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Mimetic Quality: Consumer Quality Conventions and Strategic Mimicry in Food Distribution

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Abstract. Quality is a key dimension of markets and competition in advanced capitalist societies. While political economy recognizes the role quality plays for consumers' purchasing strategies, it is less attentive to quality as a contested field where symbolic struggles and strategic manoeuvring take place. We argue that the quality-based strategies of hybrid organizations in food distribution represent a combination of different worlds of quality and judgment devices. This combination defines a camouflage strategy through which conventional food distribution chains such as high-end supermarkets conquer specific zones of the quality space. We thus maintain that the quality strategies of these organizations are explicitly boundary-spanning. To be successful, hybrid organizations need to cover both new and traditional quality conventions, overcoming divisions among different worlds while maintaining a coherent profile. This effort requires a strategy that is able to leverage situation-specific cultural meanings quite independently from individual-level attributes.

Introduction

In economics, quality attributes differ on the ease with which consumers can unpack them (Nelson, 1970; Tirole, 1988). Search attributes can be verified at the time of the transaction (e.g. the colour of a wine), experience attributes can be assessed only after the transaction has taken place (e.g. the taste of a wine), credence attributes cannot be verified and are based on consumers' trust (e.g. whether wine is produced from organic grapes). Credence goods are key drivers for quality-based markets, where intangible dimensions of quality play a crucial role (Beckert and Aspers, 2011). In

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this article, we will argue that general references to ‘quality as credence goods’ are unsatisfactory from a sociological point of view. Quality, in fact, is a contested field where symbolic struggles (Pecoraro and Uusitalo, 2013) and strategic manoeuvring take place (Callon et al., 2002; Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006; Negro et al., 2007).¹ We will analyse this process with regard to food distribution, comparing alternative and conventional food chains. Alternative food networks (AFNs) are a wide-ranging body of practices dealing with food provisioning in a different way from the mainstream agri-food system (Murdoch et al., 2000). AFNs usually take the form of grass-roots experiments aimed at reorganizing the food system along ethical, political, moral and health lines (Micheletti et al., 2004; Honkanen et al., 2006; Onozaka et al., 2010; Sassatelli, 2015). While giving a clear analytical definition of AFNs is difficult, these phenomena tend to rely on different forms of spatial, economic and social proximity between supply and demand (Kebir and Torre, 2012).

To detect mimetic strategies in the quality space, we argue that AFNs should not be analysed *in isolation* but along a continuum with conventional food networks. As recently suggested by Ponte (2016), there is an increasing dissatisfaction with neatly allocating empirical phenomena into one or another convention, moral order or stabilized compromise. A more accurate perspective would entail examining how consumers and producers simultaneously interact through multiple justifications (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006), as opposed to selectively engaging in single worlds. Although this approach is not new theoretically, empirically it has ‘rarely [been] taken into consideration’ (Ponte, 2016, p. 20; see also Stamer, 2018). Strategic maneuvering of capitalist hybrid organizations within the quality space, we maintain, is a key element to single out the strategies that support capitalism’s ability to *adapt* to new challenges and criticisms. The empirical analysis of consumer quality conventions in food distribution is our empirical case in point.

The article is structured as follows: in the first part, we set out the key concepts of our analytical framework at the crossroads of different but complementary bodies of literature, namely conventions theory, judgment devices and omnivorism. In the second part, we illustrate the research design, methods and data. In the third, we discuss the empirical findings. Finally, in the conclusions we go back to the research question and elaborate further on the key concept of *mimetic quality* at different analytical levels.

Theoretical Framework: Quality as a Contested Field

The consumption of symbolic goods and the commodification mechanisms of quality spaces are key elements for capitalism to flourish: not by covering existing needs but by eliciting new ones’ (Streeck, 2016, p. 212). In this line, political economy admits that quality is one of the most important forces leading to the economic growth of firms and markets; however, as Reeves and Bednar emphasize (1994), searching for a distinctive definition of quality just yields inconsistent results (see also Gallarza et al., 2011). Quality, the argument goes, is not a static feature, defined once and for all. Rather, focusing on food cultures, we can argue that quality is ‘fluid and malleable, and tends to shift as a good passes from one social context to another’ (Murdoch and Miele, 2004, p. 159) and from one individual to another, as a result of the process of *qualification* carried out by every actor involved in the supply chain (Callon et al., 2002). In fact, as claimed by Callon and colleagues, the evaluation of the quality of food products depends on the interaction between two different dimensions, one

referring to the intrinsic attributes of goods – such as shape, color, taste, consistency – and one related to the extrinsic judgment of individuals (Callon et al., 2002; see also Murdoch and Miele, 2004, p. 159).

A consequence of this definition is that, in the *economy of quality*, prices and information are not enough to assess the worth of goods (see Callon et al., 2002; Beckert, 2016). Quality is first and foremost a *judgment* grounded on credence/trust useful to deal with the complexity of transactions. While we concur with the prominence of credence goods for quality-based markets, we nonetheless argue that references to credence goods simply shift the problem: where does credence/trust come from? Credence is a symbolic dimension that implies structures of meaning whose explanatory power needs to be accounted for (Beckert, 2009; Karpik, 2010). Moreover, how does this symbolic dimension matter in the analysis of markets and capitalism? As Wolfgang Streeck observes: ‘a rising share of the goods that make today’s capitalism economies grow would not sell if people dreamed other dreams than they do’ (Streeck, 2016, p. 212). The ‘worlds of quality conventions’ perspective (Eymard-Duvernay, 1989; see also Sylvander, 1995; Thévenot, 1995; Biggart and Beamish, 2003; Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006; Borghi and Vitale, 2006; Stark, 2011; Ponte, 2016) provides a useful starting point to answer this question. Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) develop six ‘worlds’ of legitimate common welfare (inspirational, domestic, opinion/fame, civic, market and industrial worlds), which allow actors to reduce semantic uncertainty and facilitate coordination.² According to conventions theory,³ price is the main management form of a particular market only if there is no semantic uncertainty about quality. When differences in prices directly express shared differences in quality, market coordination applies. But when price alone cannot translate quality, actors set up other conventions and forms of coordination. In domestic coordination, uncertainty about quality is solved through interpersonal trust (i.e. long-term social ties between actors). In industrial coordination, uncertainty is reduced through common enforceable standards. Civic coordination works where there is collective commitment to welfare and/or public interest. In the world of fame, uncertainty about quality is solved through public celebrity, and worth derives from the opinion of experts. Finally, in the inspired world, what is worthy is what cannot be controlled, what is felt in inner experience, manifested by feelings and passions and what rejects habits and routines (Ponte, 2009).

