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Dynamics of Power and Cooperation in Rural Development: The Case of Chianina Beef Production in Italy

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Abstract. This article contributes to the theorization of the much-debated 'paradigm shift' from conventional agri-industrialism towards sustainable rural development through the adoption of an actor-oriented approach that focuses on the practices, initiatives and experiences of rural actors themselves. Building on existing conceptualizations of rural actors as active agents, we analyse cooperative relations amongst quality meat producers in central Italy to shed light onto the dynamics of their collective interventions. Our case study demonstrates that seemingly 'alternative' rural development processes do not necessarily represent a smooth transition towards a new paradigm. Whilst producers have the capacity to collectively negotiate the pressures of the conventional agri-food system, their agency encompasses also conscious attempts to manoeuvre a highly ambiguous relationship with conventional markets to their advantage. Such 'empowerment' is also far from unproblematic. Collective actions provide producers with a degree of power, which, however, is subject to an asymmetrical distribution that seems to parallel that of agri-industrialism. In other words, producers' collective action against the dominant forces of agro-industrial globalization is a contested process of allocation of power over productive relations and the market. Our analysis hence problematises the notion of 'paradigm shift' and calls for further research that critically examines the power differentials that reside in different dimensions of rural development practices.

Introduction

The consequences of the modernization project of the twentieth century, especially the 'residualisation of the agricultural and the rural' (Marsden, 2003, p. 25), have been

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the subject of much discussion and research in European rural and agri-food studies. The general agreement that emerges from the literature is that the 'agri-industrial' mode of rural development, established between the 1960s and the 1990s, has entailed a series of crises in rural Europe and beyond, including environmental degradation, growing health risks, the overproduction of low-quality products and a decline in the number of producers and farm workers (Marsden et al., 2001, p. 77; see also Murdoch et al., 1994; Lowe et al., 1995; van der Ploeg and van Dijk, 1995; van der Ploeg and Renting, 2000, 2004; van der Ploeg et al., 2000, 2002; Marsden, 2006; Morgan et al., 2006).

As a response to the continuing crisis of conventional agriculture, the past decade has witnessed a wide range of initiatives by rural actors that challenge the agri-industrial dynamic. As some scholars have argued, these initiatives collectively represent an emerging sustainable rural development trajectory. In contrast with the agri-industrial paradigm, which assumes the atomistic nature of farms (and of the land associated with them), sustainable rural development stresses the potential symbiotic interconnectedness between farms and the locale: it implies a reconfiguration of the asymmetrical relationship between society and nature, technology and expertise (Marsden and Murdoch, 2006, p. 7). In this perspective, sustainable rural development is then a multifaceted process that 'unfolds into a wide array of different and sometimes interconnected practices', such as organic farming, production of high quality and region-specific products, direct marketing, landscape management, conservation of new nature values and agritourism (van der Ploeg et al., 2002, p. 11).¹ Although sustainable rural development assumes a variety of forms, Marsden (2003, p. 186) identifies three definitive characteristics of this emerging paradigm. First, it is a response to the price-cost squeeze on agriculture. It adds income and employment opportunities to the agricultural sector by enlarging value added. Second, it expresses new relationships between the agricultural sector and society at large. It contributes to the construction of a new agricultural sector that corresponds to the needs and expectations of wider society. Third, it implies a redefinition, recombination and reconfiguration of rural resources, to varying degrees, in and beyond the farm enterprise.

This article aims to contribute to the theorization of this paradigm shift through the adoption of an actor-oriented approach that focuses on the practices, initiatives and experiences of rural actors themselves. In contrast with the view that the structural transformation of agriculture and the increasing control by global agribusiness conglomerates over the agri-food system leave little room for manoeuvre to small-scale producers (Buttel et al., 1990; Le Heron, 1993; McMichael, 2000), the article builds on existing conceptualizations of rural actors as active agents and pays central attention to the diversity and dynamics of their collective interventions (van der Ploeg, 1992, 1993; Long, 1997, 2001; Jarosz, 2000; Higgins, 2006). Our analysis will focus on recent developments in the Chianina meat sector in Italy to attempt to show that the new rural development trajectory should not be understood as an outcome of abstract structural forces. Rather, it is concomitant of a dynamic and complex process whereby rural actors actively respond to, and negotiate, structural change. In this process, rural actors are not powerless pawns of external forces. However, our case study will try to demonstrate that such a process does not necessarily represent a smooth transition towards a new development paradigm. In other words, producers' collective action against the dominant forces of agri-industrial globalization is not necessarily, as van der Ploeg et al. (2000, p. 403) put it, a form of 'resistance

paysanne' (see also Ventura and Milone, 2000, p. 454–455) but a more contested process of allocation of power over productive relations and the market. Specifically, our analysis of cooperation amongst quality meat producers in central Italy shows that a fuller understanding of rural development requires a careful consideration of rural actors' agency without falling into a binary 'oppression vs. resistance' reductionism. What this entails is a nuanced analysis of the power dynamics played out at different levels in rural development practices, with attention to both constraining and enabling structural forces and the significance of the interventions by individuals and groups.

