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New emerging peasantry and local food: Participatory Guarantee Systems as a strategy to re-localise and re-socialise the organic food quality. A theoretical análisis

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Summary

Despite a *farewell to peasants* was predicted by modernisation theorists, nowadays we are assisting to a re-emergence of the peasant model; this new direction is today interpreted as a search of independence from the centrifugal thrust of the agro-industrial regimes. This paper, with a theoretical approach and an analysis of the relevant bibliography, links the new emerging peasantry to the dynamics which are changing the organisation of the markets through - for example - the construction of new food circuits or the changes in consumers' behaviour. Such elements are framing agriculture in a transition process in which the primary sector have to face new challenges. Considering that both industrial agriculture and peasant agriculture are trying to cope with new demands by reorganising themselves, this work presents the Participatory Guarantee Systems as a peasants' tool to re-socialise quality on the organic markets and bring back food to a local dimension, moving it away from the commodisation process.

Key words

New peasantry – Participatory Guarantee Systems – Quality –
Alternative Food Networks – Organic production

Resumen

A pesar de que los teóricos de la modernización han anunciado el fin del campesinado, actualmente estamos asistiendo a una nueva reaparición del modelo campesino; esta dirección se puede interpretar como una búsqueda de autonomía e independencia de las fuerzas centrifugas que caracterizan los regímenes agro-industriales. Este artículo, por medio de un enfoque teórico y un análisis de la bibliografía relevante, relaciona el campesinado emergente a las dinámicas que están contribuyendo a la reorganización de los mercados como - por ejemplo - la construcción de nuevo circuitos de comercialización o el cambio en los comportamientos de consumo. Estos elementos están encuadrando la actividad agrícola en un proceso de transición en el cual el sector primario tiene que enfrentarse con desafíos crecientes. Considerando que tanto la agricultura industrial como la agricultura campesina están tratando de hacer frente a nuevas demandas económicas y sociales reorganizando su estructura, este trabajo de investigación presenta los Sistemas Participativos de Garantía como un instrumento propio del nuevo campesinado, útil para resocializar la calidad de los productos orgánicos y reconectar la producción de alimentos a una dimensión local, alejándola del proceso de mercantilización.

Palabras claves

Nuevo campesinado - Sistemas Participativos de Garantía - Calidad – Circuitos alternativos - Producción orgánica

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Introduction

Over the last few decades, the global agricultural sector has undergone a transition process which has outlined both continuity and rupture characteristics with the past, generating new forms of rurality. Subsequently to the agricultural modernization of the 1950s and the development of innovative technologies during the Green Revolution, an imminent disappearance of peasant agriculture was envisaged (Bernstein, 1990). On the contrary, today the peasant model is re-emerging as a new and more equitable reinterpretation of the social needs and demands. This paper is aimed to explain, by attentive analysis of the main contributions of literature, how the dynamics within the agricultural transition process are leading to the configuration of new production and consumption practices by influencing the connection between food and territory. In the first part, the paper will clarify causes and trends of the peasant re-emergence through a comparison with the operating logic of the agro-industrial system. The analysis continues following the main idea that both industrial agriculture and peasant agriculture survive and regenerate themselves responding to social and economic demands. The need to respond to new demands and challenges, posed by society, sets the foundation to create new food circuits, often considered as alternative to the mainstream networks. As will be described later, the creation of new circuits or the adoption of more sustainable production techniques and consumer styles - under an environmental point of view - are not exclusive dynamics of the re-emergence of the peasant model but represent a strategy adopted by food regimes to deal with a changing demand. The element that really should make the difference in defining a circuit as alternative, is its ability to guarantee and pursue - in addition to an environmental sustainability - an economic and social equity. After analysing the issue of alternative food networks, the paper continues by defining the

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concept of quality and interpreting its re-socialisation as a mechanism of the new peasantisation.

Referring to the organic markets, which have experienced a large increase in demand over the last few years, and an increasing need to ensure quality through certification processes, at the end the article will propose Participatory Guarantee Systems System (PGS) as a way to distance production and consumption from conventional networks ensuring a quality socially constructed. PGSs are useful tools to affirm the autonomy of the rural communities and counter the dependence mechanisms generated by globalised economies; for these reasons, I considered essential not analyse them individually but rather place them within the broader development of peasantry.

A farewell to peasants?

Contrary to what was announced by theorists of modernisation paradigm between the 1950s and 1970s, who preannounced a progressive disappearance of peasant agriculture, currently we are assisting to a reverse outcome, the re-emergence of the peasant model; this is delineated, by van der Ploeg (2009), as one of the main trends that are interesting the global agricultural sector. The re-emergence of the peasant model represents an indirect consequence of the advance of the agrarian modernisation in a global level and it constitutes the most recent phase in the evolution of peasantry. Following Shanin (1971) peasantry must be read as a process composed by a non-regular course that - through expansion and contraction trends - structures, deconstructs and restructures itself on the basis of economic and political changes encouraged by (non-peasant) power-holders (Bundy, 1979).

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In a first theoretical level, peasantry was ascribed to a stagnant economy for subsistence, labor-intensive, unable to generate output for external subjects; the term peasant was referred to a social group of the past, part of an undifferentiated system, organised - as underlined in the Durkheim's work (1997) *The Division of Labor in Society* - in a simple family-based society. Analyzing the Marxist thought expressed by Lenin (1967) in *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, the disappearance of peasants was an inevitable result of the penetration of agriculture by capitalism (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2010). These theoretical assumptions were used by theorists of modernisation who forecast the involvement of the peasant class in a pathway of change; this process should have led to a reformulation of the boundaries of peasantry in favor of an intensive agrarian transformation (Desmarais, 2002, 2008). Following Araghi (1995) the evolution of peasantry in capitalist systems is oriented to an end-point in order to obtain its progressive disappearance and its conversion in wage-workers and farm-workers. Today the theory of peasant disappearance does not represent an ideal situation because peasantry is not a homogeneous category and its different internal populations react differently to external influences (Johnson, 2004).