Convention theory has been summarized by Ponte (2016) in two main streams: the worlds of production framework (Salais and Storper, 1992; Storper and Salais, 1997) and the orders of worth approach (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). These two streams converge in Lucien Karpik’s perspective, where orders of worth pair with different judgment devices that provide consumers with the knowledge to evaluate the ‘worth of goods’ (Karpik, 2010, p. 96).

Such devices can be differentiated in relation to the nature of the transmitted knowledge: we will thus have *personal devices* and *impersonal devices*. The former consist of networks of interpersonal relationships based on the personal and multiple interpretations of reality that are spontaneously generated and network based. The latter convey a different kind of knowledge, unmediated by direct experience and therefore homogeneous for all consumers (certifications, guides, rankings). Both personal and impersonal devices generate specific coordination regimes: personal devices support reticular regimes, professional regimes and interfirm regimes, while impersonal devices sustain authenticity regimes, mega-regimes, expert-opinion regimes and common-opinion regimes. As we show below, the quality-based strat-

egies of so-called hybrid organizations (Haigh et al., 2015) represent a clear combination of different worlds of quality and judgment devices. We argue that this combination defines a *camouflage* strategy through which conventional food chains (e.g. high-end supermarkets) conquer specific zones of the quality space. This key point leads to the idea of *mimetic quality* as a distinctive boundary-spanning strategy (Goldberg et al., 2016).⁴

For which kind of consumers are these boundary-spanning quality strategies particularly effective? First of all, for omnivores who display appreciation for *diversity* as symbolic marker of high status (Peterson and Kern, 1996, p. 903). Consumers in hybrid food chains seek artisanal quality *and* food safety standards, freshness *and* convenience, a link with the territory *and* variety, uniqueness *and* large quantities. But as the literature on omnivorous consumers states: 'the meaning of omnivorous taste... does not signify that the omnivore likes everything *indiscriminantly*' (Peterson and Kern, 1996, p. 904). For instance, consumers who enter a high-end supermarket do not expect to find a plethora of undifferentiated goods. Similarly, those who turn to a local producer or a solidarity purchasing group do not expect to find tropical fruits from a large multinational corporation. Consumers in their purchasing choices need to rely on *some sort* of coherence in the overall definition of quality (Murdoch and Miele, 1999, p. 468; Kirwan, 2006). Accordingly, the profile of food retailers requires a distinctive positioning in the quality space. In this connection, it is worth recalling that criteria of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) based on omnivorousness are centred not so much on *what* one consumes, but rather on the *way* items of consumptions are reflectively enjoyed in *concrete purchasing practices* (Peterson and Kern, 1996, p. 904). Following Goldberg and colleagues (2016), we thus argue that to be successful hybrid organizations need to overcome divisions among different worlds of quality while keeping a coherent profile in connection with consumer purchasing *experiences*. This effort requires both a marketing strategy and an organizational setting able to leverage situation-specific cultural *meanings* of quality that – quite independently from individual-level attributes of consumers (Kirwan, 2006) – work as 'distributed apparatus[es] of qualification' to *decouple* quality conventions from the individual traits of consumers. These apparatuses work as 'quality devices': they are assemblages (both discursive and material) that intervene in the *construction* of markets (Muniesa et al., 2007). These 'atmospherics' (Vida et al., 2007, p. 469) devices do not just refer to 'the tailoring of the designed environment to enhance the likelihood of desired effects or outcomes' (Greenland and McGoldrick, 1994, p. 2), as the applied marketing literature would suggest. As Callon et al. (2002, p. 205) state they work as tools for distributed cognition in which information and references are spread out between many elements. Accordingly, the consumer's preferences are tied *into* them.

If quality conventions were framed only as given consumer desires to be 'enacted upon', the coherence among such diverse metrics would alternatively rely on utility maximization – as agents hold a well-defined preference ordering and they can trade off quality conventions – or on internalized values systems that coherently build the overall quality profile of purchasing choices. Both perspectives have been challenged repeatedly by the sociology of qualities and qualification, which emphasizes the situational features of qualification and judgment (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2000). In this connection, 'talking of quality means raising the question of the controversial processes of qualification, processes through which qualities are attributed, stabilized, objectified and arranged' (Callon et al., 2002, p. 199). Quality is thus a processual competence that occurs in *situations* where valuation is spatially localized

and temporally marked (Hutter and Stark, 2015).

Data and Research Design

The Local Context

In order to shed light on the quality-based strategies carried out by social actors in the agri-food sector, we focus on the positioning of different supply chains – both conventional and alternative – in Piedmont, a region in the north-west of Italy with a particularly favourable context for quality food production (Dansero and Puttilli, 2014). Considering a continuum between conventional and alternative forms, five supply chains have been singled out:

1. Hypermarkets and supermarkets. These large-scale retail systems are not uniformly distributed in Italy, with northern regions showing greater development than southern ones, though there are differences and exceptions (Arcidiacono, 2016). Piedmont represents a peculiar case due to the large number (nearly 2,000) of these outlets, their average floor area, which is higher than in the rest of the country (309 m² in Piedmont compared to 279 m² in Italy as a whole; AGCM, 2013), and, at the same time, the low market concentration that sees the lead retailer controlling only about 20% of the regional market (in several other regions this figure is close to 50%) (Arcidiacono, 2016). Large-scale retailers thus stand out in Piedmont both for widespread diffusion and high differentiation.
2. High-end food retailers. Piedmont is the birthplace of Eataly, a retailer-cum-restaurant that specializes in quality food. The first store opened in Turin in 2007, on the initiative of founder Oscar Farinetti. In the following years, several other stores were opened in Italy and abroad (Germany, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Japan, Korea, USA, Brazil). Eataly has been influenced and sponsored by Slow Food, a movement that aims to safeguard local food cultures and traditions. Founded in the 1980s, Slow Food now has more than 100 000 members in 150 countries. While benefiting from Slow Food's aura, Eataly is a true for-profit company, with annual revenues of €400 million and sales growth of 28% in 2015. Since 2014, a merchant bank owns 20% of the company, which will be listed on the stock exchange in 2019.
3. Traditional local markets. These spaces have been facing different trends. On the one hand, the introduction of stricter regulations, together with the diffusion of supermarkets, has led to a relative decline in their numbers. On the other hand, a long-standing tradition of produce freshness and a favourable quality–price ratio has kept the habit of buying at markets alive among local people. Piedmont falls in the second scenario, with around 1,000 traditional markets regularly held in the region (Regione Piemonte, 2012), most of them on a weekly basis at least. The city of Turin, the region's capital, has more than 40 daily markets.
4. Farmers' markets. In the wake of increasing interest in locally grown food, a significant number of initiatives have been developed to promote direct sales from local, small-scale farmers. In addition to on-farm sales, these initiatives include both the participation in traditional local markets and the creation of monthly, ad hoc farmers' markets, frequently promoted by organizations such as Coldiretti and Confederazione Italiana Agricoltori (CIA). In Piedmont, the percentage of local farms involved in direct (off-farm) sales is nearly twice the