Sustainable Rural Development: Towards a Paradigm Shift?

In recent years, the literature on agri-food has devoted much attention to the emergence of so-called 'alternative food networks'. By emphasizing attributes of 'localness', 'quality' and 'traceability', these initiatives seem to be signalling a shift away from the agri-industrial food sector. The literature has so far provided a number of case studies that highlight the potential of alternative food networks to revitalize rural areas (for example, see Marsden et al., 2000; Knickel and Renting, 2000; de Roest and Menghi, 2000; Sonnino, 2007), thereby facilitating the rise of a more territorially-based rural development paradigm.

This positive view of the impacts of 'alternative' food initiatives has been accused by some critics of reductionism and lack of empirical validity. Goodman (2004), in the forefront of this critique, claims that the postulated nexus between alternative agri-food networks and the emergence of a new rural development model is flawed by a general tendency to reify the 'local' as homogenous and ontologically given. In this context, some researchers have questioned whether the values, attitudes and behaviour of rural actors actually correspond to uncompromising binary categories (for example, see Shucksmith, 1993; Morris and Potter, 1995; Hoggart and Paniagua, 2001; Wilson, 2001; Evans et al., 2002; Burton, 2004; Burton and Wilson, 2006). Related to this is the claim that uncritical valorization of local agency, or what Dupuis and Goodman (2005, p. 360) describe as 'unreflexive localism', entails questionable political implications – first, its denial of 'the politics of the local, with potentially problematic social justice consequences' and, second, its vulnerability to neoliberal co-optation. On this basis, it is claimed that to position the exploitative, globalized agri-industrial trajectory in diametrical opposition to its local counterpart is to implicitly legitimize the relations of domination that exist at this scale. Furthermore, the argument goes, any uncritical celebration of local entrepreneurship runs the risk of consolidating, rather than subverting, the free-market logic of neoliberalism (Guthman, 1998; Allen, 1999; Bruckmeier, 2000; Ray, 2000; Scott et al., 2000; Shucksmith, 2000; Wilson, 2001; Allen et al., 2003; Goodman, 2004; Shortall, 2004; McAreavey, 2006). Indeed, the relationship between 'conventional' and 'alternative' paradigms and food networks is far more complex than an unproblematic notion of paradigm shift seems to suggest. Buck et al. (1997), Allen and Kovach (2000), Goodman (2000) and Guthman (2004) have variously highlighted contradictions and tensions within the organic sector, especially its conventionalization and the implications for its oppositional potential. The complexity of 'alternative' food networks is further highlighted by Marsden et al. (2008), who, based on a comparative analysis of six Italian and UK cases, show that the emergence of alternative and re-localized networks is a

highly problematized phenomenon whereby the construction of new markets leads to forms of social and economic exclusion and differentiation among quality producers. These contributions suggest that the power dynamics both within 'alternative' and between 'alternative' and 'conventional' sectors and practices cannot be fully captured by a simple dualism.

Therefore, to assess whether alternative food networks and other rural development practices truly represent an important step towards an alternative food and agricultural economy, it is crucial to uncover power relations that are shaping the emergence and development of the so-called 'alternative' food chains. In other words: Are the emerging rural development practices symptoms of a process of revalorization of the countryside and rural communities? Are they truly re-allocating power to small-scale food producers? Are they encouraging new forms of cooperation capable of contrasting the individualistic tendencies of the free-market economy, thereby enabling small producers to resist the 'cost-price squeeze' in agriculture?

Several studies have so far highlighted the potential of producer cooperation in relation to rural development. For the most part, the research has been focused on the positive contributions of (variously defined and measured) social capital to economic and rural development. Svendsen and Svendsen (2000), for instance, have applied the Putnamian notion of social capital to a case study of the emergence, growth and erosion of the Danish cooperative dairy movement. Sobels et al. (2001) positively evaluate the role of social capital in two successful Landcare group networks in rural Australia. Similarly, Slangen et al.'s (2004) research shows the importance of social capital and appropriate institutional arrangements in producing agricultural development in Central and Eastern European Countries. Chloupkova et al. (2003) discuss how the cooperative movement in Denmark and Poland prior to World War II relied on values of trust and cooperation, which, over time, have created a range of horizontal and vertical links between people to satisfy different needs of particular social groups. In a similar fashion, in his case study of two towns in rural Australia, Woodhouse (2006) found that the synergistic effect of bonding and bridging social capital was crucial in fostering positive economic outcomes for such communities. Although this article does not enter into a detailed discussion of social capital, it acknowledges that collective action in rural development processes is closely linked to social capital, since horizontal and vertical cohesion among local actors plays a crucial role in its success. Our case study, which explores the multiplicity of power dynamics in producer cooperation, also contributes to some of the ongoing debates over social capital, especially those concerning reductive or monolithic conceptualizations that neglect the essential fluidity and complexity of collective action (for example, see Fine and Lapavitsas, 2004; Bezanson and Carter, 2006; Law and Mooney, 2006).