Bernstein (2001) divides peasant populations in rural poor, middle rural farmers and rich farmers, division in which the first category is the one mostly affected by the disappearance process since for rural proletariat is impossible reproduce themselves with household production. Considering the above, it is not appropriately correct speak about "disappearance", however the erosion of peasant practices, the reduction of peasant space and the loss of peasant control over the means of production are currently related to processes of de-peasantisation (and, in some cases, de-agrarisation) (Ellis, 2006; Oya, 2007).

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De-peasantisation is practically expressed in terms of re-organisation of the geographical space and progressive erosion of the family basis of peasants' livelihoods (Ellis, 2006). The decline of the rural population (de-ruralisation) in favor of a massive concentration of people in urban areas (overurbanisation) is encouraged by pull factors like development of secondary and tertiary sectors in urbanised areas or agriculture mechanisation, and phenomena of underemployment and unemployment in rural territories as a push factors (Araghi, 1995; Singh & Bhogal, 2014). De-peasantisation can jointly proceed with the process of de-agrarisation although they are not always in consonance; for example, citing Bryceson (2000, p. 3) "replacement of peasant agriculture with plantation agriculture is an example of de-peasantisation, but not de-agrarisation", since the latter regards a change in the agricultural production levels and not a transformation of the production modes.

According to the logic of the agro-food regimes, agriculture and food production in capitalist systems are considered as a set of merchant relations aimed to maximise profits for the capital-holders and increase the economic reproduction of the labor force (McMichael, 2010). A distinctive element of the global agricultural production is the commoditisation of the outputs (agricultural production is standardised and disconnected from the rural *terroir*) and the equivalence of the common resources to consumer goods (the commons are considered as goods available in the market, governed by an economic rationality). The progressive marginalisation of the peasants' role in the food production and in the ecosystems management has had repercussions not only on peasantry but on entire portions of population who suffer consequences of a gradual deterioration of the ecological capital.

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Since 1950s agricultural evolution was oriented towards a productivistic phase with the assumption to intensify and specialise productions, introducing more chemical and financial inputs and reducing the vegetal varieties on the supply chain in an effort to create economies of scale (Conti, Dematteis, Lanza & Nano, 2004)¹. Still now the creation of economies of scale is accompanied by a concentration of land ownership and an increase in land access cost; the commoditisation process of the land configures the background to structure dependency relations and it represents the element which is connecting old peasants to the new emerging peasantry (Schulman, Garrett & Newman, 1989; McMichael, 2006). The access to land is the main element that allows - especially in developing countries - the structuring of a class system since it symbolise the base for the reproduction of the capital. Disparity in accessing land transforms peasants from being capital-holders to workforce with the aim to replicate such condition. Taking into account the case of Africa, Raikes (2000, p. 66) argues that “on average, land is more abundant in Africa than in any other continents, but most Africans have only very small plots and an increasing number are landless”, therefore, in capitalist economies the problem is not the resources scarcity but their real distribution. The control over the means of production and the greater or lesser extent of the capital ownership determine the position that people occupy in society and the unequal land concentration.

Considering this background, today the re-emergence of the peasant model must be interpreted as a new phase of the non-regular flow of peasantry, a search of autonomy, an act of resistance to the unequal management of the economic system and top-down strategies to develop it (van der Ploeg 2009). The claims brought forward by peasants do not correspond to individual interests

¹Economies of scale arise when unit costs fall as output rises.

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instead they have collective relevance: mobilisations for the protection of natural resources, or actions to ensure access to safe and healthy food have repercussions on the whole society. The representation of collective interests is the key to understand the re-emergence of a traditional model that starts to become innovative. Following Polanyi (1944), the relationship entertained by a class with society as a whole draws its role in the drama, consequently the success of such class is determined by the breadth variety of interests that it is able to serve, which are not its specific. The re-emerging of peasantry in the last decades appears as an organised strategy to transform the structures of power in which the food regimes are based; it is an attempt to re-balance the power - through the collective action - since the contemporary food production is a reflection of the growing and shrinking of the democratic space. Peasants, or peasant organizations, are able to enter into a covenant, or convergence, with others social groups, in order to achieve an enlargement of these democratic spaces with actions against exclusion or aimed at the environmental protection or a balanced territorial planning (Haubert, 1997).

David vs Golia

Globalisation and the progressive decrease of regulation in national agricultural systems create the basis to consolidate food regimes, where - under hub and spokes logic - we see a rift between production and consumption and a consequent distance between food and territories (Wilk, 2006). That implies a detachment of production from the place of origin in favor of the implementation of production and consumption sites - definable as non-places - devoid of any distinguishable character. In the global market the productive diversification related to the

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variability of the social or ecological capital is not recognised as an element for the competitiveness.

Food regimes are defined not only by economic actors but also by an obliging political system, in fact the functioning and the survival of such regimes depends mainly on the global governance that set patterns of economic and power relations determining a greater/lesser level of subalternity and dependency. In the same way food systems and their governance are representing causes of problems that are globally affecting the modern societies, like food insecurity, rural poverty or the partial access to land, contributing to reinforce an unequal classism.