national average (Piedmont 9.4%, Italy 5.2%), and 87 farmers' markets take place regularly (Pettenati and Dansero, 2015). In Turin alone, nearly 300 local farmers participate in traditional markets; there are also 11 farmers' markets.

5. Solidarity purchase groups. These are self-organized networks of individuals and families who buy food – and sometimes other goods – directly from producers. This kind of community-supported agriculture appeared in Italy in the mid-1990s and then gradually spread, reaching over 1,000 cases in 2011.⁵ In Piedmont there are no less than 170 solidarity purchase groups, over 130 of which are located in the Turin province.

The dynamism of Piedmont's agri-food panorama makes the region ideally suited for a case study that aims to deepen knowledge of the quality positioning of different supply chains.

Data Collection and Sampling method

Data collection was based on a questionnaire administered to a sample of consumers (N=1,090) from the above five supply chains, which investigated purchasing habits, quality conceptions, expected quality dimensions and socio-economic features. Data collection was carried out from March 2014 to June 2015 by trained interviewers supervised by the research group. To diminish self-selection biases, in each supply chain the interviewers contacted one in every five consumers, regularly varied the point of administration (rotating in different locations within the markets or super-markets), and operated on different days of the week (from Monday to Saturday) and time slots (morning, afternoon and evening). With regard to high-end retailers, data gathering took place in one of Turin's Eataly stores. Regarding local markets, municipal data allowed us to identify 29 daily markets in Turin where there are both traditional vendors and farmers. Starting from this list, we adopted a stratified sampling method, first dividing the 28 smaller markets in three strata based on their number of farmers' stalls, then randomly extracting from each stratum four specific markets.⁶ Finally, we added to the sample the biggest market in town, Porta Palazzo, which represents a peculiar case being the largest open-air market in Europe, with around 800 stalls in total, including about 90 farmers' stalls. We thus obtained a sample of 13 municipal markets. Finally, we selected four different solidarity purchase groups (SPGs) in the Turin province, according to location (in the city or in the neighbouring municipalities) and number of members (small to medium groups, up to 50 adherents, and groups with more than 50 members). After obtaining the commitment of the managers in each group, the interviewers participated in the distribution of food and administered the questionnaire to SPG members.

Overall, 1,090 questionnaires were administered: 385 in large-scale retailers (35.3% of the total sample), 251 in high-end ones (23%), 216 in traditional local markets (19.8%), 87 in farmers' markets (8%), and 151 in SPGs (13.9%).⁷ The final sample was composed of 483 males (44.3%) and 602 females (55.2%), with a mean age of responders equal to 47.⁸ The distribution in age classes highlights the prevalence of adults (35–64 years old), representing 45.8% of the sample (499 cases), while 266 (24.4%) belonged to the young class (18–34) and 163 (15%) to the elderly one.⁹ With respect to socio-economic status, data were available for 931 interviewees and showed that 40.7% belonged to the employed middle class (379 cases), 13.1% to the self-employed middle class (122 cases), 14.4% to the upper class (134 cases), 12.9% to

the lower class (120 cases), while 176 responders (18.9%) had an undefined occupational class since they were not employed at the time of the data collection. Consistent with this socio-economic profile, it was found that a large share of respondents (41.3%) had a monthly net income of between €800 and €1,500. Among the others, 37% claimed to earn less than €800 per month and 21.8% to have at its disposal more than €1,500 per month.¹⁰

Empirical Findings

We will now put to the test the previously delineated theoretical framework by outlining three hypotheses.

- Hp. 1. Quality *mixes* are emerging in the world of food consumption. These do not overlap neatly with the ‘conventional–alternative’ dichotomy, are *self-contained*, and do not mirror the random world of omnivorism.
- Hp. 2. Food supply chains select their quality positioning accordingly. *Multipolar* strategies to intercept the increasing complexity of quality spaces are evolving, adding new quality conventions without giving up traditional ones.
- Hp. 3. New multipolar strategies are built on clear-cut organizational leverage and judgment devices that support the *situational* production of meaning for consumers within specific food chains, independently of micro-level individual attributes.

We measured the level of importance of seven quality conventions using a Likert scale with items ranging 1–10 (2 items, total score from 0 to 20). Empirical results show that all conventions are considered important by a high number of consumers, although the less recognized one is the market convention, in which only 14.7% of consumers score higher than the median value (14). The most important quality convention is the environmental one, in which 85.1% of consumers score above the median value. In addition, market and inspiration conventions show greater variability, meaning that they are valued in the opposite way by relevant consumer groups (Figure 1 and Table 1).