Producer cooperation is also frequently mentioned or discussed in the wider rural development literature. Again, the prevailing view is that the development of cooperative relations amongst food producers can play a central role in providing access to the food market to small producers who have often been marginalized (or even displaced) by the forces of globalization and industrialization. For instance, Verhaegen and Van Huylenbroeck (2001) discuss how cooperation between Belgian farmers has helped them to overcome the barriers to the development of a direct selling activity – such as inappropriate farm location, the need for investments, the lack of marketing talent and the complexity of health and hygiene regulations. Cooperation, they argue, allows farmers who are unable to invest resources and labour into pro-

cessing or marketing activities to enter the market of quality production. Similarly, de Bruin (1995) discusses the impact and potential of local cooperatives and farmers' associations as a countervailing force challenging the ruling paradigm of agri-industrialism. Two farmers' associations are discussed as examples of successful attempts by farmers to balance economically viable agricultural development with ecological conditions. In addition to securing collective funds and lowering transactional costs to individual farmers, the associations, strongly supported by local communities, have mobilized different groups of farmers around common interests. Furthermore, they have acted as important intermediaries between farmers and state agencies and other rural interest groups, and this had considerable positive impacts on rural income, employment and quality of life.

Some researchers, on the other hand, caution against simplistic approaches to cooperation, social capital and its role in sustainable forms of development. Lee et al. (2005), for example, argue that, although the role of social capital and identities in rural development can be positive in general, this does not necessarily apply to all members of a community. Social capital and identities, they conclude, should not be associated with communities as given; instead, they are constructed and competed over through processes in which memberships of networks are negotiated and communities built. Similarly, in his review of the EU-funded LEADER programme's contribution to building social capital and promoting social inclusion in the UK, Shucksmith (2000) concludes that there is a tendency for endogenous development initiatives to favour those who are already powerful and enjoy a greater capacity to engage with the initiatives (with marginalized social groups less able to participate and less likely to be empowered by such initiatives). Finally, Chase's (2003) work on soybean producers in central Brazil shows that cooperatives may well embrace efficiency, global competition and economies of scale to the detriment of democratic participation and alternative agricultural practices. Again, the findings of our case study may be of relevance to some of these debates.

In this article, we intend to explore the role of producer cooperation in facilitating rural actors' agency to effect change in the face of the encroaching pressures of industrial agriculture. Through an analysis of Chianina meat producers' collective initiatives in Italy, we attempt to shed light onto the power relationships between producers, to identify their key characteristics and to assess their implications in terms of rural development. As we will conclude, our analysis problematizes the notion of 'paradigm shift' and calls for further research that critically scrutinizes the scope of producer cooperation for facilitating sustainable rural development, while examining the power differentials that reside in its different dimensions.

Chianina Meat in Italy: The Context

The crisis of conventional agriculture and the health risks associated with it are particularly evident in the European meat sector, which has been hit in the last decades by a number of 'food scares' and scandals such as BSE and foot-and-mouth disease. In addition to dealing with the market crises caused by this long stream of food scares, in Italy quality meat producers, who tend to be mostly small-holder and artisanal producers, face the pressures of cost reduction and farm consolidation fuelled by the competition from industrial meats and cheap imports. As we will see, in contrast with countries like the UK, Italian quality meat producers have actively

attempted to collectively counter such pressures and attain a degree of control over their productive relations.

Originally used in the Val di Chiana of Tuscany for the purpose of traction (van der Meulen and Ventura, 1995, p. 149), Chianina cattle have been developed over time into a top beef producing breed that is now widespread across Italy. Indeed, in addition to producers who rear Chianina calves on-farm for meat production purposes, many small cattle farmers practice the fattening of quality breeds of bull calves as a complementary farming activity (de Roest et al., 2005).

Contrary to the early opinion of scientists and policy-makers, who used to believe that the breed and its farmers would have eventually disappeared because of their alleged technical inferiority and economic inability (van der Meulen and Ventura, 1995, p. 165), in reality Italian chianina producers have successfully reinvented their activity² as a regional quality production that is somewhat autonomous from, and alternative to, the logic of the conventional agri-industrial system. Crucial to this endeavour has been the role played by farmers' associations (de Roest et al., 2005, p. 1).

