and administrative project coordination FUNCTION: Cultural facilitation, producers' and local volunteers' engagement
LOCAL COMMITTEE	1 for each territory involved (province) Actors involved: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Producers • Consumers • Technicians (agronomist/organic farming experts) 	FUNCTION: PGS Governance Activities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supply chain and case selection • Procedures and protocols systematization • Visits to producers • Promotional events
LOCAL FACILITATORS	1 for each territory involved (province) Actors involved: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitators chosen by their local committee • Supported by producers and consumers 	FUNCTION: Technical-operational Activities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Processes animation • Local committee facilitation • Connection between the local committee and the territory • Connection between other local committees
AIAB INTERTERRITORIAL COORDINATION BODY	Actors involved: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local facilitators • AIAB and L'isola che c'è (Como committee), chief communication officer, project administration 	FUNCTION: Methodological support and operational coordination Activities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project coordination • Inter-territorial facilitation • Methodological consulting • Administrative project management
GROUP VISITS	Actors: At least 1 producer (of the same type as the host producer), 1 technician (agronomist, organic farming expert) and 1 consumer (GAS member or consumer). All coming from a different territory to that of the host producer.	FUNCTION: To carry out visits to the farmers Activities: The groups fill in the visit sheet, which is designed according to the established protocols and criteria selected by the local committee. Then, a Guarantee Commission (Panel) evaluates the results that emerged from the visit.
GUARANTEE PANEL	Chaired by AIAB Lombardia (Project Leader). Its members are the producers, consumers and technicians elected by the Project General Assembly of the PGS.	Providing the PGS certification. It was constituted after the Project General Assembly of March 13, 2016. It awarded PGS certifications to those farmers that have been visited and evaluated after the two meetings took place on 5 November (2015) and 7 March (2016).

carried out (2 to maintain those producers already involved in the 2012 project).

Overall, 5 farmers from Bergamo and 6 farmers from Como obtained the certification. To understand the selected criteria to grant PGS certification, we have edited an infographic that summarizes the criteria for awarding certification for plant production and animal breeding.⁹ (see Table 1, Fig. 1).

In the final meetings, the economic and social sustainability of the PGS, its diffusion and its dissemination were discussed, and many complexities emerged.

Setting up a complex, interconnected network was a strenuous job. It soon emerged that these projects are too appealing and people are too immediately fascinated by them. But with hindsight, I would conduct a pilot project with two producers per territory for a full tour. Perhaps, after this initial experiment, I would have widened the experience to others. That would perhaps have made it easier for everyone. What needs to be built is an organizational and logistical but also a methodological network. PGS are exchanges of relationships. It is difficult to see the whole of the solidarity economy system involved. For several reasons it is easier to carry out these projects in countries of the Global South. [FG_3 Technician / AIAB Interterritorial coordination]

This issue has raised doubts, uncertainties and fears regarding the continuation of the project, given that from the experience of the previous project only in a few situations has it been possible to proceed in



Fig. 1. PGS in Lombardy. Originally developed by the authors.

⁹ See PGS 2015 22/03/2015.

the absence of funding (and that is what eventually happened).

Finally, some proposals received from the local committees were presented at the final assembly. We have systematized and summarized them in the table below¹⁰. In spite of these suggestions, the project has now run aground. The website is still active, but the solidarity economy network in Lombardy is going through an internal reorganization, due to the recent constitution of the Italian Solidarity Economy Network (RIES)¹¹ which may be able to get back to this project.