To test the first hypothesis, we checked for the multipolarity of quality conventions. As Figure 2 clearly shows, many consumers fall under a high number of quality conventions: the modal value of conventions to which consumers give importance

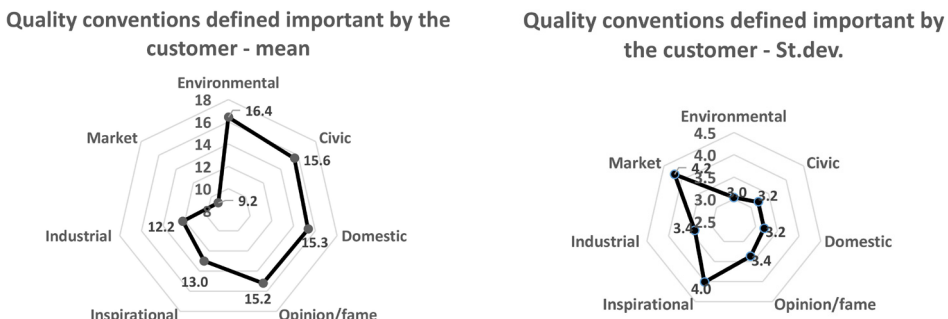


Figure 1. Quality conventions: mean scores and standard deviation.

Table 1. Consumer judgments of quality conventions in the five supply chains.

Food supply chains		Domes- tic	Enviro- mental	Civic	Opinion	Inspira- tional	Market	Indus- trial
Total	mean	15.36	16.56	15.63	15.40	12.78	8.91	12.01
	std.dev.	3.32	3.07	3.26	3.36	4.11	4.24	3.39
	min	2	2	2	2	1	2	2
	max	20	20	20	20	20	20	20
	mode	16	20	20	16	14	10	11
Hypermar- kets and supermarkets	mean	15.40	16.28	15.77	14.87	13.34	9.51	12.20
	std.dev.	2.89	2.88	2.96	3.38	3.62	3.98	3.24
	min	6	5	4	2	2	2	2
	max	20	20	20	20	20	20	20
	mode	16	20	20	16	14	10	13
High-end food retailers (Eataly)	mean	15.81	16.64	15.74	15.62	13.83	9.52	13.12
	std.dev.	2.79	2.98	3.19	3.08	4.06	4.42	3.51
	min	7	6	2	7	2	2	2
	max	20	20	20	20	20	20	20
	mode	16	20	16	16	16	10	15
Traditional lo- cal markets	mean	15.34	15.97	14.95	14.64	12.74	9.80	12.26
	std.dev.	3.33	3.02	3.36	3.42	3.95	4.10	3.62
	min	5	4	2	2	2	2	2
	max	20	20	20	20	20	20	20
	mode	16	20	16	14	14	10	13
Farmers' markets	mean	16.63	17.54	16.48	16.49	12.83	8.62	11.63
	std.dev.	2.94	2.64	3.09	2.90	3.97	4.35	3.35
	min	6	10	8	9	2	2	3
	max	20	20	20	20	20	19	20
	mode	20	20	20	20	16	11	11
Solidarity- based purchasing groups	mean	13.44	16.36	15.16	15.35	10.97	6.86	10.71
	std.dev.	3.81	3.60	3.48	3.72	4.46	3.65	2.70
	min	2	2	2	2	1	2	2
	max	20	20	20	20	20	20	17
	mode	14	20	15	16	13	2	11

above the median value is four out of seven. The quality space is thus structured along different attractors.

Is this multipolarity organized *and* boundary-spanning? To analyse the underlying structure of the quality space, we performed a principal component analysis applied to 14 items over seven conventions. The analysis shows that two clear-cut quality profiles emerge, which synthesize both distinctive and boundary-spanning conventions (Table 2). As for the first factor, quality is anchored to a set of socially relevant meanings represented by food (environmental, domestic, civic, inspirations); we label this factor 'soft quality'. The second factor includes dimensions referring to public reputation and price (opinion and commercial conventions); we label this factor 'hard quality'. As loading values show, the industrial convention is transversal to these two components. The regime of the industrial world is determined

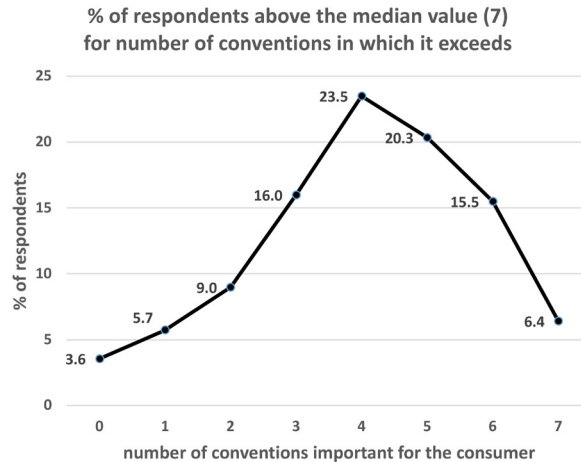


Figure 2. Percentage of respondents above the median value (7) for the number of conventions.

by the centrality of technical standards and is dominated by a logic of functionality and standardization. As Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) argued, the confrontation between the worlds of quality leads to different forms of *compromise* and *conflict*. Our findings point to a divide between the two worlds of quality (soft and hard) and to a likely compromise grounded in the industrial quality convention, which displays a double belonging and hence sets a potential common ground.

The empirical evidence further supports the idea that consumers cannot be generically defined as ‘random omnivores’. Although characterized by multiple adherences to quality conventions (Figure 2), an ordered multipolarity with boundary-spanning traits is clearly at work (Table 2).

To test the presence of supply strategies designed to intercept this ordered multipolarity, we analysed consumers’ quality representations, distinguishing them depending on the supply chain they use most frequently to purchase food. If the consumers intercepted by different supply chains have quality representations that are consistent with the chain’s profile, this would confirm that operators are able to differentiate their offerings with respect to the emerging ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ dimensions of quality. As stated, we expect that situational, chain-specific features matter more than individual-level variables.

First of all, supply operators differ greatly from one another with respect to the quality profile prevailing among the consumers (Figure 3). Representations focusing on hard quality (public reputation and prices) are widely present among consumers who regularly shop in supermarkets and traditional local markets, with more than 60% of consumers being above the average value, while representations centred on soft quality attributes are less important, with just over 40% above average. Farmers’ markets maximize instead the soft quality component (nearly 70% of customers is above average), but to the detriment of the hard quality one. These findings are broadly consistent with the chains’ profiles.

As we will discuss in more detail in the next section, the positioning of Eataly within the quality space in Figure 3 stands out as a case of *hybrid strategy*. Figure 3

Table 2. Latent dimentions of quality conventions.