Historically, the relationship between Chianina producers and the market in Italy has been mediated by the so-called '5 Rs' Consortium. Established in 1984 by a small group of breeders of the five most renowned national breeds, the '5 Rs' aimed to promote Italian meat in a context where most of the beef farms were too small to access the market individually and where the costs of production were too high to enable Italian farmers to compete with foreign meat producers. However, as a former member of the Consortium explained, the '5 Rs' 'never managed to create the synergies that would have enabled it to deal with large retailers from a position of strength'. As a result, the market for the chianina remained small and volatile for 10 years.

In the mid-1990s, the '5 Rs' Consortium began to face major economic difficulties, which eventually convinced some members of ANABIC (National Association of Breeders of Italian Beef) to create a new Consortium for Italian Beef (CCBI). Established in 1996, CCBI developed two strategies in order to re-enter the market with a brand new image for its meat. First, to guarantee its product in terms of quality, the Consortium applied for a PGI certification.³ Since this required to delimit the area of production, CCBI decided to include just three of the five breeds and to connect them to the 'central Apennines' area, which extends over much of central Italy.

Second, to guarantee its product in terms of provenance, in 1999 the Consortium developed its own 'CCBI' brand, which applies to meat from Chianina cattle that do not conform to the PGI requirements – i.e. to Chianina animals slaughtered when they are older than 24 months, to half-breed animals and to cattle from outside of the PGI production area. This CCBI brand is based on a very sophisticated traceability system: all points of sale are required to display a certificate containing all data about the animal slaughtered. Such data are also recorded in a smart card, valid for 25 days, which CCBI meat sellers must insert in a special scale that detracts the weight of the meat sold from the total supply of CCBI meat.

The double-branding of the Chianina meat has been a winning marketing strategy for producers in two ways. First, the CCBI brand has put under the Consortium's control the entire supply of non-PGI Chianina meat (c. 25% of the total) that could have otherwise competed with their PGI certified product. Second, the combination of these two brands has significantly expanded the market for Chianina meat, especially after the BSE crisis, when even large retailers had to face increasing consumer pressures to supply certified and traceable meat. Today, most supermarkets in Tus-

can have set up special counters for the PGI meat. Coop, the largest regional retailer, sends its personnel from farm to farm to choose the animals, which are directly taken to the slaughter houses and then to the cutting centres. The entire process is carefully monitored by CCBI, which, however, does not interfere with prices. These are in fact negotiated directly by the retailers on the basis of the classification attained by the meat, and are in general 25–30% higher than those paid to conventional producers. In most other cases, however, CCBI acts as a middleman between producers and consumers; in a conscious effort to connect demand and supply, CCBI has reached a supply capacity that, for instance, has allowed Chianina meat to be sold to the schools in Rome – where 48 animals are destined every week (see Sonnino, 2009). The school market has also supported the business of Italian specialized butcher shops, since it has provided an ideal placement for the less expensive meat cuts (such as the inner part of the hindquarters) that restaurants and individual customers often neglect.

The Power of Cooperation: An Analysis of Producers' Agency

BSE as a Rural Development Opportunity

This case study illustrates how non-conventional producers may successfully seize rural development opportunities through collective action. Indeed, crucial to the success of the initiative we have analysed is producers' collective attempt to actively respond to, and even capitalize on, the BSE crisis that occurred in 2001. In Italy, this crisis triggered rising consumer demands for not only national meat (i.e. provenance-guaranteed meat) but also for meat coming from animals fed and bred in a certain way (i.e. quality-guaranteed meat). As Sassatelli and Scott point out, at work here is an 'us-and-them' logic:

BSE has been portrayed in the Italian media as something foreign, something coming from a different country where people do not know how to eat and how to farm. Mucca pazza (mad cow disease) was described as 'British', just as the Dioxin crisis in pork and poultry was later to be branded 'Belgian'. [Food scandals and GM controversies] became a media issue, not only discussed together with other biotechnologies and framed within the existing bioethical discourse, but also set against the paramount safety and naturalness of 'prodotti nostrali' (home-grown products, lit. products from us): the Italian, local produce (Sassatelli and Scott, 2001, p. 225).

In this context, relationships between producers and retailers are strongly affected and mediated by a pervasive emphasis on food provenance and traceability. Meat consumers, according to one retailer, 'often ask where the meat comes from, they want to know the farm, the area, how the animal was raised'. Broadly speaking, this type of demand has created a market for two different types of products in Italy: local products, which are locally produced and locally consumed through marketing channels such as specialized shops and on-farm sales; and locality products, like Chianina meat, which are linked to a specific context of production through PDO or PGI certification (Marsden et al., 2008). In this context, the BSE crisis provided an impetus for the Chianina producers to secure a market for themselves by collectively renewing their meat as a quality product that offered consumers a sense of connectedness and familiarity with the context of production.

