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EDITORIAL

GRASSROOTS (ECONOMIC) ACTIVISM IN TIMES OF CRISIS Mapping the redundancy of collective actions

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ABSTRACT: In the current economic crisis of industrialized society, social movements face two types of challenges: firstly, they are confronting institutions that are less capable of and have no propensity for mediating new socio-economic demands; secondly, they are experiencing difficulties in building strong and lasting bonds of solidarity and cooperation among people. The latter are fundamental resources for the emergence of collective action; however, the highly individualized structure of contemporary society makes the creation of social ties ever the more difficult. As a consequence, contemporary waves of protest are often short-lived.

Nonetheless, in response to the multidimensional crises, the consolidation of grassroots mutualistic and cooperative experiences, within which new affiliations for collective action are experienced, is on the rise. Indeed, it is a fact that even though conditions are not favorable, social movements have continued to expand and promote community-led initiatives for social and economic sustainability. In some cases, these initiatives play a decisive role in the fight against poverty and in guaranteeing human livelihood. Solidarity-based exchanges and networks, such as barter groups, urban gardening, new consumer-producer net-

works and cooperatives, time banks, local savings groups, urban squatting, and others similar experiences are typical examples of continuous reactivation of people's desire to be agents of their own destiny. This combination of formal and informal networks are a testimony to an ability and an aspiration. Indeed, on one hand, they are indicative of citizens' capacity to self-organize in order to tolerate, absorb, cope with and adjust to the environmental and social threats posed by neoliberal policies. On the other hand, they are attempting to change an economic system, increasingly perceived as unfair and ecological disruptive, by building an alternative in the cracks of the former, based on greater mutual solidarity between individuals and more sustainable connections with the environment. This special issue is a reflection, among the many that have been proposed of late, on some of these self-organized collective actions that have passed through and/or emerged from the aftermath of the crisis. It is the result of an attempt to cross various disciplinary fields, in order to explore the redundancy of their respective explanations as to why and how some grassroots activities last and succeed, and turn this redundancy into the powerhouse for relaunching more robust and less aleatory initiatives.

KEYWORDS: Resilience, Collective action, Degrowth, Sustainable Community Movement Organizations (SCMOs), Commons

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1. Resilience and resistance to what?

Following Castell et al. (2012), it is possible to succinctly present the twists and turns of the current economic model. According to the Catalan sociologist and his colleagues, over the last 30 years industrialized society have been experiencing a new model of economic growth i.e. the global informational capitalism, structured around the network society. It was founded on certain values and beliefs that emerged from the movements of the 1960s and '70s, whose core aim was to foster a culture of freedom. A culture that on one hand has been the impetus for technological innovations based on entrepreneurialism (think of the free software, open ecology sources, peer-to-peer productions), animated by curiosity-driven research, the desire to fight against corporate monopoly, for more flexible engagement than traditionally organized social actions, and the necessity to escape state bureaucracy. Yet on the other hand, it has somehow favored the waves of deregulation, privatization and liberalization, which have been the main objectives of the neo-liberal agenda since the '80s. In 2008 this economic model entered a crisis. Ecological economists underlined that the crisis was caused not only by abuse in the financial economy – i.e. credits, collaterals, futures and derivatives trading – by malfunctions of the real economy – i.e. factories, farms and services – but also by the plunder of what they define the real-real economy – i.e. ecosystem services, fossil fuels, natural gas deposits and sink capacity (Kallis et al, 2009).