Item loadings for principal component analysis. Rotated component matrix.		Factor 1	Factor 2
		Soft quality	Hard quality
Domestic	Vegetables and fruits are quality goods when: they are grown according to tradition.	.513	.222
	Do you feel comfortable buying vegetables and fruits: from those who you trust?	.598	.004
Environmental	Vegetables and fruits are quality goods when: they are environmentally friendly.	.709	-.042
	Do you feel comfortable buying vegetables and fruits: from those who respect the environment when producing and trading?	.797	-.146
Civic	Vegetables and fruits are quality goods when: they are the product of the work and commitment of many people of a territory.	.660	.094
	Do you feel comfortable buying vegetables and fruits: from those who care not only about their personal interest?	.708	-.068
Inspiration	Vegetables and fruits are quality goods when: the product mirrors the passion with which it was made.	.662	.104
	Do you feel comfortable buying vegetables and fruits: from those who do it with passion and commitment?	.751	-.002
Opinion	Vegetables and fruits are quality goods when: they have a solid reputation due to awards or experts' opinion.	.335	.652
	Do you feel comfortable buying vegetables and fruits: from those who sell only widely judged high-quality products?	.266	.717
Market	Vegetables and fruits are quality goods when: they have a high price.	-.050	.767
	Do you feel comfortable buying vegetables and fruits: from those who sell more expensive products?	-.101	.816
Industrial	Vegetables and fruits are quality goods when: they have been produced and processed according to strict rules.	.510	.278
	Do you feel comfortable buying vegetables and fruits: from those who sell products that have followed a standardized production process?	-.138	.769

Notes: Extraction method: principal component analysis; rotation method: equamax with Kaiser normalization; rotation converged in three iterations. The proportion of variance explained by the two factors: 50.9%; weighted sample (every supply chain has the same weight); final test: Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Test: KMO = 0.823, Bartlett test sig. = 0.000.

shows that Eataly leverages on both dimensions of quality: it scores slightly higher than SPGs on the soft quality dimension, outperforming to some extent generalist supermarkets and traditional local markets on the hard one. SPGs display a different positioning: they score well in the soft dimension of quality, underperforming in the hard dimension in terms of public reputation and price. All in all, the empirical evidence illustrated so far reasonably supports the second hypothesis.

To find support for the third hypothesis, we checked first the statistical significance of the above-illustrated differences between supply chains. As Table 3 shows, differences between groups are statistically significant.

To check if the effect on quality positioning (Figure 3) of the chains' attributes is stronger than the effect of individual-level attributes (such as gender, age, birth-

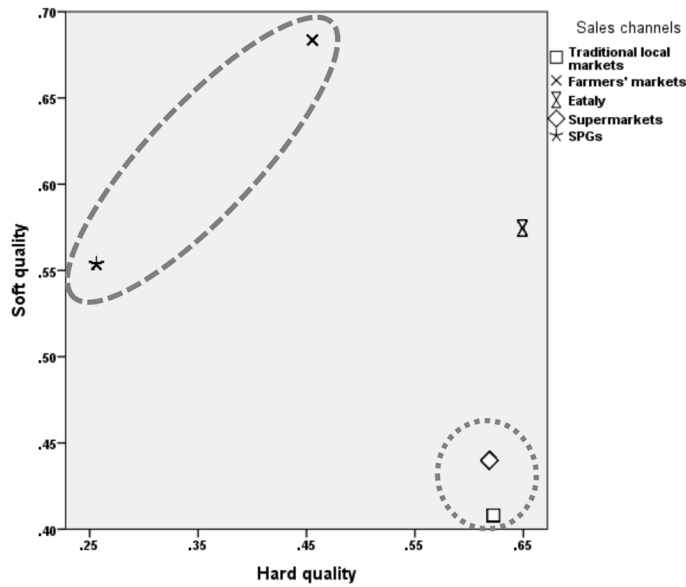


Figure 3. The quality space: hard and soft quality.

Note: the axis value is the percentage of consumers over the mean value of the factor by sales channel.

Table 3. Quality dimensions and supply chains (ANOVA analysis).

		Sum of squares	df	Mean squares	F	p-value
Soft quality supply chains	Between groups	7.163	4	1.791	7.344	.000
	Within groups	234.086	960	.244		
	Total	241.250	964			
Hard quality supply chains	Between groups	15.720	4	3.930	17.065	.000
	Within groups	221.084	960	.230		
	Total	236.804	964			

place, social class and income), we estimated the parameters of a linear regression.¹¹ The first model introduces the supply chains as independent variables, the second model adds gender, age, birthplace, social class, and income as control variables. The results (Table 4, models a1, a2, b1, b2) show that the supply chain effect is significant, consistent with the hypotheses, and independent from individual-level attributes. As shown in Table 4, both Eataly and, to a larger extent, the farmers' markets are able to attract customers who consider the soft quality component important. On the opposite side, the supermarkets are ineffective in expressing this concept of quality (see negative intercept). Socio-demographic variables are all non-significant ($p < 0.01$) and do not change the weight of the chains' parameters, which maintain their influence as expected.

Both the farmers' markets and, especially, the SPGs have a negative effect on the hard quality component, while for Eataly and the traditional local markets the effects are not statistically significant. Introduction of the socio-demographic variables

Table 4. The supply chain effect on hard and soft quality.

	Model a1		Model a2		Model b1		Model b2	
Dependent variable	Soft quality		Soft quality		Hard quality		Hard quality	
Observations	964		964		964		964	
R ²	0.033		0.054		0.075		0.105	
p-value	0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000	
Durbin Watson	1.913				1.846		1.841	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
(Constant)	-.110 *	.052	-.388 **	.128	.188 **	.051	.397 **	.125
Traditional local markets	-.159	.087	-.110	.089	.017	.085	-.002	.087
Farmers' markets	.471 **	.121	.496 **	.122	-.333 **	.118	-.325 **	.119
SPGs	.003	.102	.233	.155	-.758 **	.100	-.789 **	.151
Eataly	.222 **	.083	.226 **	.085	.073	.081	.070	.082
Female			.071	.064			-.034	.062
Young 18–34 years old			.199	.110			-.342 **	.107
Adults 35–64 years old			.149	.099			-.062	.096
Piemonte			.026	.083			-.189 *	.081
Northern Italy (other than Piemonte)			-.044	.106			-.086	.103
Center Italy			-.225	.149			.162	.145
Abroad			-.232	.157			-.152	.153
Upper class			.200	.137			.038	.133
Self-employed middle class			.095	.135			-.068	.131
Employed middle class			.240 *	.114			-.012	.111
Not employed			.031	.130			.087	.127
Net income 800–1500 €/month			-.090	.077			.082	.074
Net income > 1500 €/month			-.043	.098			.086	.095

Notes: Reference profile: large-scale system, male, over 65 years old, from Southern Italy, working class, net income < 800 €/month; *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01; the VIF inspection excludes collinearity among the variables.

in the model does not change the influence of the chains, as individual-level attributes are not statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). These results are coherent with the different chains' positioning in the quality space (Figure 3).

