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Transcript

Welcome, everyone, warmly to today's seminar. I would like to introduce Francesca Forno, who is an Associate Professor at the University of Trento in Italy. I had the pleasure of going to my first EASST conference in Trento, and I have very fond memories of the city. I should very insert quickly here that she teaches sociology, the sociology of consumption there and her research interests include civic participation and social change, and she has published and done research on political consumerism, collaborative consumption, grassroots initiatives, and grassroots initiatives on social innovation and alternative food networks. And she's joint coordinator of the University of Trento's Co-Act Research Group, collective action, change and transition, and also the associate editor of the journal we briefly talked about earlier, specialising in the analysis of social and political participation. I will hand over to her for the name of your talk. Thank you very much. And you will talk about the topic 'From grassroots to platforms. The reconfiguration of alternative food provisioning in an online world', and we're looking forward to your talk. Thanks so much for joining us.

Thanks very much for your invitation and also for giving me the second chance; the first time I went over, and while I have prepared a presentation, a PowerPoint presentation, just to be sure that I will respect the time. I see that I have organised my talk that I will talk about 30 minutes and a little bit longer, I don't know. It's always difficult to measure and I have to say in advance that of course I'm presenting different thoughts that we have yet to publish. We are thinking about that - we have actually developed work during a European project that ended a few months ago, that is, as a possible platform where I combine my earlier studies on grassroots food movements, no, new food movements. This is new a area of studies, how consumption, sustainable consumption, are configured. On the Internet, I mean online.

So I will give a presentation, try to combine my earlier studies, and also you will see there are reasonable thoughts that are not conclusive. I mean, are thoughts that are taking shape, because we have collected a lot of data that now, at the moment, we are thinking about, to conceptualise and reorganise. This is also why we're so, so, happy to present to you, to you all tonight, this evening, because I think that your questions will show probably some things that you might find interesting in the data we have collected and also in the advancement in the interpretation that we are trying to make on this data. We are at the end of the day a little bit, a little bit tired today, but I will try anyway to do my best to be clear.

OK, this is the outline that I want to follow. So I want to depart just briefly to summarise the problem, the main problem related to contemporary food provision, production and consumption. Because I see that is it very important to start by pointing out the different questions related to food consumption and food production in the conventional food chain, because only in this way we can understand why we have seen the mushrooming of these grassroots initiatives, that I have dedicated a large part of my research to, in the last 10, 20 years. And especially what I studied for a long time with really big and in-depth research, a kind of grassroots initiative that is very, very much widespread in Italy, that is, solidarity purchasing groups of families that, joined together, to buy directly from the farmers.

I did this study. I think that was 2012, with a couple of colleagues. When we all, we were researchers at the University of Bergamo. It was a very important starting point for all of us. Just to mention their name, one is Christina Grassini, who is now a professor of anthropology at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands, and the other one is Serena Signorelli, who is actually still in Bergamo and she is a business economist. So we joined the three competencies and many of the thoughts that I have developed originated from this big study that we did. But then of course over the last few years and especially after COVID-19, all these grassroots initiatives had to confront the new environment. That increasingly digitalised. And digitalization, if you think about it, I mean, when I read the first attempts to rethink alternative food networks jointly with new digital technology, these studies, they saw a lot of potential in digitalization, with digital tools for enlarging, scale-up, or scale-out, alternative connections. So this is also the one of the starting points of our platform project. Then of course COVID-19 happened, and the pandemic actually happened exactly at the middle of our project. We were studying alternative food provisioning online before COVID-19 and suddenly COVID-19 started. Every country in Europe went into lockdown and of course, this push, the provisioning of food much more online than before, this obviously had, I mean, I don't like to say this, but obviously for us this is what we were researching exactly on the topic, this was very interesting opportunity to see, to watch closer, very closely, the reconfiguration of online food provisioning, alternative food provisioning online.