Articulating the 'Old' and the 'New'

CCBI seized the opportunity to respond to the rising consumer demands by strategically mobilizing their capacity to provide PGI-certified meat bolstered by strict traceability. In this regard, the central novelty of this initiative lies in the strategic balance between the 'old' and the 'new', the endogenous and the exogenous. In other words, Chianina beef production builds upon a location-specific mix of different forms of capital – the local ecological capital (the Chianina breed, meadows, etc.), human capital (local knowledge, techniques and skills of farming, breeding, feeding and processing, etc.) and the socio-cultural context that valorizes the quality, provenance and locality of food. CCBI's initiative rests on the ability to link this endogenous capital to the new demands for traceable, quality products fuelled by the BSE crisis.⁴ The 'fit' between these different factors has given CCBI a crucial advantage to strategically negotiate their presence on the market. As van der Ploeg and Renting point out, a 'new' rural development initiative 'nearly always involves a reconfiguration of pre-existing constellations' (2000, p. 530, emphasis in original). Thus, sustainable rural development initiatives entail both continuity and change: 'Continuity, since rural development processes basically reproduce and re-affirm the central features of farming as socio-technical practices. And change, because these basic features are at the same time transformed' (van der Ploeg et al., 2002, p. 12). Through CCBI, producers have renewed their activities in a way that fosters revalorization and recombination of existing resources.

Quality and Provenance: Aligning Tradition and New Institutional Arrangements

Under this initiative, the PGI designation, integrative branding and the traceability system have served as effective markers of quality and provenance. This resembles what Lamine (2005, p. 334) observes in box schemes in France: turning to the Chianina meat motivated by a mix of uncertainties about food security and quality, consumers are 'offered, first, a combination of codified guarantees about proximity, freshness and production practices, second, non-codified promises about food safety, dietetics, and taste'. In fact, the PGI certification and the traceability system provide codified, institutional guarantees concerning provenance, typicity and production procedures associated with the product, while at the same time offering non-codified, implicit promises of food safety and quality that neither PGI certification nor the traceability system would alone be able to provide. By aligning the Italian tradition of trust in typical and local food with these new institutional arrangements, producers have been able to reconfigure their activities and to meet the new demands of society at large.

Strategies of labelling and codification, often associated with the conventional supply chain, may appear to represent conformity, rather than resistance, to agri-industrialism. It needs to be noted, however, that such practices carry different meanings under different socio-cultural circumstances. In the Italian context, as Sassatelli and Scott point out, '[p]roduct standardisation and labels are one way of, as it were, bringing products home' (2001, p. 227). The often posited association between labelling and the universalistic and technocratic forms of trust typical of industrialized food systems of mass production and distribution does not fully apply to a country where small retailers and farmers' markets have long occupied a dominant position. In Italy, labelling is required to place a greater emphasis on traceability.

Hence, the Chianina producers actively used these institutional mechanisms to strike an effective balance between 'inheriting territorially distinctive resources and manipulating these, as symbols, to gain market advantage' (Tregear, 2003, p. 102; see also de Roest and Menghi, 2000, p. 440). As Frascarelli (2005) explained, in the case of Chianina meat, the development of a voluntary (as opposed to mandatory) traceability system has enabled producers to achieve their main goal – i.e. the differentiation of their product on the market. However, labelling alone would not have provided producers with any type of negotiation power on a market that is overall dominated by a small group of large retailers. What has really made a difference in the recent history of the Chianina meat has been the alliance amongst producers facilitated by the activities and initiatives of CCBI – an actor, as Frascarelli (2005, p. 6) concludes, which will probably determine the long-term destiny of Chianina producers.

Producer Organization as a Primary Rural Development Actor

There is no doubt that CCBI's organizational contribution is of crucial importance to the success of the Chianina initiative. In addition to applying for the PGI registration, CCBI's collective labelling and marketing (of both the PGI and non-PGI certified meat under one organizational umbrella) and investment in traceability have allowed producers to organize a quality insurance system that individual producers would be unable to develop due to the high costs involved. In this sense, cooperation proves to be crucial to cut the costs and convince producers to make the necessary investments (Verhaegen and Van Huylenbroeck, 2001, p. 453). As one of the ANABIC managers noted, without institutional support, the quality of the product alone may have been insufficient to allow the Chianina producers (many of whom are small-sized and geographically dispersed) to compete with conventional products. For example, CCBI has enabled producers to negotiate with large retailers from a position of collective strength through the preservation of their own brand. In other words, the Consortium has been able to protect the territorial specificity and embeddedness of its product from the homogenizing pressures of the conventional market.