Complementing the outlined diagnosis, and informed by the rigorous approach of critical feminist economists (Orozco 2010, 2015), degrowth scholars assert the multidimensional aspects of the current crisis. Indeed, they sustain it is not only a crisis of global informational capitalism, but also a crisis of extractivist economy, the biophysical support of the former, an ecological crisis, a political crisis and a crisis of care. In brief: a civilization crisis articulated around the twin economic imperatives of growth and development (D'Alisa et al. 2014a). If this is true, then how has the collapse of this civilization been avoided (or postponed)? The worldwide elite – thanks to the deference of many politicians in power – have imposed a re-regulation of financial markets, i.e. using the political power of the supposedly dismissed state. Globally, state policies have been based on a mix of money injection (bailing out many banks from the damage caused by the real-estate bubble) and austerity policies, in the name of controlling of the rise of sovereign-debt, partly caused by the financial crisis. Both policies are presented as very different approaches, but in actual fact, they share a core objective: the re-launch of growth (D'Alisa et al. 2014b). Moreover, those policies have been very helpful for few but disastrous for the majority of the population that has been forced to bear the brunt of them. As consequence, social unrest has mounted. The Sidi Bouzid revolt in Tunisia, Tharir square in Egypt, Syntagma in Greece, Puerta del Sol in Spain, Zuccotti park in the USA and Gezi park in Turkey have become the worldwide symbol of a claim for more democracy in political as well as in economic decisions.

In the current situation, however, social movements simultaneously face two types of challenges. Firstly, they are confronting institutions which are less able (and willing) to mediate new demands for social justice and equity emerging from various sectors of society, in the wake of the successful neo-liberal attack on the social welfare system and the consequent retreat of the state. Secondly, given the highly individualized structure of contemporary society, they are also experiencing difficulties in building strong and lasting bonds of solidarity and cooperation among people, bonds of union that constitute a fundamental resource for collective action. Thus, many protests, although very effective in the short run in imposing political change, are often short-lived and last only on a symbolic level (Forno & Graziano, 2014). In some cases people's malaise, anxiety and unrest has taken the form of defensive xenophobia and racism; in other cases it has propelled collective actions that aspire to found a fairer and more sustainable socio-ecological configuration than the one molded by the current socio-economic system.

Sociologists led by Castells were not only among the first to offer a diagnosis of the crisis, but because of their privileged position in Catalonia during the rise of indignados movement, they were also immediately ready to investigate the waves of economic

practices and grassroots movements that gained momentum in the aftermath of the crisis. Their results stressed that the alternative economic culture was no longer only a prerogative of marginal anti-systemic movements; on the contrary, it was slowly pervading the culture of society at large (Conil et al. 2012). A preliminary result that may partly help to explain the unexpected results of the Barcelona en Comú – a grassroots movement-backed party that won the last election for the municipality in the Catalan capital – which made it possible for the spokesperson of the Platform Against Eviction (PAH in Spanish), the most relevant social movement in Spain in the last decade, to be voted mayor of the city.

In line with those pioneering studies, the present special issue analyzes those collectives that first and foremost resist the expansion of global (informational) capitalism by engaging in the production of alternative and contentious socio-ecological configurations. Furthermore, it is a reflection on those self-organized collective actions that have passed through and/or emerged from the aftermath of the crisis. The aim is not only to see if their practices of resistance are building more resilient processes to cope with the current crisis, but also to outline some of their pros and cons as a political counter-hegemonic endeavor.

2. Wearing different lenses: the creation of redundancy looking at collective actions

Communication marks the creation of redundancy (Bateson 2000). Engineers duplicate critical components of a system when they want to increase its reliability.

The idea of this special issue comes out of an initial attempt to ensure dialogue among different disciplines and approaches. The overlapping of some previous results, obtained wearing specific disciplinary lens for describing important characteristics of similar collective actions by different social scientists, should guarantee a better backed-up explanation of the why and how those practices emerge and last. Indeed, we, the three editors, have different backgrounds (an ecological economist, a sociologist and a geographer) and use different languages and tools for analyzing the genealogy, dynamics and characteristics as well as the strength and the weakness of grassroots activities and social movements, which aspire to transform the current socio-economic system into a more just, equitable and sustainable society. Apart from sharing the same objectives as researchers, the three of us use to take part in several of the collective actions we investigate. We act and think, thus, as organic intellectuals of those grassroots activities. Therefore, if this our first attempt at creating dialogue between

our previous independent reflections has any sense to it, it will create a series of redundant explanations of such collective actions, which in turn will improve their stability, predictability and integration.