So I want to describe a little bit of the platform project in its different work packages because they have follow a logic that is more or less the one that I just summarised now. And I want to go through the key results. Some of the key results, including with this idea that alternative food networks are somehow trapped between social innovation and platform capitalism, with an attempt to co opt and reformulate the initial intention of this grassroots organisation. This is also something that we conclude in one of the first papers we published, in Geoforum, and thinking about possible scenarios, I will end. I mean I will present at least the first conclusion with this first scenario and also to debate if it is still valid. Because we published the data at the beginning of the pandemic, and then I would like to end, I mean to make the final conclusion with the new project that I feel very much in line with these findings, and we have been collecting data zooming in on community supported agriculture that we actually helped to organise, because we would like to see, we would like to experiment with, in action, the difficulty of reconnecting consumption to production. So this CSA that we actually helped to set up was a laboratory that started, I mean, we call it our living lab. That started immediately after the pandemic and we are observing with a lot of instrument how consumption and production change when consumer and producers try to reconcile their time, their expectations, their labour and their ways of acting. So this is more or less the that I want to do.

OK, so if we, I mean, we obviously should depart from the contemporary food system. And sustainability, I I think that we know, I mean there are no doubts that the, the contemporary, the conventional food system is unsustainable. I mean, there are lots of reports, a lot of governmental agencies, national and international, that put attention to this actuality, that is important for me. Sustainability has become environmental, social and economic, biodiversity loss reduction, soil and water production, but it has also a lot of social problems, like the disconnection, the flattening of practises, the loss of knowledge. Here we see that this is quite an interesting area in social innovation around food, because what do these practises try to do is reconnecting, making a lot of efforts, actually, but also try to synchronise practises that have been de-synchronised. If we think about seasonality for example, but also with time, and also knowledge, and this is something that I

as a researcher work on in this field. When I started to work with the CSA experiment for example, I noticed that I didn't know many of the vegetables that these farmers, local farmers, were producing. So there is a lot of lost knowledge. So there are a lot of social issues related to the contemporary food system and sustainability. And then of course there are the socio-economic issues, over-exploitation of labour, this is a very hot issue in Italy. I heard that it is a very hot issue, it's a problem that I really I wasn't aware of but actually, there are colleagues that are doing some research on this problem of price squeeze. The fact that farmers are not paid enough, not only in the global South but also in the global North, marginalisation of small scale agriculture. That is linked to the fact that we are losing biodiversity if we lose small scale agriculture, local agriculture. So there are no doubts anymore that this is the consequence of the way we produce food, but also the way we eat. Food that we choose. So we can see that there are structural changes but also individual changes connected with the unsustainability of contemporary food systems. If we think about the structural changes, we can refer, for example, to the definition of the industrial system, translation of production that creates a sort of vicious cycle that means that cheap food is linked to the dynamic of job insecurity and poverty. That are included in pricing in the global North but on the other side there are also some micro, individual changes that reinforce these vicious circles that, for example, fast and urbanised life, the disconnection from the rhythm and the territory that is, the fact that, we are completely disconnected when we choose food. With seasonality for example, but also with our local environment, as we can buy food that comes from the other side of the world. For example, yesterday night when I was finalising this presentation, I checked Amazon Fresh. I will recall it a little bit at the end of this presentation, there was asparagus on offer for very few euros that comes from Chile, no? So we are disconnected, and of course I mean those who study this are aware, but the majority of people don't think about it or look, and there are findings now that that we are disconnected. Lots of knowledge as I said just now, seasonality, conservation, cooking and what has been called the diffusion of what has been called interior modes of living. That also involved the standardisation of diet that has been reinforced very much with eating habits that have developed everywhere of now. And I think that this this is an almost complete feature of many arguments that are going on now around food.

So as a scholar of social movement, I know since I started my PhD on this issue, on social movements in general, that when there is growing discontent in society and institutions are not able to find a solution to respond to civic demands, usually something happens in the middle, no? It takes the form of new organisation, new organisation that maybe can link to one to another, create a social movement - that can also be very influential, you know, politically as a pressure group. So if we think about this growing demand around food that obviously we have seen in many countries, but also the fact that the institution not responding, although we have now a lot of programmes like Farm to Fork, the European Green Deal, they are actually also this. We can read this as an answer to grassroots mobilisation and to the fact that food is now a topic of great attention among the general population. So what happened in the middle between citizen demand and the mixed response to this situation that we have started to see, at least from the 2000 from the new century, with the big rise in price after the crisis, the economic crisis of 2007 and 2008? With the pandemic I was listening a presentation a few months ago of a group of scholars, based in the Netherlands, they were presenting cross-country research and they were showing the number of community supported agriculture projects in Germany and there was a clear link between the crisis of 2007 and 2008, and the last time previous to the pandemic of community reorganisation to buy food altogether, connecting directly with the farmers. We have seen concrete forms of new infrastructure for direct sale, also known in the literature as alternative food networks, and we have seen, for example, the mushrooming of local markets, local farmers, solidarity purchasing groups. That is very, very much