In part, these are consequences of the reorganisation of agro-food space started during the 1980s with structural adjustments promoted by international agencies with the purpose of dismantling the existing agriculture sector by defining a more ‘market-responsive’ system, which, according to the principles exposed during the Uruguay Round of the *General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade* (GATT), should have been framed in a context of de-nationalisation (Desmarais, 2002, p. 92; McMichael, 2010). The Marrakesh Agreement, on 15 April 1994, marked the culmination of the long Uruguay Round instituting the World Trade Organisation (WTO) which was officially formalised on January 1995. The Annex 1A on *The Multilateral Agreements on Trade in Goods* included additional agreements to the GATT of 1994 establishing structural reforms for global agriculture. The three pillars of the *Agreement on Agriculture* were the *three reductions* of (1) domestic support, (2) tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade, and (3) export subsidies. Liberalisation of trade has damaged small producers by depriving them of national protection and making them incapable of compete globally on the price level. Over the last twenty years, on the

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line of this economic scenario, further regional free trade agreements have been signed. *The Dominican Republic-Central America FTA* (CAFTA-DR) is the first free trade agreement between the United States and a group of smaller developing economies (Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Dominican Republic) signed in 2004. Taking into account the case of El Salvador, under the CAFTA-DR system, the data from the Ministry of Economics report that in 2005 there were 518,016 people employed in the agricultural sector while in 2006 there was a fall to 506,559. This means that in first year of liberalisation there was a net loss of 11,457 jobs². Moreover, CAFTA-DR damaged part of the production of basic foods, as a result the cooperatives which produced mainly rice, corn and beans decreased by 28% between 2004 and 2006 in favor of massive imports of rice, meat and wheat from United States which caused an increase in prices of basic dietary products on the domestic markets³.

Thus, currently peasants are reacting to the effects of the negative externalities of neoliberal agriculture through organizing *no-border strategies* which enabling to exercise social pressure on the organs of power. Global alliances, like *La Vía Campesina* (LVC) or others agro-ecological movements like *Campesino a Campesino* (CAC), promote the reshaping of economic relations by reconnecting the supply chain to the local control (Borras, 2004; Patel, 2005; Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2010). LVC is an autonomous and independent movement that defends small-scale sustainable agriculture as a way to promote social justice and food sovereignty, while CAC is a peasant movement from Mesoamerica (Mexico, Cuba, Guatemala, and Nicaragua) which is promoting agricultural practices with low inputs to address the negative environmental

² Ministry of Economics, Department of Statistics and Census (DIGESTYC). Multi-purpose Household Surveys. Years 2005 and 2006.

³ Ibidem.

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externalities of industrial agriculture. In the small-scale level the supply chain is socially re-constructed as a set of dynamic relations between local actors, social system and environment, and it is configured as a local collective competition good not standardisable and hardly replicable. Peasant agriculture do not appear static, it is configuring itself as a bridge between past and future laying the foundations for growth by looking at the ecological and social resources in an attempt to reduce depletion and activate a virtuous circle of endogenous development. New peasantry is able to generate positive externalities for the environment and the collective system because, contrary to the monofunctional agro-industry, it accomplishes non-market services (Velázquez, 2001).

With the term multifunctionality we refer to the ability of primary sector to perform functions non-market oriented, like the recreation and the maintenance of landscape, biodiversity preservation or the enhancement of rural areas. Multifunctionality is representing - especially in the European Union - one of the main measures to develop the rural areas (Marsden & Sonnino, 2008; Hebinck, Schneider & van der Ploeg, 2014). It symbolises an additional strategy - respect to diversification and pluriactivity - to address the *cost-price squeeze* since it provides new income and new working patterns. On the contrary product diversification refers to an expansion of goods and services produced by farming to deal with economic uncertainty and risk factors by diversifying the income, while pluriactivity implies a reallocation of work within the peasant family through a combination of agricultural and non-agricultural activities (Van Huylenbroeck & Durand, 2003). Therefore, multifunctionality is today a specific character of the peasant model, in part oriented to non-productive actions, in which the actors involved “show strong tendencies for local and regional embeddedness” playing a key-role in the process of re-localisation of food

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circuits (Wilson, 2008, p. 2). In the following sections I will analyse again the topic of multifunctionality by connecting it with the features of the new quality certification systems.

New food circuits

Nowadays peasants are trying to develop an agro-food organisation able to reflect territorial identity directly on the markets. As highlighted by Shanin (1973), the term market can be used in reference to two different social and economic realities often contrasting: on the one hand, it refers to the place where people exchange goods through a compromise between seller and buyer, on the other hand it refers to an institutionalized system of economic organisation based on the laws of supply and demand where prices have a pivotal role. Peasant model is not limited to the use of alternative agricultural practices since it brings with it a traditional system, as today innovative, to organise the market on the bases of the system of relations activated between producers, consumers, institutions and environment. As a consequence, market is socially set and it appears as an arena, composed by a relational system, aimed to exchange goods, know-how and identity characters, thus market is also the site for social interaction (Watson & Studdert, 2006).