As noted by de Roest and Menghi (2000) in their study of Parmigiano Reggiano, the success of typical food production depends not only upon the intrinsic quality and characteristics of the product but also, among other things, upon the presence of an attractive market and consumer demand for the product – which have been stimulated, to some extent, by the BSE crisis – and a high degree of economic coordination and vertical integration – which CCBI, as an institutional production/marketing coordinator and intermediary, has provided. Sanz Canâda and Vázquez highlight how quality certification bodies such as PDO Regulatory Boards play a key role in 'hybridising traditional know-how and new knowledge in the areas of quality, the environment and the foodstuff' (2005, p. 485); we may add that the operationalization of such hybridized knowledges and skills cannot be completed without the active commitment and cooperation of producers themselves, facilitated by producer organizations like CCBI.

Power Dynamics of Rural Development Initiatives

CCBI's initiative has delivered some significant rural development benefits. Economically, it has consolidated the Chianina market and generated greater value added at

the farm level. Chianina meat today commands a price 25–30% higher than that paid to conventional producers, and the annual turnover amounts approximately to 3500 heads, totalling 8.75 million euros. The institutional framework created by the Consortium has protected the novelty of the Chianina – as a quality locality product that responds to new consumer demands and is simultaneously grounded in the local socio-cultural milieu – from the competition of the conventional meat sector. Ecologically, this contributes to biodiversity (the sustenance of the local breed) and, by extension, may also benefit landscape management through fodder production.

It can be argued that this initiative has enhanced the endogenous development potential of the Chianina farming communities. The Consortium has enabled producers to mobilize territorial assets to strengthen their livelihoods in the face of the encroaching forces of globalization. With the institutional backing of their organization, Chianina farmers are redefining their activity, shifting away from the conventional economies of scale towards more multifaceted economies of scope. Here Chianina beef production is potentially more than just an isolated farm ‘survival strategy’; rather, it can be seen as part of a larger web of initiatives that hold the potential to renew the interrelationships between rural and urban, farms and people, local ecologies and society. In other words, there is scope for regional coherence whereby Chianina beef production actively contributes to the sustainable agri-food and rural development model that some scholars have theorized.

In short, this type of organized activities and cooperation may be potentially oppositional. In terms of their position in the wider agri-food system, they are susceptible to the predominant forces of internationalization, industrialization and free market capitalism (Tregear, 2003; see also van de Ploeg et al., 2000); at the same time, however, they hold out the possibility of creating room for a degree of autonomy from, and perhaps even an alternative to, the logic of the conventional agri-industrial system (de Roest and Menghi, 2000; Murdoch et al., 2000; Tregear, 2003). In the case analysed here, producers have successfully negotiated ‘quality’ within a strategic institutional constellation, thereby devising an effective response to the cost-price squeeze that has been affecting conventional farming. It is in this sense that, in their study of Umbrian farm butcheries, Ventura and Milone (2000, p. 454–455) claim that agri-food practices of this kind may represent an example of ‘resistenza contadina’.

Significantly, this case study shows that the conventional–alternative distinction is of analytical and methodological, rather than empirical, value. As pointed out by many in the debate over alternative food networks (Guthman, 1998, 2000, 2004; Allen and Kovach, 2000; Goodman, 2000; Allen et al., 2003; Renting et al., 2003; Lamine, 2005; Morgan et al., 2006; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006a, 2006b), the relationship between conventional and alternative agri-food sectors is not only competitive; it can also be highly ambiguous. In our case study, part of CCBI’s success derives from its link with the conventional commodity markets – contracting with large retailers and employing corporate-style marketing strategies like branding and labelling (albeit with different significance and meanings). As an ANABIC representative explained, the consortium has been working closely with large retailers because ‘they were crucial to us at the beginning. They gave us a visibility on the mass market that is necessary if you want your product to be known. It is fundamental’. Whilst it is beyond the scope of the present article to assess whether this amounts to the ‘conventionalization’ of quality production, it nevertheless suggests that such initiatives have multifaceted potentials and implications and that the complexities of each need to be accounted for empirically, rather than being subject to reductive and totalizing

analysis. For example, the Consortium is currently trying to decide whether to expand the production area – an operation that, they say, would enhance the visibility of the product on the market but would also bring the prices down for the Chianina producers.

What is evident from this case study is that collective actions of rural actors can make powerful interventions in their circumstances sometimes. If their activities are not immune to the expropriation and subsumption processes of agri-industrialism, they nevertheless pave the way for potentially viable institutional defences against its detrimental impacts (van der Ploeg and Renting, 2004, p. 238). The strength of CCBI's initiative is grounded in the reconfiguration of the territorial assets; BSE and the socio-cultural traditions provided no more than a context for this agency to unfold. In other words, the success of the initiative depends not just on structural conditions like changes in consumption patterns, the expansion of locality product markets and the availability of quality/provenance codification systems, but, crucially, also on the agency of rural actors themselves, who had the capacity and the willingness to create a strategic coherence amongst the resources at hand.