Finally, we tested the organizational strategies that chains pursue to support their positioning in the quality space. We expected that the quality-based strategies of Eataly would exemplify a clear combination between different worlds of quality and judgment devices. To this end, we measured consumers' ratings of expected quality through nine items (score from 1 to 10), following a customary model of analysis of quality dimensions (Parasuraman et al., 1994). The analysis aimed at exploring the differences in expected quality among consumers who regularly make purchases in the five chains, and then bringing out the competitive advantage of the organizational strategies pursued.

As Figure 4 illustrates, consumers' expectation exhibits high and homogeneous

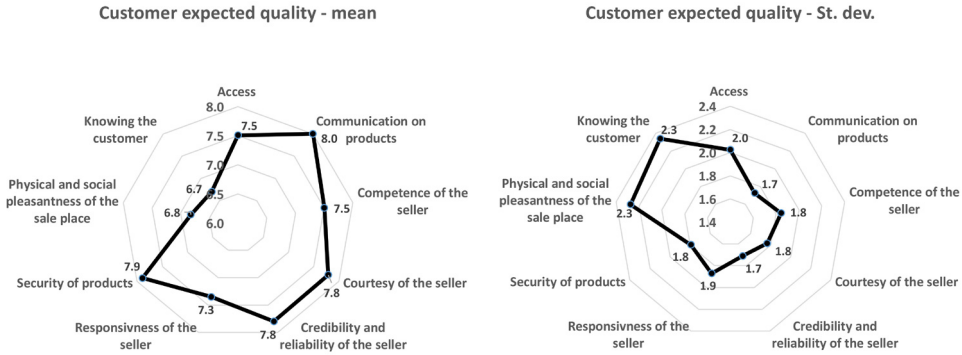


Figure 4. Expected quality.

values with regard to security, credibility, courtesy and product communication, while showing greater variability and less homogeneous judgements on knowing the customer, ease of access, physical and social pleasantness of the site.

To single out organizational leverages, we performed a principal components analysis. Two clearly different dimensions emerged.

The first factor, which we call ‘the seller matters’, highlights an expectation of quality that is focused on the personal relationship with the seller, on their expertise and reliability. The second factor, called ‘the retail environment matters’, points to an expectation that is related to the ease of access and to the physical and social pleasantness of the retail environment. The need for personalized answers is the only dimension that is transversal to the two factors, although its loading score is higher for the second factor. Thus, the structure of consumers’ quality expectation can be summarized by referring to these two areas, which highlight different organizational strategies carried out by the operators in the supply chains. One is centred on the seller, the other on the retail environment; in both cases, personalized knowledge emerges as relevant.

We then analysed the position of the operators in the different supply chains with regard to the use of these organizational levers (Figure 5).

As Figure 5 shows, the positioning of the supply chains along the two dimensions highlights the different practice of the organizational levers. The farmers’ markets and the SPGs are positioned to the extreme of the vertical axis, with almost 80% and 70% of consumers exhibiting above-average levels of importance attributed to the seller. In this case, the lever is the personal relationship with the seller. Conversely, large-scale supermarkets minimize personal relationships, without proposing a real alternative to the traditional markets. Once again, the case of Eataly has a peculiar position that is coherent with the role of the organizational lever used to manage the previously outlined score on the soft dimension of quality (Table 5). Eataly manages the soft dimension not through personal devices, but by the means of impersonal and commercial devices, which score very high. As Table 6 shows, these positionings are highly statistically significant.

Once again, we estimated the parameters of a linear regression model in order to compare the market segmentation ability of different chains, controlling for the effect of socio-demographic variables. The results (Table 7, models c1, c2, d1, d2) show that the supply chains’ effect is significant, consistent with the hypotheses, and

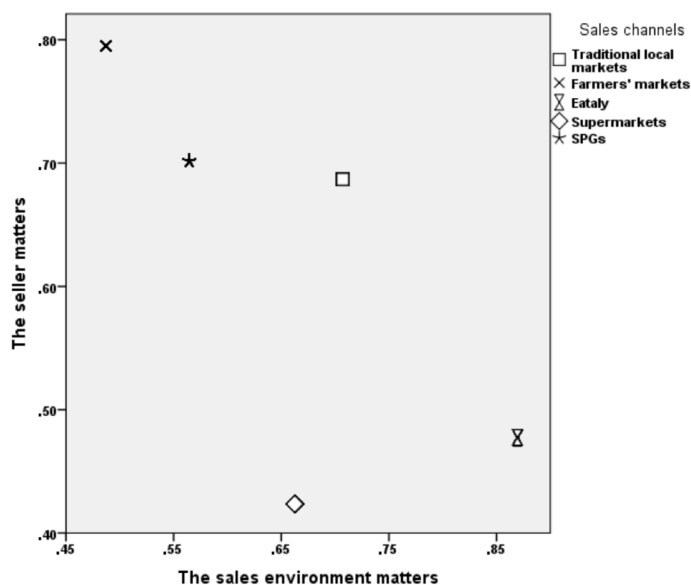


Figure 5. Positioning in the expected quality space.

Note: the axis value is the percentage of consumers over the mean value of the factor by sales channel.

Table 5. Latent dimensions of expected quality: seller v. sales environment.