GENERAL ASSEMBLY - FINAL REPORT	
PROPOSALS PUT FORWARD DURING THE FG AND REPORTED TO THE ASSEMBLY	During the training stage, a pilot visit should be organized. Visit group: only producers from other territories. Introduce guarantee levels. Review the visit manual (checklist, second visit ...) Work on proposing a regional law on PGS.
PROPOSALS PUT FORWARD BY RESEARCHERS AS META REFLECTION	1. How to avoid the process from being experienced as determined from above, losing its meaning and effectiveness? Pay attention to the methodology of involvement: – what roles? – what times? See <i>Ecovida Experience</i> (Rover et al., 2017) 2. What other actors to interact with?
WORK PROPOSALS OF THE AIAB COORDINATION AND LOCAL COMMITTEES	PRIORITY: Define a federative plan of PGS sustainability for its continuity. 1. PGS path consolidation 2. Promotion of the “C’è Campo” brand 3. Redefinition of the territories involved and of the external partners (AIAB?) 4. Co-participation of each territory in the territorial coordination (engagement of each territory): – Organization of visits – Collection and insertion of data in the portal and site update – ‘Widespread’ coordination at regional level 5. Definition of the necessary resources and retrieval methods 6. Economic management at centralized or territorial level

4.1.2. Empowerment in the PGS community of practice

The study has found that the actors from the local food networks involved (including producers) are guided by value motivations and the desire for interaction, exchange and relationship. The vision of the future is in fact positive because it is influenced not so much by the idea of maximizing profit but by factors such as care for and resilience of territories and social rootedness (Migliore et al., 2014). The main change that producers reported as a result of being part of these circuits is similar to that previously identified by GAS members (consumers) in Lombardy (Forno et al., 2013): listening and cooperation with other actors (producers and consumers) increases. Relationship is therefore highlighted as the main characteristic experienced in both its richness and its complexity. In this respect, the PGS takes up the theme of interaction and exchange, and that is why the same producers hired in the FG and interested in the PGS recognize an added value compared to third-party certification (Cuéllar-Padilla and Ganuza-Fernández, 2018; Cifuentes et al., 2018).

In the “C’è Campo” PGS there are some critical issues, among them the effort to involve producers and consumers proactively in facilitating their active engagement throughout the process. A virtuous circuit to allow the activation of new resources to support the project

¹⁰ See the General Assembly, final report 13/03/2016 (Signori and Vittori, forthcoming).

¹¹ <https://economiasolidale.net/ries> last access 16/03/20.

economically and socially was not created. The perspective of control remained (visit groups composed of producers and consumers from different territories). Moreover, the involvement of some actors, such as local institutions, was not considered. The interaction between producers from the same territory could indeed be a useful tool to consider for the creation of groups of farmers able to activate paths of active engagement and cooperation at the local level, or rather force the EU to include PGS within the organic agriculture regulatory framework.

Moreover, the emancipatory potential of the PGS has been stifled by a cultural heritage deriving from the all-encompassing capitalist socio-cultural structure that has ended up affecting this aspect as well (Mayo, 2015). Instead of encouraging peer-education, involving individual and collective empowerment, a more materialistic and productivist approach has been maintained, focusing on “doing to obtain” the certification and not so much on “doing together” to create the certification. Due to this ‘short circuit’, the process is perceived as top-down rather than bottom-up (Signori and Vittori, forthcoming). However, the radical innovation introduced among these alternative food networks has prompted the local solidarity economy network to set up the regional solidarity network in Lombardy (RES Lombardia) first, and then Italy’s national solidarity network (Rete Italiana Economia Solidale).

Being a de facto “closed” circuit, a community could allow each of the participants to identify themselves in a certain shared value system (Pratt and Luetchford, 2014), and we are sure that the shared values were theoretically there. However, it has not been possible to bring theory and practice into dialogue. Much of the process has been experienced as rigid and bureaucratic. The learning context, the fundamental pedagogical setting in the processes of self-determination (Reeve, 2002) was not adequately prepared and, perhaps, there was not even the awareness of triggering a need deriving from a situation of disadvantage/ domination/ oppression (Freire, 1975). However, the transfer of knowledge has been partially accomplished as demonstrated by the practical dimension of PGS, this being one of its most important intrinsic features. Most of the participants have learnt something unknown to them before, and knowing and meeting people from other territories has increased their knowledge. Nevertheless, as previously described, the PGS was generative in the sense of strengthening human and friendly relationships between participants, especially among producers. Indeed, some of them have translated their mutual esteem into strong ties and commercial collaborations, going further than the competitive framework that typically characterizes the capitalist system, even at the micro-level.