With the return to peasant agriculture - and with it the growing differentiation of the outcomes - production is increasingly directed to alternative distribution channels or Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) (Oostindie, van der Ploeg, Broekhuizen, Ventura & Milone, 2010). Nowadays they represent a way to re-socialise and re-localise food, and a possible solution to respond to requests arising from social conscious consumers (Moore, 2006; Seyfang, 2007; Rossi, Brunori & Guidi, 2008). One of the main reasons that drives consumers to prefer different circuits,

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compared to the traditional ones, is the lack of confidence and the growing mistrust towards the productivistic system hit by scandals and by food scares (Renting, Marsden & Banks, 2003). Through the logic of the AFNs, food circuits are re-localised and re-embedded on a local scale, this shall not be construed as a defensive localism but as the ability to create competitive measures to counter globalisation (Morgan, Marsden & Murdoch, 2006). Localise doesn't mean closing the system in itself but rather re-configuring the relationships between the actors of the chain by the means of collective action, social solidarity and participation; the result is a territoriality structured as a set of relations maintained by the actors with the exteriority to meet collective needs in order to increase the autonomy of the system compatibility with the local resources (Raffestin, 2012). The re-modeling of food systems is due to an interaction between producers and consumers: producers change production practices making them more sustainable, consumers develop abilities to co-produce new boundaries between production and consumption re-designing their active role in the chain complex (Brunori, Rossi & Malandrin, 2011). Consumption comes out of private sphere and individual particularistic interests, becoming a political functional space for collective action towards a democracy of socioeconomic relations. Looking at the organizational structure of AFNs, following what has been proposed by Marsden et al. (2000), we can identify three main types of distribution channels:

- I. Face to face: consumers purchase products directly from the producers. Personal interaction allows the creation of a bond of trust and transparency on the knowability of the product purchased.

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- II. Spatial proximity: goods are produced and sold locally in a specific region. There is a minimum brokerage that does not represent an obstacle to confirm consumer awareness about the local nature of the purchase.
- III. Spatially extended: trust arises from the values and identity incorporated by the product sold in a different region from the place of production. Labels can be the vehicle to create consumer awareness on a specific product.

An additional study conducted by Watts, Ilbery and Maye (2005) places AFNs on an axis - at whose extremes - strong AFNs and weak AFNs are positioned, separated by a variety of hybrid forms. In the first type, spatial proximity is greatest and the direct contact ensures knowability and trust towards the product; in the second type spatial proximity is reduced, thus, the relational connection between consumer and producer is supported by certifications, labels or intermediaries, elements that, for the authors, erode the circular process of information exchange based on mutual trust (Watts et al., 2005).

Despite the researches carried out to date on the issue of AFNs, current studies are not enough to explain the complete nature of these new circuits, or at least they are not sufficient to identify their real alternativity to the conventional distribution system. In fact - in the neoliberal economies - agriculture is able to reinvent itself to address some social demands through, for example, the mitigation of environmental degradation or the improvement of animal welfare, but actually they do not favor a socially constructed development and not allow the reduction of socio-economic inequalities promoting their replication and fueling a dynamic condition of self-

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perpetuation of the capitalist system⁴. According with Leyshon, Lee and Williams (2003), AFNs, in some cases, can become a means of exclusion and inequity in the participation and in the access to the markets because the basic logics of production and distribution don't change following the rules of standardisation and economic globalization, typical of food regimes. Agroindustrial system restructures itself by reducing the number of intermediaries in the supply chain - as happens in internet sales - creating a false proximity between producers and consumers; the reduction of intermediaries and the shortening of the chain are not sufficient elements to define the circuits as alternative networks since there is not a de-commodification system supported by confidence, awareness and knowledge towards the product, which can allow the empowerment of the base.

Therefore, taking into account what has been reported above, further empirical studies will be useful in order to better understand how new circuits are symbolizing - both economically and socially - strong alternatives to the conventional channels with the purpose of relocalising production and food consumption and so foster the collective construction of the product and its quality.

Quality as a multidimensional concept

The term quality does not have a single meaning but appears as a multidimensional concept that changes spatially and temporally based on requests, rules and expectations arising from the market, society, or from the governance apparatus. Not having the attribute of uniqueness, the concept of quality is marked by boundaries which limit the recognition and validity of the various

⁴ This process of (ecological) sustainable re-orientation of modern capitalism is called by Evans, Morris & Winter (2002) *ecological modernisation*.

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meanings. Quality is always a construction, an intermediation between different actors who recognise certain characteristics of a product; the recognition, the knowledge and the sharing of those characteristics orient the choices on the market and determine preferences towards some products (identified by a community as quality products) rather than other similar. Considering its multifaceted nature, the concept of quality is difficult to define therefore it is necessary to contextualise it in relation to the place, the group of actors that recognises it, and the socioeconomic system in which it is embedded.

In the framework of the emergence of new markets, *place* and spatial dimension play a crucial role in influencing the processes of production and the consumer behavior, as well as the idea of quality. The influence of the places contrasts the old dominant trend of global markets through in which the difference in outcomes was given by specific production standards and commercial logic.

Some studies link food quality to particular regional contexts not invested by the productivist dynamics of agricultural industrialisation. According to this theory quality is rooted in *local ecologies*, wherefore the abandonment of industrialised productions should foster the recognition of a product as a quality product (Murdoch, Marsden & Banks, 2000; Goodman, 2003); but if we consider the multidimensionality of quality a result of an interaction in different places and in different times, it is impossible to assign the attribute of quality to a single spatial category, consequently it is possible to correlate quality both to industrialised productions and territorialised ones. In the agro-industrial systems quality corresponds to compliance with standard parameters vertically defined, generalised and extensible without spatial limits, while in the localised supply chain, quality is constructed on different knowledge systems, it is identified

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as an endogenous construction dependent on the local context and deriving from a local *milieu* and a know-how consolidated over time. In this last case quality is *site-specific* because it incorporates particular territorial characters like craftsmanship. Thus, quality parameters can not be generalized or easily spatially extended.