Item loadings for principal component analysis. Rotated component matrix.	Factor 1	Factor 2
What features of the sales service deems important, when you choose where to buy fruit and vegetables?	The seller matters	The sales environment matters
Access	.129	.650
Communication on products	.691	.206
Competence of the seller	.864	.011
Courtesy of the seller	.712	.295
Credibility and reliability of the seller	.783	.141
Responsiveness of the seller	.707	.307
Security of products	.620	.295
Physical and social pleasantness of the sale place	.121	.851
Knowing the customer	.398	.588

Note: extraction method: principal component analysis; rotation method: equamax with Kaiser normalization; rotation converged in 3 iterations. Proportion of variance explained by the two factors: 58.2%; weighted sample (every supply chain has the same weight); sample variables are transformed into their logarithms; final test: Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Test: KMO = 0.876, Bartlett test: sign. = 0.000.

independent from individual-level attributes.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we have analysed consumer quality conventions in different agri-

food supply chains, both conventional and alternative, and we have highlighted the strategies adopted by retail organizations positioning themselves coherently in the quality space combining different quality conventions and judgment devices. We first showed that multipolar, but ordered, quality profiles are widespread among consumers. Consumers' quality positioning, on the one hand, denies the existence of random omnivorous profiles; on the other hand, it does not blindly reflect the 'conventional-alternative' polarization. We then shifted attention to the food supply side, bringing out the consistency between consumers' quality representations and the chain's quality profile, confirming the existence of differentiated strategies that are carried out by operators to enact quality conventions quite independently from individual-level attributes of consumers. Table 8 provides a summary of these 'chain-effects' on the quality positioning in reference to large-scale food distribution.

Traditional markets, farmers' markets and solidarity purchasing groups share the relevance attributed to the seller, showing high quality expectations related to this relationship. But some differences in their positioning emerge. In traditional markets, the centrality of the personal relationship with the seller and the irrelevance of all the other dimensions describes a situation in which *quality is in the relationship*, namely direct contact with the vendor embodies the *generic* quality expectation of consumers. In the farmers' markets, the vendor is perceived as an intermediary and a guarantor of a *specific* kind of quality. In this case, therefore, *soft* quality is in the relationship. In solidarity purchasing groups, a sort of negative feeling against hard quality is found. This might be due to the low importance that these consumers give to market and labels/experts' opinion as quality signals that are widespread in 'conventional' agri-food chains. At the same time, the personal relationship with the seller is crucial for quality expectations. For this reason, we can say that in solidarity purchasing groups *quality is the relationship*. Finally, we observed the case of hybrid organizations such as Eataly. In this case, quality strategies seem to be designed to combine different worlds of quality and judgment devices. Eataly, in fact, is able to hold together the ability to respond to soft quality expectations and to leverage on the retail environment features. In other words, consumers of high-end supermarkets do not look for a specific seller, they look for a particular *sales atmosphere*. And the retail environment is the organizational lever that Eataly relies on to generate the experience of soft quality. Eataly thus shows a specific mimetic ability: it valorizes the soft dimension of quality, without renouncing the hard one, by mimicking the trusting relationship of AFNs through impersonal judgment devices strategies, where the atmosphere substitutes for the personal relationships with specific sellers. As Eataly's owner Oscar Farinetti has stated: 'The street market has been a tremendous inspiration for me, I tried to recreate its atmosphere inside Eataly' (Fiory, 2014). In Eataly's case *quality is in the air*. These findings support the idea that – in the experience of consumers – Eataly looks like a new large-scale distribution retail format that offers a new food distribution paradigm inspired by concepts such as sustainability, sharing and responsibility (Sebastiani et al., 2013). It goes without saying that the atmosphere in question clashes with the protests of Eataly employees against low wages and precarious contracts, with the huge purchasing power the company exerts on its suppliers, and with Farinetti's tremendous political capital, which allowed him to have a key role in the food-themed Universal Exposition of 2015 in Milan. From this point of view, the strategic mimicry of Eataly and its positioning in the quality space stand out as *camouflage*.

With regard to the 'conventional-alternative' dimensions of food production and

Table 6. Positioning in the expected quality space (ANOVA analysis).

		Sum of squares	df	Mean squares	F	Sig.
The seller matters * Supply chains	Between groups	17.131	3	5.710	25.015	.000
	Within groups	184.445	808	.228		
	Total	201.576	811			
The sales environment matters * Supply chains	Between groups	12.770	3	4.257	20.709	.000
	Within groups	166.092	808	.206		
	Total	178.862	811			

distribution, at the macro-level mimetic quality points to the capacity of capitalism to absorb critical pressures (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999). In the case of Eataly, this seems to occur primarily through narratives. When, during a public event, a Sicilian farmer complained that Eataly sold his produce at five times the price it paid him, Farinetti began a long tirade on the concept of narrative, claiming that a product has no value if one is not able to build a narrative about it (Bukowski, 2015). Mimetic quality thus activates new justificatory discourses, in order to resist the anti-capitalist critique encoded in AFNs' narratives: 'in fact, critique has an internally transformative influence on capitalism. Capitalism incorporates the values that were the basis for its critique' (Rendtorff, 2014, p. 261). At the meso-level, the concept of mimetic quality points to the relevance of organizational hybrids, those organizations that respond strategically to new quality mixes and combine institutional logics in unprecedented ways (Haigh et al., 2015).

We tried to show how quality conventions/orders of worth combine differently in different worlds of food/worlds of production (Salais and Storper, 1992; Storper and Salais, 1997). As Stefano Ponte argued (2016, p. 16): 'analytically, the literature has developed along two distinct (but sometimes overlapping) approaches: a first that engages with a agro-food adaptation of the "worlds of production" framework; and a second that applies the "orders of worth" approach of Boltanski and Thévenot and further elaborations of "quality conventions"'. The empirical test of the *mimetic quality* concept provides a bridge between these two approaches. Furthermore, our findings support the idea that if imitation results in isomorphism in responding to the same institutional environment (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), *creative mimicry* results in variation and hybrid forms in response to given institutional demands and expectations (Oliver, 1991). While mere imitation goes along with habit, imitation and compliance, creative mimicry implies active agency for co-optation, influence and control.

But creative mimicry must be able to adapt quickly to evolving demands and local symbolic constraints. If, as we argued, quality is temporally and spatially marked, its historical timing would also make a difference: strategic mimicry needs to adapt quickly to different constellations of factors. In this connection, further analyses that take into account differences in time and space are therefore needed. For instance, a better understanding of Eataly's mimetic strategies is likely to come from a comparative analysis of how organizational levers change in different contexts. While a retail environment that reproduces the traditional market's atmosphere exists – and seems to work – in Italy, in other Eataly stores around the world other mimetic strategies might be implemented in order to meet different consumer expectations

Table 7. The supply chain effect on the expected quality.