While the initiative thus serves as a potential vehicle for the empowerment of the producers vis-à-vis the conventional agri-food system, it is also important that we eschew a romantic view of local agency (Shortall, 2004) and pay critical attention to the inequity of power that exists at the level of the farming communities. Over a decade ago, van der Ploeg (1995, p. 136) argued that the critical issue in quality production is control and that the redistribution of the extra added value, among other things, is central to the issue.

While the Chianina producers' initiative has delivered important economic and some ecological sustainability outcomes, its social sustainability implications are rather mixed on both the consumption and the production ends. On the consumption side, the effective branding and marketing of the Chianina may enhance the existing sense of place and trust in local products and producers at the wider community level. The success of the initiative also contributes to keeping high-quality meat available at the local level. However, the product remains a niche that reaches mostly a small, wealthier segment of the population, due to its higher price. On the production side, there is a question of equity among the producers. While the initiative may provide an institutional environment conducive to the development of a collective identity and cohesion of the producers as a group, there is an increasing disparity between medium/large and small producers, which the current Chianina beef production tends to aggravate, rather than alleviate. Building on de Roest and Menghi's (2000) argument, we can say that Chianina beef production mitigates, yet ultimately is not free from, the cost-price squeeze and the associated pressures on production styles and techniques. Indeed, under an ongoing trend towards farm consolidation, small producers who are unable to expand their production or modernize their facilities and breeding/feeding practices are driven out of business, while larger farms continue to increase in size. CCBI and ANABIC are divided in their positions on the question of further market expansion; meanwhile, small farmers must operate under a prevailing climate summarized by an ANABIC official as follows:

The breeder must understand that he (/she) must become an entrepreneur, which means he (/she) must modernise his (/her) facilities, the genetics, and the feeding practices must be improved... At the moment the Chianina

is in the hands of many small farmers.... It's the medium-sized farms that open the way. You cannot expect small farmers to do it (brackets added).

For small farmers who struggle to cope with this kind of pressures, then, quality beef production may well remain a 'survival strategy' to barely stay in business, rather than turning into a real and proactive development tool. As producers themselves testified, they have thus far survived due to 'lots of passion' for what is, to many of them, a family tradition; yet, under the present circumstances 'the ones who only have 10 animals or so will have to quit' unless they keep up with the new requirements.

Small producers, some of whom may not be Consortium members due to their inability to pay the membership fees and may only sell their produce to CCBI, are also largely excluded from the decision-making processes that have resulted in, for instance, the crucial move to focus on establishing privileged channels with large retailers and the associated pressures on their production styles and scales. The marginalization of these producers is further compounded by their disadvantaged access to social, as well as material, resources in that large producers tend to already possess relevant knowledge, influence and social networks that consolidate their position within the collective initiative and the distribution of its benefits (see Shucksmith, 2000, p. 208; also Ray, 2000; McAreavey, 2006). Such asymmetrical distribution of socio-economic power and resources is likely to undermine the level of mutual trust among the producers and the sense of collective ownership of their activity – with everything this implies in terms of sustainable rural development.

One of the key future challenges for initiatives like the one we have analysed here is to see whether the synergistic potentials discovered and developed at an early stage are expanded and woven into a coherent rural development strategy that embraces social as well as economic and ecological sustainability. In particular, there is a need for producer organizations (possibly with national/regional policies playing a role) to encourage such initiatives to embrace the aspirations and needs of the widest possible range of rural actors, rather than just a segment of the communities.

Indeed, this case study illustrates that collective action allows regional quality producers to counter the power asymmetry that they collectively face vis-à-vis the conventional agri-food system. Yet disparity exists within the same collectivity, and this entails differential benefits and potentials of the unfolding rural development initiative. Such inequity derives from structural inequalities among producers as well as from the pressures of the conventional commodity market that producers must engage with, since quality production does not take place in a vacuum (Sonnino, 2009). Rural actors have the capacity to effect change, yet they do so in the context of a pre-existing socio-cultural, economic and political setting. It is crucially important to shed light on the dynamics and complexities of this dominant setting, if we are to achieve a better understanding of rural development processes and of the paradigm shift. Zimmerer aptly explains:

'Just-so stories' of globalisation, agriculture, and conservation tend to make blanket interpretations and a priori assumptions of either desired adaptations or disastrous outcomes.... Ultimately, such accounts serve mainly to confirm beliefs and advocacy positions about the innate capacities of local people and/or the all-powerful course of globalisation. But such accounts also tend to show an unfounded disregard for countervailing forces and a

kind of premature finality with regard to processes of change, both of which belie the complexities of globalisation (Zimmerer, 2007, p. 12–13).