Especially in mainstream circuits, where the spatial proximity between consumer and producer is greater, we can distinguish a quality product according to the expectations of the different actors involved in the chain. As Henson (2000) reported, quality is classifiable on the basis of physical characteristics, such as the fat content or the texture (product-oriented quality), on the basis of production processes (process-oriented quality), and on the basis of consumer' perceptions about the product (user-oriented quality). This type of classification decays in shorter circuits since the spatial proximity brings to the need for an integrated quality concept which expresses the interest of the whole community.

Quality and certifications in organic markets

In contemporary agro-food systems the demand for local products, with a quality rooted in the territory is rising. This trend is identified in the process of *quality turn*, which is manifested through the transition of preferences from standardised products towards quality food ingrained in a local dimension (Murdoch et al., 2000; Goodman, 2003). The social and the political attention to the issues concerning food security and sustainability of agro-food networks, is leading to a development and strengthening of organic agricultural productions, as well as an expansion of the respective markets.

Organic agriculture is defined by IFOAM as:

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A production system that sustains the health of soils, ecosystems and people. It relies on ecological processes, biodiversity and cycles adapted to local conditions, rather than the use of inputs with adverse effects. Organic Agriculture combines tradition, innovation and science to benefit the shared environment and promote fair relationships and a good quality of life for all involve.⁵

In relation with this definition, it is easy to note how the growing demand for local organic products, *high in natural qualities*, reflects the agricultural transition process, inside of which the primary sector must respond to requests for environmental and socioeconomic sustainability (Murdoch et al., 2000). According to the Research Institute of Organic Agriculture in 2014 43.7 million hectares of agricultural land were managed organically in 172 countries, by approximately 2.3 million farmers (FiBL, 2016). The global sales of organic food and drink reached 75 billion euros in 2015. United States are the leading market with 35.9 billion euros, followed by Germany (8.6 billion euros), France (5.5 billion euros), and China (4.7 billion euros) (FiBL, 2017). In 2015, most of the major markets showed double-digit growth rates. The highest per capita spending was in Switzerland (262 Euros), and Denmark has the highest organic market share (8.4 percent of the total food market) (FiBL, 2017).

Organic production and sales of organic products are dynamics not only attributable to a small-scale, but, in part, they compose the new strategies of industrial sector to cope with changing consumers' expectations. In order to understand how quality is socially constructed in the new food circuits and then understand why it differs from the standardised quality of the conventional organic markets, it is necessary to analyse the certification system.

Nowadays organic products can be widely found in the mainstream channels of agro-industry, on the contrary in the early 1990s the organic production was addressed for the 90 per cent to short

⁵ This definition was adopted in Vignola, Italy, in 2003, reflecting the four Principles of Organic Agriculture: the principle of health, the principle of ecology, the principle of fairness and the principle of care. All details are available here: <http://www.ifoam.bio/en/organic-landmarks/definition-organic-agriculture>.

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circuits as for instance farmers markets or direct sales in the farms (Van Loo, Caputo, Nayga, Canavari & Ricke, 2012; Boza Martínez, 2013). In a context where the *local* can be easily contaminated and dominated by the *global*, the system of quality certification has an important role in guiding consumer's behaviors. Before the 1980s, organic certifications were not widely developed because the scale of production was limited to small circuits, inside of which quality was guaranteed by trust and direct relations between producers and consumers. Until then, the few certification experiences were attributable to the *first party system*, a character of voluntariness and self-regulation, which imply that productions are classified as organic if they respect precise standards established by a specific group of farmers. They are the subjects who monitor and evaluate the conformity of the outcome through peer review operations (Michelsen 2001; Nelson, Tovar, Rindermann & Cruz, 2010). By the early 1990s the rising demand for organic products has led to the formulation of new certification models which could ensure quality on wider circuits: on the one hand, a new model was represented by the *second party system* in which the evaluation of the quality standards was done not by the producers but by intermediaries (actors that sell or transform the product); on the other hand, the *third party system* was promoted by applying an external control on the product conformity. In this last case, an external agency is responsible for the development of a quality standards framework.

Although today, after several decades, the third party certification is the most commonly used, it is not exempt from problems which are limiting its application. Looking at different experiences in southern countries (Zanasi, Venturi, Setti & Rota, 2009; Castro, 2014; Kirchner, 2015) a first issue concerns the difficulty to access the organic markets owing to the high costs that peasants have to cover to obtain the certification, secondly a lack in receiving support during the

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bureaucratic process is often detected. Not least the fact that quality standards are mostly established following the interests of Western consumers (since the main certification agencies are located in North America and Europe), this results in the imposition of a disciplinary which producers of southern countries must respect without being able to negotiate it; the use of such top-down approach contributes to create situations of disparities on the market and dependency relations between South and North (Nelson, et al, 2010)⁶.

Under this structure the sphere of social relations has no value in defining quality since it is obscured by the trade logic of quantity and price. In reference to the detachment of a product from the social relations system, Allen and Kovach (2000, p. 225), referring to Marx (1967), speak about *fetishism of commodities*: “the fetishism of commodities is a condition within capitalism in which the social relationships through which commodities are produced are obscured in the commodity as it appears in the market”.

Thus, on the one side, third party certification appears as a tool of globalised markets that provides consumers with guarantees about production procedures but, on the other side, it deletes the food identity by eroding the social connections activated to have a finished product.