Therefore, even though there are some critical shortcomings emerging from the analysis, it is possible to say that the common effort to set up the PGS community of practices has empowered at least some of the participants. It has also pushed the local committee to move forward in building inter-regional projects oriented towards spreading and disseminating solidarity economy practices, such as PGS projects.

4.2. The Ortazzo CSA construction process

The community-supported agriculture model represents “a direct partnership based on the human relationship between people and one or more producers, whereby the risks, responsibilities and benefits of agriculture are shared, through a long-term binding agreement” (Declaration of Ostrava, 2017). In Italy this model has found a specific application in cooperatives where consumers are in effect agricultural entrepreneurs, financing the coverage of costs at the beginning of the year and redistributing the entire harvest in equal parts (Piccoli et al., 2021). In some cases, the division of expenses takes place on the basis of a bidding system in which each participant can offer, anonymously, more or less than the average cost, according to their economic conditions and jointly offering a clear contradiction to the utilitarianism that forms the basis of neoliberalism (Orsini, 2006). The principles of the Italian CSA are explained on the website of the national network (www.

reteitalianacsa.it).

- 1) Collective planning of choices (what and how to produce)
- 2) Pre-financing of costs by shareholders (advance payments)
- 3) Sharing of risk (shareholders are not refunded if something goes wrong)
- 4) Elimination of price concept (shareholders don't pay for the share, they cover costs)
- 5) Redistribution of benefits among all members (if the season is good, shareholders benefit from it)

Using the example offered by Arvaia (www.arvaia.it), the largest and among the first CSAs in Italy, in 2018 some members of the Ortazzo Solidarity Purchase Group (GAS), based in Valsugana, in the Province of Trento, started working on this project. The proposal came from a couple of farmers, already GAS suppliers, who had learned about the CSA model from a colleague. Subsequently they talked about it with Ortazzo GAS consumers, including one of the authors of this article, who was starting her doctoral research at the time. From this coincidence, the idea arose of combining academic research and the practical development of a CSA experiment. The research has thus become a participatory action research at the service of the ongoing process, with the typical tools of social research described in the methodology.

The Ortazzo CSA started as an informal pact between a group of GAS families and three producers who were already suppliers of the GAS itself. In the first year (2018) it was simply a mutual observation and discussion on the operational form to be given to the CSA. In the second year (2019) a pre-order was made with a moral commitment to purchase by consumers. In 2020, a deposit of 100 euros was added to the pre-order to suggest a commitment to purchase, and in 2021 a pre-financing was made equal to at least 30% of the pre-order value. Looking at the process in a detached and rigorous way, we can say that the Ortazzo CSA met the criteria to be considered a full CSA only partially and slowly. However, right from the start this experience was meant to be an experiment, without claiming to fulfill all the standards of a CSA. Perhaps because of this intrinsic weakness, the experience was suspended at the beginning of 2022, after four years of attempts and extreme difficulty in building a real community around agriculture. Members are still reflecting on and discussing whether to abandon completely the idea of establishing a full CSA or to take it up again in 2024. One major issue is the number of shareholders, since the very limited amount of goods involved does not allow the CSA to be sustainable from an economic point of view.

4.2.1. Unmaking in the Ortazzo CSA

Taking up the assumptions proposed by Feola (2019) on unmaking as a situated, generative, internally contradictory process on a personal level, which involves both a symbolic and material deconstruction, and which, although often hidden, has a strategic dimension, let us now try to identify these characteristics in the Ortazzo experience.

The situated nature of this experiences is clear, it takes place in Alta Valsugana, within a group of solidarity purchasing willing to take a step forward in supporting local farmers because

I cannot imagine a community without agriculture. It makes life authentic, not an artificial, 'plastic' life [Interview n. 8/2018].