Rural development is a contested process. The task of researchers is to elucidate this process in all its empirical forms and dimensions so as to derive insights of theoretical as well as practical value.

Conclusions

The changes in the context of consumption following the recent food crises have presented new opportunities for producers of traditional products, which, in this case study, have been seized by Chianina beef producers. By creating an intricate mix of 'old' and 'new' resources, skills and knowledges, as well as a mix of new demands of the wider society and a tradition of attachment to local food, Chianina producers have successfully reinvented their activity as regional quality production that caters for the rising consumer demands for traceable local food. In this process, the producer consortium, CCBI, has played a central role. They have been responsible for the PGI application, the introduction of a traceability system, and effective collective branding and marketing, thereby creating a strategic institutional mechanism of quality/provenance guarantee that individual producers would otherwise be unable to access. This initiative has provided the producers with greater value added and greater power to negotiate their market position as well as a degree of control over their productive and market relations. In addition, ecological sustainability benefits, such as biodiversity and (possibly) landscape management, may have a broader positive impact on the quality of life at the local/regional community level. In this regard, the initiative may be seen as a rural development practice that has empowered quality producers, allowing them to confront the conventional market from a position of collective strength. However, if sustainable rural development differs from competing development models because of its multidimensional sustainability (Holloway et al., 2006, p. 220), something must be said about the social sustainability potential of this initiative, which remains uneven to date. The Chianina producers are under increasing pressure to conform to some of the principles of conventional agriculture, especially scale enlargement and modernization of production/processing methods. Small-scale producers who are unable to cope with these requirements or to influence collective strategies and decisions continue to be marginalized or even excluded from the quality meat sector. In this respect, the case study demonstrates the potency of local agency but it equally shows that the 'local' 'includes many "communities of interest", with highly unequal capacities to act' (Shucksmith, 2000, p. 208).

Herein, then, lies the dynamics of power and cooperation in rural development. On the one hand, non-conventional producers, through organized collective action, have the capacity to actively negotiate the pressures of agri-industrialism. This agency, however, encompasses not only the oppositional potential of challenging the logic of conventional markets. It also involves conscious attempts by producers to engage in a highly ambiguous relationship with conventional markets to their advantage. On the other hand, this 'empowerment' is also far from unproblematic. Through organized actions of this kind, producers do gain a degree of collective power. However, such power is at the same time subject to an asymmetrical distribution that parallels the dynamics of agri-industrialism. Rural development, as our

case study shows, is a contested process of allocation of power over productive and market relations, with tensions and contradictions of its own. We have attempted to focus on these issues through the adoption of an actor-oriented approach that, we believe, has much to say about the real meanings and implications of development paradigms.

The contested nature of the 'paradigm shift' has been noted by a number of scholars in the past. What is necessary to further develop our understanding of this complex process is a body of empirical research that identifies the multiple meanings and realities of rural development from the point of view of the subjects of this paradigm shift: that is, rural actors. Whilst much research attention has been focused previously on highlighting either transformative or conventional elements of rural development practices, an actor-oriented approach enables us to capture the contradictory yet rich and dynamic realities of rural development. Questions concerning the re-valorization of the countryside and of the rural communities, the re-allocation of power to small-scale food producers and the role of cooperation in contrasting the individualistic tendencies of the free-market economy can only be fully answered by taking into account the multiplicity of the lived experiences of rural actors. This article is a contribution to this urgent task, which, we believe, will offer the theoretical knowledge needed for a critical and more holistic understanding of rural development processes as well as practical insights in the service of producers, citizens, policy-makers and other rural actors in their continuing search for a more sustainable future for rural communities.

Notes

1. Examples of the diversity and impact of these activities have been provided by Banks and Marsden (2000, 2001), Brunori and Rossi (2000), de Roest and Menghi (2000), Marsden et al. (2000), van der Ploeg (2000), van der Ploeg and Renting (2000), Ventura and Milone (2000), Gorman et al. (2001), Knickel (2001), Miele and Pinducciu (2001), Alonso Mielgo et al. (2001), Renting and van der Ploeg (2001) and Kinsella et al. (2002).
2. In 2003, there were 1,066 Chianina farms in Italy, rearing a total of 35,743 certified animals (ANABIC, 2003).
3. While PGI certification is commonly associated with the provenance of food products, the actors in this particular case regarded it primarily as an official marker of territorially specific quality.
4. Data available on the Chianina meat sector clearly demonstrate the success of the Consortium's strategy. Indeed, after 11 years of constant decline of the number of Chianina farms (from 1,141 in 1988 to 684 in 1999), in the 2000s there has been a slow but constant increase in the total number of Chianina farms, which reached 1,066 in 2003. Starting from the year 2001, the total number of certified animals also began to increase, reaching a total of c. 36 000 in 2003 (the highest ever since 1988) (see ANABIC, 2003).

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