D'Alisa et al. (2013) looked at diverse forms of grassroots activism through the lens of degrowth. They adopted a degrowth perspective as an interpretative frame. The authors illustrated the useful coexistence of different grassroots strategies articulated by civil society and by what the authors define, in a form of apology, as uncivil society. Uncivil actors being those that refused to be governmentalized (Armiero & D'Alisa, 2012). These degrowth scholars argue that civil actions such as Transition Town initiatives and uncivil actions such as ecological squatting practices (for more, see Engel-Di Mauro & Cattaneo in the present issue) should be combined effectively to re-politicize the debate about what kind of society we (those interested in changing the current socio-economic system) want to live in, and open up alternative avenues. The synergies of both strategies are crystal clear when their advantages and disadvantages are highlighted. The civil forms of activism involve a more heterogeneous milieu, and tend to gain broader support in the society, but they risk being a-political and thus more easily co-opted by conventional markets and neo-liberal ideology. The uncivil forms hold a more subversive attitude with their clear rejection of the imaginary of growth and its inherent economic inequity and ecological unsustainability. However, they are rejected by many due to their (illegal or informal) forms and gain the favor of different strata of society (when it happens) all too slowly. This is why D'Alisa et al. conclude that both civil and uncivil should be fundamental engines of a degrowth imaginary if their common action is to enforce effective, transformative, counter-hegemonic narratives.

Forno & Graziano (2014) investigated grassroots activities through the lens of both political consumerism and social movement theory. The latter highlighted that many Global Justice Movement activists identified the market as the main arena in which to implement their political activism. The former highlighted the individual's responsibility in the daily performative act of consumption in demanding not only a certain price and product quality, but also a certain producer behavior. The authors integrating both frameworks proposed to define as Sustainable Community Movement Organizations (SCMOs) all those social movements that mobilize citizens, leveraging mainly on their purchasing power and encouraging them to behave in the market as politically concerned consumers. Forno & Graziano stress that the common denominator of the SCMOs is their criticism of the productivism of modern industries and farms and the desire to re-articulate consumption and production on a smaller scale. Thus, they support a relocalization of economics activities to be re-embedded in social relations; characteristics and objectives that sound familiar to degrowth supporters (for similari-

ties with SCMOs examples see D'Alisa et al. 2014a). Indeed, Forno & Graziano recognize groups promoting de-growth as a particular kind of SCMOs, one that has an anti-consumerist attitude and a global scale of action. However, although critical consumption is recognized as a relevant strategy from which one may start promoting societal transformation, it is not possible to define degrowth movement activists as looking only at their own consumption attitudes, because their strategies are varied, including: oppositional actions (e.g. stopping the expansion of infrastructures), the construction of alternatives (e.g. promotion of co-housing), reformist policies (e.g. renovation of public school), research (e.g. activist-led science), multiscale activism (e.g. practising permaculture, supporting the ecological reconversion of territory and sustaining the worldwide agro-ecology movement) (Demaria et al. 2013).

Maurano analyzed grassroots struggles wearing the lens of a territorial geographer. Together with his colleague Carabellese, he argued that environmental conflicts mobilize a latent social capital, which actually reactivates a new form of territorialization (Carabellese and Maurano 2013). The process of re-territorialization comes with a claim to the “democratization of democracy”, thus as grassroots struggles create dissensus, they also empower marginal groups, which often have no voice in the standard institutional procedures. The territory as a cultural substratum and the livelihood of the community is re-thought differently because of the collective action, which also unveils new, previously invisible connections between people, and also between people and their environment. This unveiling of connections constitutes a prefigurative performance of commoning (D'Alisa 2013, De Rosa & Caggiano, this issue).

Indeed, struggles have also been identified as a constituent element of the commons. Power relations, which pass through and mould the commons, evolve geographically and historically, through struggles (D'Alisa & Mattiucci 2013). This continuous enclosure is immanent to capitalist evolution. Commons are produced through struggles and enclosed again by capitalism (De Angelis 2007). Capitalism needs a common fix to tackle social instability and at same time commons is the basic form for the creation of alternative socio-ecological arrangements (De Angelis 2013). Thus, it is no coincidence that in the context of the current ecological and social crises, many grassroots collectives have been representing their practices and horizons as instances of commons (Bollier 2014). The commons is an evolving pattern made up of three elements: 1) pooled goods or services (the resource), collectively managed, 2) a group of people (the commoners), who collectively found and enforce institutions for governing the resources, 3) the production and reproduction of the commons over time through actions (the commoning).