Referring to the article of Auld, Renckens and Cashore (2015), it can be stated that certifications are set on two logics: the *logic of empowerment* and the *logic of control*; under this setting, certifications should help to empower producers through the creation of a channel to access the market and, at the same time, they would bind producers to a certifying body. As said above, third party certifications are not always able to guarantee this scheme since the logic of control,

⁶ Gómez Tovar, Gómez Cruz & Schwentesius Rindermann (1999) defined this type of dependency *biocolonialism*.

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implemented by an external entity, leads to mechanisms of disempowerment for those who are unable to deal with the bureaucratic process.

In the light of the above, it is clear the need for alternative forms of certification which can bring quality back to a basis of equity and recognisability.

Socialised quality and Participatory Guarantee System

As anticipated in the introduction, the development of an alternative system to certify organic productions have to be placed in the strategies and in the mechanisms within new peasantization because it is representing a further effort to boost the de-commoditisation of food, starting from the re-socialisation and re-localisation of quality.

One of the systems that is now being an effective tool to achieve this objective is represented by the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS). PGSs are quality assurance systems that operate locally by certifying productions with the active participation of the actors (Sacchi, 2015). The primary aim is to provide a response and support for small scale farmers who want to sell their products on the domestic market choosing to not enter in the dynamics of export (because of socioeconomic reasons or territorial limitations) (Torremocha, 2012). PGSs through the participation give voice to collective values but also to demands and expectations of an organised civil society. The operation of PGS is based on the ability of local actors like producers, consumers or other development actors, such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), to structure a network able to establish mechanisms for the regulation, control and implementation of quality on the organic supply chain. Being under a common project, participating in direct

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meetings, and sharing ideas are elements which reinforce the common identity as a prerequisite to innovate the system.

PGSs are guided by two basic ideas: (1) democracy (as an equal opportunity to participate) along the whole supply chain and system, (2) and the consideration of food as a cultural and social factor deriving from the local representations; these points are linked to specific operating principles that steer the system (Figure 1):

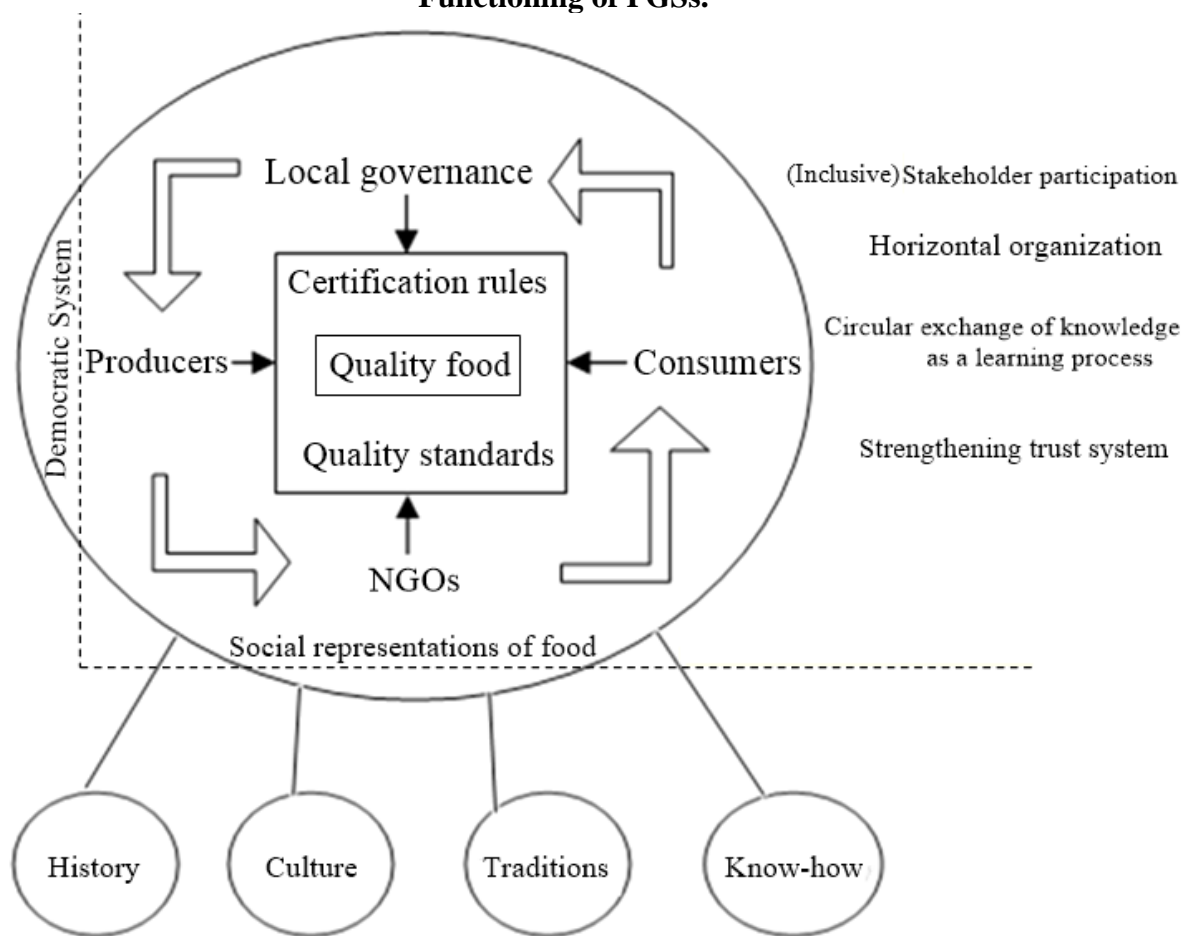
1. **Horizontality and circularity:** the non-verticist structure allows a rotational division of responsibilities (May 2008). With the notion of horizontality, we refer not only to the management of tasks but also to the management of the knowledge about practices of production and consumption. While in the third party certifications there is a selection of quality parameters, identified by a group of actors, outsiders for the productive territorial contexts, in PGSs the system of knowledge, concerning quality, is not taken through top-down perspectives but is handed down and built locally. Through the exchange of information between peers, horizontality becomes circularity, therefore, a *dialogue of knowledge* is created in order to define the rules for the productive practices and the product requirements. Quality parameters are embedded in specific local contexts; thus, they are not applicable to a standard certification system. The estrangement from external expert systems of knowledge sets new conditions, less exclusionary, to facilitate the access to the markets creating new economic opportunities. This, before being an economic fact, is primarily a political act (especially for peasants in developing countries that move away from expert systems spread by developed countries) that raises the question of the supremacy of an expert knowledge which consolidates subalternity conditions through the creation of a higher