In the Ortazzo CSA there is this will to base relationships on mutual trust both among consumers and, above all, between consumers and producers, as already widely documented in other studies on alternative food networks (Corsi et al., 2018). This is modelled on identifying the need to remain anchored to the social and human context in which it takes place and its being located in the here and now:

a group of people who trust each other, who entrust to a group, to one or more producers, what they want to eat and the cultivation of

what they want to eat just by trusting them; conversely, producers too must have confidence in consumers, in making their business sustainable [interview no. 1/2019].

We find that, in principle, the choice to be part of a CSA is based on the search for an alternative practice (White, 2013), which therefore tends to materially deconstruct capitalism, but which at the same time is supportive and potentially generative in terms of social justice and livelihood (McGuire, 2017; Mellor, 2018).

The choice [to set up a CSA] there is therefore based on the desire to imagine and practice a different production system and economic system in general, which envisages an exit from the market and therefore a departure from the vision of the price of food as the only significant value [Minutes of the national meeting of the CSA 2018].

CSA seems to be linked to the attempt to deconstruct materially and symbolically the liberal economic order with its principles. In fact, we find that the will to free food from the logic of the market emerges from the interviews, going beyond commodification and approaching an ideal of food as a common (Vivero-Pol et al., 2018):

Food is one of the most blackmailable goods, those who buy it can blackmail those who produce it because if the buyer sets a price that can be even lower than the cost of producing the goods but gives them the power to blackmail because if the producer does not sell his product it suddenly loses quality, then it suddenly loses value and therefore it puts pressure on the producer and this is something that must not be tolerated, it is not ethical (interview no. 2/2019)

Performing a symbolic deconstruction of the market system is a difficult exercise, so that many people do not change the mode of economic exchange (Galt et al., 2019) because

my assumption is the trouble, that's the trouble with the way people think. Unfortunately, people are accustomed to choosing goods off the shelf [interview no. 4/2019].

This statement reveals the contradictory nature of unmaking, the difficulty of shifting from an ideal plan that many espouse to a daily action plan, experiencing something like sacrifice and inconvenience. The contradiction between individual benefit and striving towards something new is strong in this context of community building, collective emancipation and practical changes. This is particularly true when something goes wrong.

Technically, another thing is that while there was already lettuce in the gardens, they were unable to guarantee the supply of products. So, you make me compile a seasonal program and then in fact that seasonal program is not respected at all because in the end it went a bit awry ... This may be a trivial detail, but what is certain is that there must be a solid basis of training and programming behind it. There were also some things that were really bad: the fact that he was having trouble giving you change for your money, or you asked him to give you a lettuce plant and he had to go and get it ... little things that ... In my opinion if you decide to undertake a business enterprise, you need to be engaged, you have to stay on top of it because otherwise the customer perceives it from this point of view and is quite aware of it [interview no. 6/2019].

The transformation required by this unmaking (Feola et al., 2021) is intimate and hidden in everyday practices, but strategic for achieving societal change (Elsen, 2018). Considering the experience, in fact, no matter how extensive the efforts of the group of promoters are, getting people's attention is getting harder and harder:

But nowadays, even if it's no more than 30 seconds, people don't listen to you anymore, it starts with 'supermarket, shelf, product, price, special offer in big yellow signs, 'Go!', 'Buy'. Any monkey can do it for that stuff. But being part of a CSA requires a higher level of intelligence, not above average but higher than that of the monkey, which is normally the basic standard of intelligence we use for all

day-to-day things. We are all in autopilot, we do everything automatically. Meanwhile, our heads are messed up with other things. A CSA process requires an evolutionary leap [interview no. 5/2019].