Therefore, commons can be defined as a connecting structure (biophysical and/or artificial) organized around integrative institutions by a group of people (D'Alisa 2013).

Degrowth, Sustainable Community Organized Movement, Territorialization and Commons are not the only approaches to analyze contemporary grassroots mobilization. Another analytic framework, which has been increasingly exploited in recent debate, is built around the concept of social resilience. Socially resilient systems are made up of three dimensions: the coping, the adaptive and the transformative capacity. Capacities necessary to tackle sources of stress, i.e. slowly increasing threats (e.g. water contamination, increasing house prices); and perturbation, which refers to rapid-onset hazards (e.g. hurricanes, financial crises). Thus, social resilience is considered a dynamic process which describes the ability of embedded social actors to foster collective transformation through a process of social learning and participative decision-making (Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013).

As the various contributions in this special issue will also show, such analytical frameworks represent different angles from which to look at similar, although not identical, phenomena. For several reasons, they also represent the reactualization and reappraisal of old debates such as 19th-century co-operative movement ideas on the need to reorganize economic life on the basis of human and social needs, not just accumulation (Forno 2013; Forno and Graziano 2014, see also Bosi and Zamponi, present issue).

However, the goal to make all these approaches communicate does not mean repeating old arguments about similar grassroots attempts to resist and respond to continuous dispossession by the capitalist system (Harvey 2003), but once again to explore their redundancy and to reinvigorate those collective actions.

3. Contextualizing the special issue

Many of the cases presented in the present special issue are indicative of citizens' and informal groups' capacity to self-organize in order to tolerate, absorb, cope with and adjust to the environmental and social threats posed by neoliberal policies. In summary, they are examples of the ability to build socially resilient system from below. More in general, grassroots initiatives are spurred to do so in order to cover basic and urgent needs such as food, shelter, health, childcare and education without a specific political vision in mind. On the contrary, the ones discussed below also attempt to change the current economic system, increasingly perceived as unfair. In order to do so, they are building alternative socio-economic configurations in the cracks of the system, on

the base of greater mutual solidarity between individuals and more sustainable connections with their environment. These attempts are fundamental for re-launching the beginning of history again and again (De Angelis 2007). This is a reactivation that often has a specific horizon in mind: that of the commons (Bolier 2014, Hardt & Negri 2009). Unlike more 'classic' social movements, such experiences are much more involved in constructive and carefully organized forms of dissent towards contemporary capitalism and its transnational organization. The actors involved promote and diffuse innovative economic practices throughout society which try to facilitate resilient processes in the current adverse contexts.

At the center of Engel-Di Mauro and Cattaneo's article (2015, present issue) is the experience of urban ecologically aware squats and 'rurban' experiments carried on in Barcelona and Rome. As the two authors claim, especially in such rurban versions, squats represent interesting lifestyle alternatives. They demonstrate the ability to gain larger support in their neighborhood while developing projects of autonomy in line with anti-systemic groups. Indeed these uncivil actors (D'Alisa et al. 2013) not only promote individual self-fulfillment through access to physical resources that guarantee the satisfaction of basic needs such as food and shelter to their members, but they also seek to involve people who are no part of squatter culture at all in their alternative social and economic practices, such as gardening and cycle workshops. Nonetheless, they contribute to raising ecological awareness in their neighborhoods and cities, and become promoters of actions that aim to reduce harmful environmental impact. Doing so successfully, their experiences last and gain in social resilience by virtue of being politically legitimated by various social strata throughout the city. The promotion of self-managed practices and the setting of self-instituted norms make these rurban squatters commoners (Bolier 2014). Their sober and ecological life style make them the best anthropological and political subject of a degrowth society (D'Alisa et al. 2014a). Furthermore, the ecological squatting practices described by Engel-Di Mauro & Cattaneo can be seen as part of those Direct Social Actions (DSAs) which are at the center of Bosi and Zamponi's contribution (2015, present issue). Indeed, DSAs are a form of actions that instead of claiming something from the state or other power holders, focus on directly transforming specific aspects of society by means of the action itself.