	Model c1			Model c2			Model d1			Model d2		
Dependent variable	The seller matters			The seller matters			The sales environment matters			The sales environment matters		
Observations	935			935			935			935		
R ²	0.035			0.065			0.079			0.118		
p-value	0.000			0.000			0.000			0.000		
Durbin Watson	2.012			1.997			1.993			1.993		
	B		SE	B		SE	B		SE	B		SE
(Constant)	-.202	**	0.055	-0.447	**	0.129	.034		.051	.311	**	.118
Traditional local markets	0.337	**	0.088	0.394	**	0.090	.044		.081	.005		.083
Farmers' markets	0.394	**	0.123	0.443	**	0.124	-.372	**	.114	-.368	**	.114
SPGs	0.328	**	0.103	0.613	**	0.155	-.298	**	.095	-.562	**	.142
Eataly	-0.06		0.085	-0.077		0.087	.444	**	.079	.475	**	.080
Female				0.043		0.065				.034		.060
Young 18–34 years old				0.120		0.111				-.404	**	.102
Adults 35–64 years old				0.200	*	0.100				-.030		.092
Piemonte				-0.062		0.085				-.032		.078
Northern Italy (other than Piemonte)				0.007		0.109				-.109		.100
Center Italy				-0.081		0.152				-.049		.139
Abroad				-0.583	**	0.158				-.005		.145
Upper class				0.105		0.138				-.080		.126
Self-employed middle class				0.054		0.138				-.144		.126
Employed middle class				0.189		0.115				-.020		.105
Not employed				0.043		0.133				-.057		.122
Net income 800–1500 €/month				0.003		0.078				-.121		.072
Net income > 1500 €/month				0.132		0.100				-.183	*	.092

Notes: Reference profile: large-scale system, male, over 65 years old, from Southern Italy, working class, net income < 800 €/month; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$; the VIF inspection excluded collinearity among the variables.

and ideas about what quality. Comparative case studies focusing on Eataly's stores in New York, Chicago, Monaco, Istanbul, San Paolo, Dubai, Tokyo or Seoul could provide useful elements to understand how the quality strategies pursued by hybrid organizations adapt to local circumstances.

Finally, at the micro level, the idea of mimetic quality points to purchasing choices as a situational competence, resulted from a complex process of qualification (Callon et al., 2002). This competence consolidates normative orientations, moral standards,

Table 8. Quality conventions and worlds of production.

	Eataly	Traditional markets	Farmers markets	Solidarity purchasing groups
Soft quality	Positive	No effect	Positive	No effect
Hard quality	No effect	No effect	Negative	Negative
Seller matters	No effect	Positive	Positive	Positive
Sales environment matters	Positive	No effect	Negative	Negative
Quality strategy	Soft quality is <i>in</i> the air	Quality is <i>in</i> the relationship	Soft quality is <i>in</i> the relationship	Quality <i>is</i> the relationship

in-group or out-group boundaries and the agent's behaviour accordingly. Purchasing choices thus build recognition rules and they generate a sense of belonging to a group, real or imaginary. Situational competence, if properly managed and performed, has a symbolic value *representing* that we are part of a common belonging (e.g. food activist, food experts, food lovers). This shapes individual identity anchoring it to a wider identity, i.e. to a collective profile or to an order of worth. For what mimetic quality in food networks is concerned, a positive feedback seems to be at work: the more hybrid organizations successfully imitate alternative quality conventions and shape their organizational settings accordingly, the more important consumer situational competence is. At the same time, the more the situational competence is effective, the more that specific combination of quality conventions is reinforced. This would appear to confirm the idea (Callon et al., 2002; Callon and Muniesa, 2005) that in the 'service economy' the situational qualification of products *within* the procurement process is a key concern for the organization of markets.

Notes

1. The concept of 'symbolic struggles' quite naturally links to Bourdieu's analysis (e.g. 1984, p. 281). While this connection is certainly plausible, it is worth to point out how our approach differs from Bourdieu's. Bourdieu was mainly interested in those strategic actions designed to *accumulate* symbolic capital and in the *conversion* from one capital form to another. We are more interested in how quality-based fields are built on tensions, disputes and compromises of different 'worlds of quality' (see Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). Moreover, we maintain that forms of compromise and conflict among quality conventions are spatially and temporally marked, while Bourdieu links them to structural locations of subjects in terms of class position. However, we share with Bourdieu the idea that quality is first and foremost connected to power and conflict in a given social field.
2. Later contributions add two further worlds: the environmental world and the projects-based world (cf. Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999).
3. In the field of agri-food consumption and production, the theory of conventions has been applied to a variety of research problems summarized by Ponte (2016) in two main analytical streams: the worlds of production framework (Salais and Storper, 1992; Storper and Salais, 1997) and the orders of worth approach (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). All these contributions converge in the idea that 'in reality clear distinctions cannot be made between definitions of quality and that boundaries between categories are often blurred' (Sage, 2003, p. 7).
4. It is worth underlining that organizational strategies are *signals*, which, unlike *signs*, are pieces of information intentionally emitted by an agent (cf. Gambetta, 2005, 2009).
5. Data retrieved from Retegas, the Italian network of SPGs (see <<http://www.economiasolidale.net>>). Because online registration is voluntary and some researches were carried out locally, Retegas estimates that there are about twice as many registered solidarity purchasing groups (Grasseni, 2013).
6. The three strata included (i) markets with 1–4 farmers' stalls, (ii) markets with 5–8 farmers' stalls, (iii) markets with 9–13 farmers' stalls.

7. The total number of questionnaires refers to valid cases for which the supply chain where the administration occurred constitutes the predominant, or at least habitual, place of food purchasing.
8. Minimum age 19, maximum age 86, standard deviation 16.2. Data were missing for 5 respondents (0.5%).
9. With regard to age, data were missing for 162 respondents (14.9%).
10. The number of missing values for occupational class was 159, and there were 327 missing values for monthly net income.
11. In the model, the reference group is that of large-scale system consumers, having the following social profile: male, over 65 years old, born in the South of Italy, working-class member with a low-income.

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