Therefore, looking at the ability to “make room” for something new (Feola, 2019), this model of deconstructing the market so that a different paradigm can emerge, Ortazzo’s experience confirms the situational nature of this process, which can only take place in a precise place, involving real people who at that moment decide to act. The deconstruction of practices is symbolic and material at the same time and requires facing contradictions between ideality and practical possibilities. It is undeniably a generative process. It is somewhat more difficult to identify the hidden but strategic nature of this potential example of unmaking, a topic that certainly deserves further study, considering, among other things, the criticism often leveled at movements linked to transformative, alternative, solidarity economies, and so on, as to their inability to extend beyond the niche (Giambartolomei et al., 2021).

4.2.2. Empowerment in the Ortazzo CSA

Turning to the theme of empowerment in the CoP, and thinking about the individual, organizational and community dimensions, some important aspects emerged from interviews, focus groups, questionnaires and minutes of the meetings that can shed light on how a process of agricultural and food self-determination can go in this direction.

First of all, there seems to be a demand for a social infrastructure where it is possible to develop community actions that do not always find fulfillment and which, on the contrary, is explicitly lacking in the participant’s comments. The very process of building a community is exhausting:

Well, maybe they don’t really believe in this so much. But in my opinion the idea is good, but we all have to believe in it [interview n.3 / 2019].

Perhaps this is also due to a certain lack of organization:

There was no direction given to the project and no regular review of the problems encountered with the producers [Questionnaire no. 23/2018].

And the process of building a collective identity that makes other people identifiable as belonging to the community was tiring:

In fact, I don’t know who the other co-operators were. So how can we say we are a group? [interview no. 6/2019]

Again, it is plausible that the social environment is not ready, underlining the lack of control over the ongoing process:

But these initiatives find sterile, or at least arid, ground here [interview no. 10/2019].

In fact, it is clear that the community building process is slow and requires considerable personal investment, in terms of critical awareness and, above all, of active participation and taking responsibility (see Vincent, 2014)

Discontinuity in the participation of the people involved. It seems that for many of them the process of creating a community requires more time and energy than they are willing to put into it [questionnaire no. 20/2018].

Not everyone is negative about this relational dimension, which nevertheless still seems to remain at a preliminary, individual and organizational level, but not yet of a real community:

I saw that most of them came, yes also because we make the best tomatoes in the world, but they come to have a chat [interview no. 9/2019].

In other cases, however, looking specifically at the issue of control over the food supply chain, in some instances it appears that something

has started to move, even in the sphere of community empowerment (Rossi, 2017), moving in the direction of a generative unmaking of everyday practices:

CSA has made me a little more aware, because otherwise I would always go to M., take my vegetables, go home, go to the supermarket, and so on, always. But, my goodness, if this CSA can work, in this sort of way, how can I put it? It is just like a movement, a movement of people, even of cultivated products [interview no. 8/2019].

It appears that in the course of the experience there was an awareness, a development of critical awareness, of how, while requiring considerable effort, which may be regarded as a sacrifice in the sense of unmaking, the CoP can be successful (Francescato et al., 2007):

I think it has great potential, but it requires a strong commitment, at least more commitment than just going to any supermarket or shop where you get what you need [interview no. 5/2019].

What seems to have taken shape is the basic idea, the slow construction of a shared ideal that supports being a community:

Because, in reality, what I saw was that the philosophy itself worked [interview no. 9/2029].

This perspective is not fully shared, however, and dissonant voices show that the process is somehow hidden, contradictory, and unfinished:

This CSA, I don’t perceive it as a CSA. That night when you talked to him there, I got an idea, I read a bit, I got an idea ... in some countries it is used on a really vast scale and then, after a while, after a year, even after the second year, we can say that ... well, yes ... No, I certainly cannot say that I was part of a CSA [interview no. 8/2019].

Despite all this, from the beginning there was a sharing with respect to the objectives of the community, which set out to experiment with an alternative and challenging model to the free market.

It was or was meant to be an experiment with all that this entails, there are advantages and disadvantages to experimentation [interview no. 5/2018].