According to Bosi and Zamponi, these activities have always represented a significant part of the repertoire of contention, and the fact that grassroots economic actions have somehow gained momentum in recent times should be attributed to the increase in the demand for such actions, which in times of economic hardship tends to characterize a broader constituency. The thesis of the DSAs somehow tends to be confirmed by two other contributions to the present issue, both related to the ever expanding

practices of urban gardening. Both the contributions by Elisabetta Cangelosi (2015) and Marta Camps-Calvet et al. (2015) show how the resurgence of this practice, respectively in Brussels and in Barcelona, represents not only a way to cope with economic and social threats but above all a tool to rebuild and reshape social bonds. Urban gardens create opportunities for self-organization and commoning, offering spaces to enhance social cohesion and collective action. In a context of generalized cutbacks to the welfare state and basic public services, even when they contribute only marginally to the practitioners' diet, urban gardens help to reduce social exclusion and offer opportunities to develop and debate around new alternative models of urban lifestyle. Anguelowski (2014) argues why these practices are often in line with degrowth predicaments of small-scale and low-impact forms of food production and provision, the latter being at the core of Guidi & Andretta's contribution to present issue. The authors deals with the current transformations in times of crisis of the so-called Solidarity Purchase Groups (SPGs) – which in Italy represent the most widespread example of an organized form of political consumerism (Graziano & Forno 2012; Forno et al. 2013; Grasseni et al. 2015). Interestingly, their analysis shows that while post-materialistic values resulting from economic well-being might have initially fueled changed in consumption and lifestyles, once political consumerism is structured, not only does it resist external shocks but it also transforms itself and adapts to the new conditions imposed by crises, thus resulting in effective and resilient grassroots economic practices. They not only act at the concrete level of everyday life choices of consumption (I buy a fair-trade product and not a mere commodity) but they face the more abstract level of choice of the contexts in which the act of consumption is practiced (I buy a fair-trade product in a small shop and not in a mega store or a big shopping mall); finally they also promote the complete rethinking of the ensemble of alternatives and contexts in which consumption choices take place (I take part in SPGs or a District of Solidarity Economy and not a complete marketized milieu). This is a process of unlearning (Bateson 2000) that can help to transform critical consumers in critical citizens (Collettivo Pagine Arcobaleno 2004; Forno et al. 2013; Forno 2014; Grasseni 2013; 2014).

In fact, in several respects, the current crisis has picked up on increasing criticism on the existing regime of productivism and mass consumption, which is progressively being questioned (Campbell 2009), for its growth mania (D'Alisa et al. 2014). Conventional food supply chains characterized by massification and the pursuit of low prices has led to growing concerns amongst both consumers and farmers, together with a range of international experts. While among consumers, anxiety has grown as a consequence of a series of food safety scares and the lack of traceability, for farmers it has been the

cost-price squeeze of specialized commodity production that continues to reduce the scope for making a living from agriculture.

A particularly emblematic example of farmer mobilization in times of crisis is analyzed by Itçaina & Gomez (2015), who in their contribution to this special issue present two cases in the French Basque Country showing how new economic social movements are today much more interconnected than before, with sectoral and territorial claims in the Basque territory. The Basque small farmers' movement has in fact succeeded in extending its cause beyond the agricultural sector by linking the category-based interests of small farmers to wider societal issues: the aspiration to set up alternative economic spaces, environmental issues, politicized consumption, and institutional recognition of the Basque territory. An articulated attempt at building a counter-hegemonic alternative which permeates civil society, i.e. the social space where class actors try to reach consensus around their ideology as well as political society i.e. the social space where the actors of different classes struggles for the seizure of coercive power. A similar case is analyzed by Federico Oliveri (2015) in his analysis of SOS Rosarno, a project that was launched in 2011 by a group of small farmers and activists based on the Gioia Tauro Plain, Calabria, Southern Italy. The idea behind this initiative was to sell organic citrus fruits through Alternative Food Networks essentially based on Solidarity Purchase Groups, in order to allow farmers to pay migrant workers according to the standards set by the law, to guarantee themselves a fair remuneration, to offer healthy and affordable food to consumers, and to protect the integrity of the environment. A very challenging project in a context where 'ndrangeta (the name of the mafia in Calabria) controls vast parts of the agro-food sector; where seasonal migrants have been vexed constantly, and where the income per capita is among the lowest in Italy. This case also demonstrates the transgressive role of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) (Goodman & Sage 2014): their capacity to cross the boundaries of established knowledge and practices, and to envisage new forms of ethics and engagement with power. It shows on the first level of analysis that at a time of austerity and welfare disintegration, solidarity can act as a connective value to build alliances with other groups that share its mutualistic undertones. Furthermore, at a deeper level of analysis, the case highlights how the articulation of struggles around food can open up broader political issues such the fight against organized crime mafia-like and the precarious condition of immigrants and their racialized lives.