reference category to which peasants have to turn to support their development. PGSs are acts of resistance to this system definable as *knowledge-colonialism*. I define knowledge-colonialism through the lens of Gramscian theory according to which cultural hegemony is an indispensable aspect of political control since the continuous diffusion of a system of knowledge - belonging to a dominant group - creates a complex of cultural and technical references from which who does not have a system conforming to the hegemonic depends (Gramsci 1971). Accordingly, knowledge-colonialism appears as a cultural hegemony extending beyond national borders.

2. Participation and inclusion: in PGSs the participation of internal and external stakeholders is guaranteed by the characters of democracy and inclusiveness of the system. All actors have a role in influencing an endogenous development; referring to Torremocha (2012), PGS are more than a system of sanction, control and reward, converting itself into an instrument of collective action for sustainability.
3. Trust and dialectic: following Simmel (1998), trust is the hypothesis of future behavior sure enough to be able to find a practical action; in the case of PGSs trust is represented by a compromise between producer and consumer where certainty is given by the transparency of production practices and certification mechanisms resulting from a dialectical process between actors. Thanks to this dialectical (and learning) process quality is re-socialised and the link between food and territories is reconstructed (Home et al. 2017). Moreover, if trust is seen through Luhmann's thought it can be interpreted as a reduction of complexity that led PGSs to overcoming the bureaucracy of third party systems in order to promote equity and

social justice at all stages of the supply chain (Luhmann, 2002; Whatmore, Stassart & Renting, 2003; May, 2008).

**Figure 1
Functioning of PGSs.**



Original figure created by the author.

So, while mainstream certification models refer to quality products which respect requirements related to predefined standards, PGSs refer to quality food in which traditions, culture and history of a place - derived from a process spatially and temporally dynamic - are incorporated. The constant reference to the relational system, as engine of PGS, activates a replication of the social

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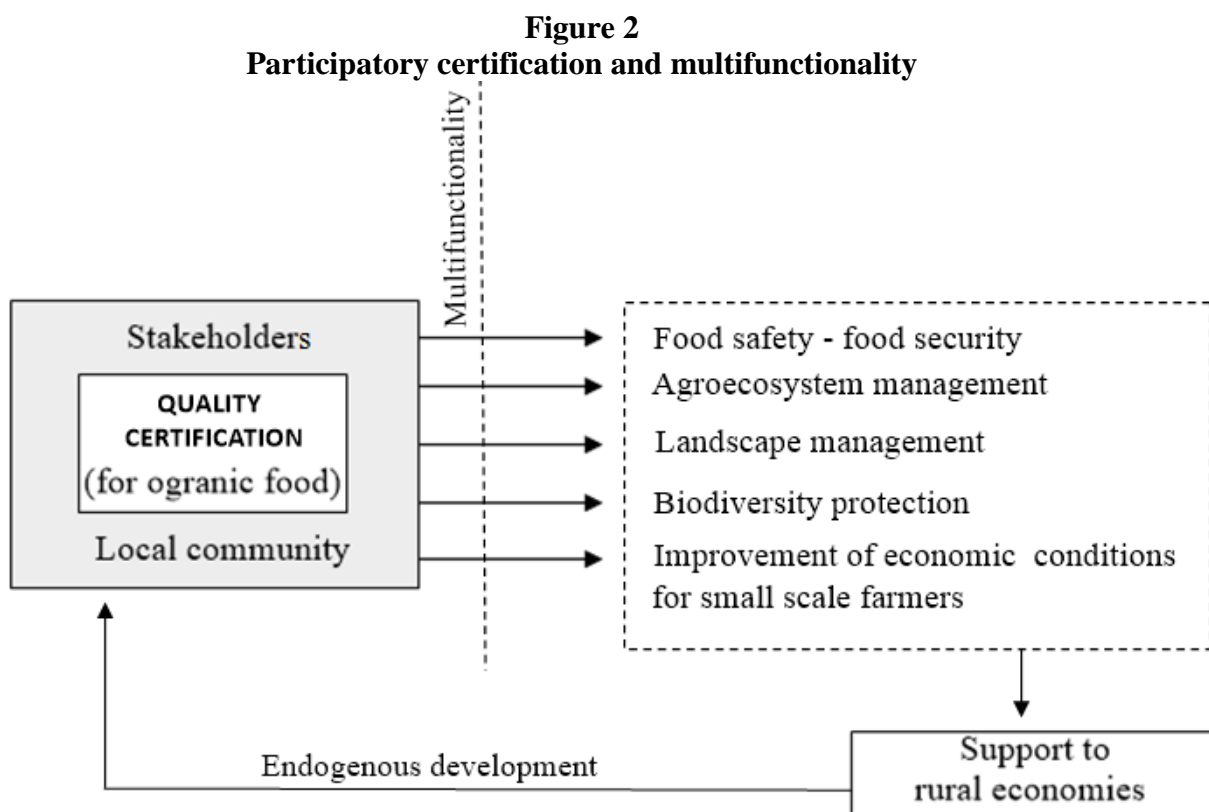
capital. Since social capital (SC) is the set of social relations of which an individual or collective subject can avail for a certain time, its use favors its reproduction in a virtuous circle (Colemann, 1990; Trigilia, 1999). In conclusion of this section, considering that a ‘territorial context results more or less rich in SC depending on the greater or lesser participation of the resident people in networks of relations’, it can be stated that contexts where the PGS are working present high levels of SC which is embedded in the finished product (Trigilia, 1999, p. 423).