so in Italy. I just read a few days ago a paper that was discussing the fusion of community supported agriculture in Wales. So this is very much wide-spread. And what do they do, these alternative food networks? Well, they create new spaces for citizen involvement. They develop new political meaning around food. They provide new meaning to the act of eating that goes beyond feeding and this is really something that is happening within these new spaces. When people discuss and bring to the fora new meaning about food, food is not just something that you feed yourself, but is something that is related also with the environment around you, the protection of the environment. And within these alternative food networks, there is the different form that they take in different countries, there is something that we have studied with Christina Grassini and Serena Signorelli that I mentioned before. And when we looked at solidarity purchasing groups, we see very much the fact that within these groups you restart to think about the importance of daily life and sustainable diet. This is a much newer concept than that I learned after actually I started the purchasing group, but when I when I started to study this this idea of sustainable diet I immediately realised within that research we had exactly this. I mean these people working to reach a more sustainable diet. We found particularly interesting the pricing of meat, the price of local produce in their diet. Of organic products, but also the attention these people, before it actually became a very important issue. Generally speaking, also the attention to reduce food waste. And there is also this attempt to territorialize and reconnect through direct social action, agriculture to the urban area, to the city. And what they do actually do, these alternative food networks. Theory of sustainable consumption, is by practise theory, what actually happens in these grassroots groups is the resignification of food. Giving food new meanings, but also learning by peer, from peer, new competencies. And also changing the infrastructure. Also the material that goes around these new alternative food networks.

So they are really kind of arena, forum, spaces where there is a lot of learning within it. So our question was what is happening when you transfer this networking and coeducation mechanisms from the offline to the online? So we approach the grassroots, I mean the platform project, with this idea in mind, so and we started to read about grassroots organisation and the challenges related to digitalization. And we saw, for example, in the first attempt to talk about this issue, a lot of expectation on the fact that that new platform, digital platform, could actually help, they went, if we think very in line with this idea, conveyed by alternative food network's reflection on the use of digital tools as a way to ease alternative food action was present at the beginning of the debate. Because we think the possibility of digital reconnection between production and consumption could make it easy easier to buy directly from farmers, because obviously it could have been easier to shorten the supply chain, the horizontal inclusion of actors like in grassroots, offline initiatives, and in social cooperation. Of course, I mean platform digital platforms can also help social cooperation, if we think about buying and selling. And it could be also reinforce this idea of being an instrument to direct knowledge beyond physical proximity. But what we saw with empirical data that we collected, and I will now pass to the findings, the main findings that we gain from this project, that offline alternative food networks never actually transpose direct action from offline to online at least until COVID-19 happened. The pandemic obviously changed rapidly the situation. Here are some data that we collected just to show the differences. Just think about the Italian situation. Obviously the platform project was a European project involving five different countries. Here are the figures just for Italy but just think that the Italian before the pandemic only 5%, only 5% of Italians bought food online. There was a big difference between for example, the figures that we collected. These are Eurostat data in Germany. But of course, after the pandemic, the situation changed radically. I mean the percentage raised up quite a lot, so the pandemic had a very big responsibility in pushing the people to buy food online. A little bit of background of the platform project before showing some