The politicization of the struggle is also presented in the last article of the current issue by De Rosa & Caggiano (2015). The authors make their arguments looking at the empirical case of social and ecological conflicts currently unfolding in the so-called Land of Fire, an area in Southern Italy infamous for the socio-environmental impact of two

decades of illegal waste trafficking, disposal mismanagement and contamination (Carabellese & Maurano, 2013, Armiero & D'Alisa, 2012, D'Alisa et al. 2010). They describe an emerging social and economic network, weaving together environmental justice movements resisting accumulation-by-contamination strategies and social cooperatives reclaiming lands and assets confiscated from the Camorra, the Neapolitan name for such mafia organizations. De Rosa & Caggiano show how alternative economic networks offer the means to re-spatialize the food supply, re-embedding production, and reconnecting local actors with the physical territorial attributes and vernacular ecology of their region. Furthermore, how these commoning practices create scope for new market arrangements, where more horizontal links are established between a wide range of actors, contributing to strengthen the local economy and creating new employment opportunities.

4. Conclusion

Since 2007, Europeans have been living with a permanent feeling of the incumbent collapse of the current socio-economic system. This state of mind has been inflicted on the vast majority of the population by a technocratic approach that proposes the same recipe to all countries. A recipe whose ingredients are the continuous expansion of market principles in order to re-launch economic growth and austerity measures that prevent the state from intervening to allocate and redistribute resources. However, the very depressive context has allowed a number of alternative socio-economic practices to gain momentum. In response to a supposed end of history, women and men have collectively decided to autonomously restart history again and again. The proliferation of new socio-economic practices has thus lured research interests towards the 'alternatives'. As a consequence, with the aim of analyzing such elements, analytical frameworks have brought together the causes, effects, evolution and possible limits of the various alternative (economic) practices, which have come to light in the wake of the crack in global informational capitalism. In this special issue alone, six different approaches coexist: Degrowth, Sustainable Community Movement Organizations, Territorialism, Commons, Social Resilience and Direct Social Actions. All their respective supporters struggle to show how and why their analytical framework can explain more effectively a broader set of phenomena than the others. We do not blame these practices per se, because we believe in the importance of the continuous refinement of sound tools for the advancing of scientific knowledge. However, what we have argued here is that it will be more fruitful to look not at what certain approaches can explain that the

others cannot, but to recognize what we can describe of a certain fact and that other approaches can do likewise. It is important, we maintain, to map the redundancy of the various views on current alternative practices in order to improve their stability, predictability and integration; in short, to unveil their connecting structure and making these collective actions more reliable. In this first attempt, we outline five main elements that are encompassed in all the cases presented, highlighted by the different approaches as important features of them: 1) the critique of the individualized consumerist lifestyle and the support for a simple and sober way of life; 2) the abandonment of the ecologically destructive economic system and the enactment of a more sustainable form of production; 3) the dismantlement of the capitalist production relation and the institution of a process of shared stewardship and “hostesship” about resources that a group of people possess and manage in common; 4) the neglected action addressed to a supposed power holder and the spur of actions in order to transform some trait of society directly 5) the abandonment of a single scale initiative and the articulation of multi-scale collective actions.

Future studies should continue to investigate the commonality of such collective actions. We hope that this issue will stimulate ideas for continued and new research in this field.

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