Looking at the experience of Ortazzo CSA in the years following its constitution, in 2020 the pandemic drove the consumer group to show real solidarity towards producers, taking particular responsibility for distribution logistics during the lockdown (Piccoli et al., 2021):

What I feel these days, what I have felt, is the double flow: we small farmers who have contributed in some way and consumers who have somehow kept faith with the pact. Here, in short, also with respect to this thing of the double exchange, of the double exchange on a social level, it was there, I felt it [focus group n. 1/2020].

5. Discussion

As Feola et al. (2021) point out, following Newell (2020), capitalism – in the theorizations of sustainability transformation – has been largely taken for granted for its misleadingly assumed stability and homogeneity, thus limiting the scope for defining alternative futures, policy options and strategies for transformative change. Furthermore, they highlight the fact that “theorizations of sustainability transformation have often given scarce consideration to normative and ontological pluralism, which has contributed to the rigidity of de-politicized techno-centric responses to global environmental change and undermined the transformative co-production of political economies, cultures, societies, and biophysical relations” (Feola et al., 2021, p. 3). In this nuanced scenario, the form of unmaking and any attempt to trigger it, such as the PGS and CSA experiences, creates no immediate and disruptive ruptures or disarticulations within and from the capitalist system but produces grey zones, hybridization between modes and

relations of production that are contextualized and mutable in time and space. Social formations entail the presence of more than one mode of production and complex respective relations, coexisting in structures of power and dominance (Althusser and Balibar, 1968). Therefore, understanding the evolution or the internal erosion of one mode or form of production necessarily requires an analysis of how it relates to the others, in terms of expansion or “internal unmaking”.

In the light of this, even though the PGS and CSA experiences presented in this article have faced stops and difficulties in autonomously surviving and expanding after their launch and first years of the projects, the fact that the “unmaking” is not a crystallized result but a process that moves and generates grey zones for the creation of more equitable socio-economic relations means we can consider them as an attempt to create an internal breach, a space of new interaction and co-learning that develops – with the continuous mediation of common objectives and values – in the long run. They can be considered as ‘seeds of transitions’ (van der Ploeg and Wiskerke, 2004), or ‘seeds of change’ (Seyfang, 2009), some of them sprout, others do not, but sowing and subsequent work are always necessary as a proactive act to try to change the terrain – from the inside. Last but not least, although Feola (2019, p.992) stresses that: “unmaking is a contradictory personal experience that needs a personal, inner change”, the empirical evidence shows that this is evident especially at the outset; then, in the long run, an alliance between actors and convergence between objectives and values of a given group is needed to feed the unmaking movement. Individual trajectories should be combined with collective action for providing resources, including the ecological knowledge and social bonds needed in a long-term perspective (Aларcon et al., 2020). We have to always take into account the circularity of the process of change, since on the one hand, changes in the individual sphere may be key variables in explaining change in social behavior, and on the other, change in personal behavior can itself be caused by and responsive to changes in social practice (Todd, 2005).

Building on the above, we can now argue that basically, from the empirical evidence on the ground, there are two elements that are intrinsic to the process of unmaking, to the creation of grey zones and/or new spaces of interaction that shape and reshape food systems, giving rise to new food circuits: the alternative sub-processes of social construction of (I) the market and (II) quality, locally driven by – and rooted in – territorial networks. The territoriality of the unmaking in this scenario acquires considerable importance since the territories in which the initiatives are implemented are increasingly characterized (albeit not homogeneously) by the vertical positioning of the local food producers within conventional long agri-food supply chains (Corti, 2014; Pretolani and Rama, 2022) or by other processes of de-agrarianization of the alpine rural economies with growing urban sprawl and industrialization in the alpine valleys and peri-urban areas. The experiences of unmaking are a manifestation of a localism that tries to turn itself into an effective social movement of resistance to globalism by defining common rules and objectives for interaction (De Souza et al., 2023).