data to you. As I said, it was a project that involved by country Norway, Ireland, Germany and Sweden and Italy, of course. What we aimed was to study the configuration of new digital infrastructure around food and I will in a moment explain why we adopted an overall approach to food practise we wanted to study. We made 45 interviews in the in the Italian case, but each team collected between 40 and 50 in depth interviews, wanting to study from the planning for what to buy, to the waste. Our focus was actually looking at concrete consumer practises. So we had divided the project in three phases. The one which actually occupied a lot of time was in depth mapping of the main digital platform activity. Just think about that this mapping exercise, it took quite a lot of time and in ended in 2019, well before the pandemic. This mapping was very, very important for us because we collected information on 211 sites. And we created a code book and the code sheet with that helped us to know to take note of the different characteristics of these 211 websites. Thanks to this mapping we were able to study how the infrastructure was built had an effect. We had this idea. We wanted to check if this had an effect of also on the core learning activity that we saw in, for example, in purchasing offline. Then we, thanks to this mapping, we were able to divide, to recognise, some types of structure. Then we selected different case studies, platforms actually, and we went inside of each, choosing for each of them 10 informants. We selected a town in Milan because at the time before the pandemic, these kind of initiatives, they spread only in big towns in Italy and mainly in Milan, this was very much a northern country phenomena and we selected 3 digital platforms that I will show you. They have different characteristics, especially to understand which kind of food was in it, but also what were the practises on the part of the consumers and if the consumer had the possibility to learn something using this platform? I mean, if their diet changed because of the infrastructure of this platform. And then we did phase 3 with an online survey distributed to the user of this platform. And we were able to collect 587 replies. So we have a quite big source of different data that we collected in this project. So the first finding that we achieved with this mapping was that we recognised immediately that within the web pages, let's say that we're selling food in Italy, we could recognise it. The differentiation not just in Italy, in all the five countries, and we worked out this distinction between pipeline and platform (pipeline are actually digital, the proposal of the actual physical store). So they were not that interesting for us. Instead, we found 31 platforms that actually provided a virtual space and also some rules of interaction that actually facilitated the reconfiguration, the online reconfiguration, of alternative food networks. And when we started to look at the scripts, the infrastructure, this platform, we could recognise that we we had in front of us mainly 3 different types of digital food platform. The ones that we call local food delivery platforms are actually infrastructure, digital infrastructure, that are not very different to any kind of intermediate. For this, the intermediation here is very strong, actually, the platform, who is managing the platform, does everything by himself. On the other side, we had another configuration of platforms that we identify as food assembly. An interesting type that has diffused in many, many countries, where actually the importance of this platform is that usually orders and selling and buying and online, but when you go and need to collect them, you usually collect them in a physical place where in some cases you also encounter, if you are a consumer, also farmers. So there could be exchange there. In the first type there is no exchange. The third one is interesting and is a another model that we found, that digital platforms that work somehow by asking consumers to self-organise, so there is a lot of networking on this digital platform, and we were able to find three examples of each of these digital platforms.

The idea was looking at the different mapping what we had on the ground, trying to make sense of the different structure, then select for in-depth interview consumers that were utilising these different platforms, because we wanted to control also the effect of the infrastructure, of the learning of the changing of the people's diet. So we selected 3 cases that are here, described, also

with some pictures. We had an artist also in our group, Margarita, and that we selected the case of Cortilia, a local food delivery platform, a food assembly platform, and a grassroots online platform. The differences are not here, for example, Cortilia is a non participatory infrastructure offering fresh food from local producers online to be delivered directly to the front door. So there is not any interaction and mainly Cortilia, as an organisation and a platform, does everything by itself, and you will see that this has quite a lot of consequences. Then there is a food assembly. It is interesting because, as I said before, there's a centralised IT technology, IT service. That can be essentially described as a digital farmers market. So farmers put what is on offer and the consumer can see what is on offer. They can select and then usually they go to a physical place to collect what they have prepaid and pre-ordered. So it is interesting in this way. Mercato is something again different because of the digital non-business infrastructure, by base and design. This is very important for maintaining and stimulating networking among consumers and between consumer groups and producers. And it is interesting, because the mechanism for Mercato is something that is spreading again in many countries, they change with efficiency and time saving. Actually this infrastructure has consumers to take part in the organisation, so to exchange the free time that the digital platform gives to them to spend in managing in a way, in a collective way, the platform itself. The platform doesn't do everything by itself, I mean when Mercato asks consumers to be active for example to share the burden of distribution, distributing food, they can chat. They exchange. They can exchange suggestions. Here are some key results of these in-depth interviews and also coming from the online questionnaire, concerning the search for good food, somehow, regarding quality, also social equity, because we asked them, why did you start to get your food on this digital platform quality - social equity, environmental sustainability, more pleasant shopping experience, reducing packaging? It was very interesting for us. We were not expecting this, that some motivation many people had said was that they wanted to reduce plastic packaging, for example. This is where people that, especially of course in the more participatory platform, decided they were willing to invest more in the participatory price for more time and on the less participatory platform, more money, looking for convenience, not that regarding whether it was more participatory or not. Price or time, you know the time, just keeping in mind that our case study was Milan, where time is a precious resource. Mainly they were buying fruit and vegetables, but we notice also the shopping. At least our informants said that shopping through this new platform it helped them also to change. There was an increase in consumption of seasonal fruit and vegetables, a decrease in meat consumption and fish. There was a lot of experimentation and self production that we noticed that in crisis among our participants and in some cases also we noticed that they actually pointed to us that buying food through these digital platforms also help them to reduce food waste. Because there is much more planning involved in buying digitally and we are talking about not ready made food here. We are talking about fresh vegetable and fruit. And what also we noticed, we were expecting this, but we learned a lot interviewing people that we were not expecting, but we wanted to check this idea that platform design really matters a lot. Where platform makes mutual learning possible like for example. We noticed also that our informers, they often said that they learned new skills, they had new knowledge. There was kind of a more profound exchange in practises, you know, this is also something that that we noticed in my earlier studies of grassroots movement organisations, like community supported agriculture or well, the Italian version of solidarity. But here again we saw the same things. I mean, that conviviality really help to go through more deep change, profound exchange, profound exchange in practises and in food consumption.