PGSs in practice

Currently, PGSs are spread all over the world, with greater diffusion in Latin America and Asia. In 2015 109,317 producers and processors were involved in PGSs and - among them - 46,945 were certified through the system. In spite of the different localisation, they have common organisational characters that determine their daily functioning. Producer or groups of producers that want to be part of a PGS commit themselves, through a compromise declaration submitted to a certification commission, to comply with the system regulation and to adapt the production practices to it (Khosla, 2006). The commission is generally composed of five members from different categories (producers, consumers, development actors) who have the task of evaluating requests for participation in the system, by sending to the production site, a group of visitors in order to gather the information needed to assess agricultural property management, production techniques, origin of seeds or other requirements established by the regulation (Torremocha, 2012). If production standards are consistent with the PGS rules, the commission allows the access of the applicants in the system and authorises the use of a specific quality label. According to the principle of democracy, each task covered is subject to rotation and every activity is public and transparent (Meirelles, 2007).

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The involvement of different actors binds them in a common effort that goes beyond the mere production and consumption of quality food, indeed participatory certifications have a multifunctional character that guarantees - besides a greater economic efficiency and a healthy, safe and adequate food for local diets - ecological services like protection of biodiversity and landscape management (Figure 2).



Original figure created by the author.

The use of alternatives forms of guarantee is locally working in opposition to the standards of international certification models (e.g. the International Organization for Standardisation or ISO).

A practical advantage that we can observe is an increase in farmer's incomes due to a rise in

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organic consumption locally (Fonseca, 2004; Cuéllar-Padilla & Calle-Collado, 2011; Hochreiter, 2011). Nevertheless, the greater diffusion of the systems is formally hampered by a deep lack in the institutional formalisation. In fact, only a few countries like Brazil, Bolivia and Peru attribute legal recognition to PGSs while in other different realities only traditional certification bodies are recognised as legitimate on the basis of ISO Guide 17065⁷. As a result, the local institutions do not adopt policies that could stimulate an extension of the participatory system and its credibility. As reported by IFOAM (2017: 2) “from more than 70 countries with an organic regulation in place or under development, only a handful has taken PGS into consideration when developing their organic laws and regulation”. The lack of legal recognition plays like a centrifugal thrust creating a distance between PGSs and new potential users and compromising its effectiveness and applicability to new contexts. This is the direct consequence of a partial involvement of the different stakeholders: when there is no effort from local or national governments, the level of confidence decreases, the process of credibility building is interrupted resulting in a slump in the level of attractability and replicability of the system. The causes of this institutional lack are not only identifiable in an informative bias, inherent in the PGS potential, but must be traced back to the direct political will to protect the status quo within the food regimes (Seyfang, 2007). The perpetuation of vertical and non-inclusive food regimes becomes functional for the strengthening and the maintenance of economic and political systems in line with the neoliberal scheme. Quoting Mutti (1998, p. 543), institutions have to play the key-role of “*diffusers of trust*”, that means they have to be “social mediators which create channels of linkage between different social networks [...] and favor the widespread accumulation of the social capital building bridges

⁷ It specifies the requirements for bodies certifying products, processes and services.

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between relational areas marked by lack of links but rich in informative potentiality [...]”. So, if the formal recognition of PGSs comes from those who already have a certain degree of trust (i.e. governance apparatus), it would reduce the area of uncertainty around their applicability.

Conclusions

In this paper, the topic of quality re-socialisation has been interpreted as one of the strategies for researching the autonomy of peasantry. Through the contributions of the relevant literature, I have tried to identify an ideal tool (PGS), locally accessible, that can be functional for the social construction of quality within an ever-expanding market like the one of organic food.

After describing the operating principles of Participatory Guarantee Systems and placing them within the most complex process of the re-emerging of the peasant model, it can be said that PGSs are a means to withstand the pressure of global markets on local economies. We have seen that the practices for managing the system adopt not only the logic of a rational economy but reflect the principles of a peasant moral economy aimed at a collective advantage. As pointed out several times in the previous sections, nowadays meeting a collective need is what allows peasantry to exist, reorganise and reinvent itself. The role of peasants is no longer confined passively to food production but is extended beyond the boundaries of the supply chain in order to assure a multifunctional character of agriculture.

Looking at the current situation, in spite of a not completely favorable politics, peasant organisations and transnational peasant movements are working to frame PGSs in a broader framework of sustainable development, within which policy-makers should have a role of connectors between the complex of new certifications and the policies for rural development,

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social inclusion and food security; only in this way it will be possible to understand, and then expand, the real potential of the participatory system.

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