Looking at the C'è Campo PGS experience in Lombardy and the Ortazzo experience in Trentino Alto-Adige, from a theoretical point of view, it is clear that we have to strip the notion of the market of any a priori normative framing (Hebinck et al., 2014). The market is an arena for social interaction (Shanin, 1973), an ‘arena’ in which through the co-construction of trust, proximity, transparency and alternativeness to conventional circuits, producers – as price-makers – can re-acquire control on their products and labor, while consumers access information about the agrarian substrate in a sort of de-fetishization of the product. To understand this, the conceptualization of market must go beyond any neoclassical conception of the market as a self-regulated “system”, to include the profile of the market as a socialized, continuously negotiated place: “markets are sites for social interaction [...] using the Polanyian concept of embeddedness, the market is then an arena where specific transactions – in a given time – take place between specific actors (buyers and sellers), who exchange specific goods and

services in accordance to specific rules” (Hebinck et al., 2014; Uleri, 2019, p.143; De Souza et al., 2023). Accordingly, as previously mentioned, the processes of construction of PGS and CSA systems define new specific rules for the socio-economic exchange. For example, for PGS, participation in the decision-making process within the local committee is considered a personal duty in order to collectively construct and facilitate the common recognition of – and commitment to – the PGS protocols; moreover, there is an underlying need to integrate local, diffused know-how with scientific knowledge and to consider both as important factors in order to inclusively connect and combine the different skills and types of expertise of the PGS actors. For CSA, we have highlighted the importance of pre-financing the costs of production by the consumers, sharing the risk between producers and consumers and redistributing rewards among all members, as a way to foster the predominance of reciprocity and redistribution practices over the conventional market exchange system. They generate “deliberative spaces where new concepts of systems of food provision are legitimized” and ensure the centrality of “regulatory environments providing the necessary flexibility to experiment with new patterns of economic behavior” (Brunori et al., 2011, p.49).

Consistently with this, the concept of quality also changes. It is not a homogenous standardization but becomes an expression of reflexive modernity (Giddens, 1991), in which the production and consumption of food is the reflection of the individual and group stance in society, of moral standpoints and of approval or disapproval of other behaviors typical of other individuals or social groups: “our food choices, like various other cultural expressions and practices, offer insights on how we present ourselves, shape our identity, define our membership and express our distance from others” (Koc and Welsh 2001, p. 46). Hence, quality appears as a social representation – that changes in time and space – of specific groups of actors who commonly recognize certain characteristics in a product and a related system of values connected with its production and consumption, in contrast to exogenous systems of quality recognition (e.g., third-party certification).

Even though many typical local products of the territories are certified with quality labels, such as Protected Designation of Origin or Protected Geographical Indication (e.g., Casera DOP and Bresaola IGP in Valtellina), these are often territorially contested (Misuraca, 2014) due to an obfuscating industrial vertical integration process that excludes local producers. For example, in the case of the Bresaola IGP there is a low degree of incorporation of specific local resources since the raw material (meat) can be of any origin, about which the consumer appears to be poorly informed, while conflicts also exist between the industrial commercialization actors on the one hand and the artisan components of the supply chain and local agricultural actors on the other (Belletti and Scaramuzzi, 2022). Accordingly, the grassroots generation of territorial parallel systems of agri-food certification and the connection between producer and consumer is an attempt to create spaces of autonomy from the conventional market’s centrifugal and squeezing forces that respectively depend on the creation or strengthening – through formalization – of local multisector and multiactor interdependencies (networking).

The two experiences are a representation of what Duncan and Pascucci (2017), citing Day (2005, p.9), call polymorphic organizations, namely organizational systems based on a non-hegemonic approach actualized through the establishment of “non-universalising, non-hierarchical, non-coercive relationships based on mutual aid and shared ethical commitments”. Both organizations set the limits of new communication infrastructures, facilitating the generation of alternative cognitive scenarios through co-learning processes, and replacing formal third-party controls and sanctions with participatory control systems, trust, and moral sanctions (Brunori et al., 2011). This is the result, but also the constant engine, of non-hegemonic educational practices for empowering individuals and specific communities by increasing socio-political capabilities (Moulaert et al., 2005), and by primarily involving different people acting at different levels in decision-making

and service provision and then co-creating common visions and pathways for change (González et al., 2010; Mert-Cakal and Miele, 2022). The empowerment effort is hence a key element for making the unmaking process efficient in the long run as it allows the opening of spaces of new interaction not only between individuals (e.g., consumers and producers) but also, at the macro level, between state, civil society, and the market, thus reshaping and changing governance and related power relations between market economy and social economy.

6. Conclusions

By focusing on the two experiences in Northern Italy this article has identified two steps or triggering points of a nuanced process of unmaking territorially rooted. The unmaking process is symbolic and material at the same time and hence requires facing contradictions between ideality and practical contextualized opportunities that change in time and space. The C'è Campo PGS and Ortazzo CSA cases are presented not as something alternative and set apart from the dominant mode of production, but as something that originates from its contradictions, setting different logics for reshaping social and economic formations. They are identified as “seeds of transitions”, elements of a process of change that develops from the inside of our system: in this process of evolution with a contradictory and undefined course, failing, stopping or stepping back are events that may occur.

The case studies are a manifestation of organizational territorial systems that continuously interact with wider societal formations and may give rise to a process of *longue durée* (see Braudel, 1992) – a type of *transformation as a metamorphosis*, an evolutionary process of long-term change originating from the territory, which reflects on – and connects with – broader networks and systems (Polanyi, 1944; Novy, 2022). However, it is not possible to understand their full potentiality if we limit our analytical focus to individual successes or failures. Failures in particular, as in the cases of C'è Campo PGS and Ortazzo CSA, provide an active ground for a multitude of efforts aimed at opening a space for the emergence of different logics in the functioning of societal interaction. Transition processes result from the transformation of the interdependencies between the different components, groups and actors of the agri-food systems over time (Lamine et al., 2019). Therefore, these experiences cannot be considered simply as failures, but should be seen as component parts that are potentially significant for bringing about and influencing a wider process of change. We thus recognize that the research faces limitations associated with the limited timeframe of the observation carried out: this cannot be enough, on the one hand, to fully understand the complexity behind the reasons and effects of their failures, and, on the other, to trace all the territorial and supra-territorial connections they were able to establish in a sort of network of networks with the potential to undermine – over the course of time – the mainstream food system.

As underlined by Duncan and Pascucci (2017), among others, the development of AFN initiatives does not necessarily have immediate transitional potential, namely it does not necessarily result in an evident radical change. For a transformation to occur, what is important is the way these aggregations are organized and connected so as to influence a process of change in the long run. With its focus on unmaking, what this research brings to the fore about AFNs is that it is impossible to understand the transitional potential of such organizational systems if we limit our attention to single initiatives and their specific, temporally contextualized successes or failures. There is hence a need to consider a process dimension and adopt a transition perspective of analysis that is capable of placing and “reading” specific aggregations within a specific timeframe and within broader networks in order to understand how these efforts can gather additional economic and human resources in the long run so as to overcome organizational limitations and provide more stable “opportunities for promoting regime-level change” (Duncan and Pascucci, 2017, p.332). Future studies should move along this trajectory in order to grasp more accurately the real potentiality of AFNs. With

regard to the specific case studies examined here, future research is needed to assess the long-term impacts not only of the promoted capacity-building processes but also of the parallel unlearning mechanisms (van Oers et al., 2023), and to understand which connections related to the networks of the two initiatives are still active and what kind of impact they are generating. This can offer territorially rooted perspectives of analysis that allow a nuanced understanding of the nonlinear evolution of our capitalist societies, encompassing movements of making and unmaking, and grey zones between them.

Credit author statement

Alessandra Piccoli: general design, theoretical framework 2.1 and 2.2, methodology, results 4.2, general review, Francesco Vittori: general design, theoretical framework 2.3, methodology, results 4.1, general review, Francesca Uleri: introduction, discussion, conclusion, general review.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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