Well, just to come to some conclusions that will underline other data that we collected around the project. The platform project aim to study the infrastructure of online food consumption, in particular in terms of sustainability, in time, maybe too this concept of sustainable diet, that was at

the time still very little explored. It focused attention to consumer practise through in-depth interview and online questionnaire. And what actually we found? Well, we found that, for example, many digital platforms, what we found in our mapping, have structures that aid discourses and experimenting at the level of food movement organisations. So in Italy there was a lot of, for example, words or references to solidarity purchasing groups. Actually in our mapping we found within the platform only one that was actually at the time concerned with digitalization of some grassroots, really grassroots experience. All the others, including the one we started, including Mercato, were actually entrepreneurs that try to emulate, to sound like, grassroots initiatives. Although in some cases they are used by grassroots organisations. But anyway there are grassroots organisations, especially after COVID, that use online infrastructure to broaden their reach and capacity to involve citizens, as in the role of consumer. The majority of what we found is still top down organisation and that is also something that we were not expecting, results like this. Between grassroots and plateau, there are an ongoing dynamic of appropriation. This is also something that we found it very, very clearly in our findings, that there is this dynamic of appropriation. When market actors appropriate the innovation created by alternative food organisations, provisioning of good food anyway, good food tends to extend or be outside the niche of market actors. This is one of the matters that scholars who are investigating this are interested in. But anyway, since intermediation is very hard, very intensive, obviously the price of food in crisis, so it is like that when there is an appropriation, like in Cortilia, the price goes up and they became very exclusive. I mean we notice this through our survey you know. This kind of platform, that they do strong intermediation, tend to be very costly and exclusive, although they offer their food to a wider number of people that in grassroots initiatives. And this is also something that we discover and we wanted to point out this, that despite the limited number, grassroots food platforms should be taken more seriously. And I think that this study has also stressed this, because they are small, they are small experiments. And they don't have the resources often to build a digital infrastructure. But what we observe in Mercato was something very interesting, that not only this platform was able to enhance more phone exchange among participants, but they were also more inclusive. So the idea of having a platform that is more convenient is very important also to make bigger changes in towards a sustainable diet. And this was very clear in our study. These are the conclusions of one of the papers we published on these results, as I haven't reached the part that we were at when we finished the first part of the study, imagine, we were just entering in the pandemic and we were imagining possible scenarios. Because everything was very quickly changing at the time, you know, and we imagined it for maybe one scenario of back to normal after the pandemic. We now know that we are not back to normal, not because the pandemic has not ended, but also because our habits, as some habits, have been changed. There is also a lot of effort from big players that the time to colonise the entire food distribution system. I mentioned before Amazon Fresh, an interesting example of this dynamic we have seen, of mass retailing digitalizing more, but also some success of this diffusion of some food platforms that have been capable of responding to demands of environmentally conscious consumers, and this was clear in the spread of this initiative. And these are two papers you might want to go and read.

I just want to stress the fact that these kinds of initiatives are important. I mean, they should really be taken more seriously because they can really make citizens shift their diets. And thanks also to the participants. These initiatives, they actually are curious and self reflect through our data collection. We are doing participant observation, we have distributed shopping diaries to understand what they were eating at the very beginning when they started to do this study. We have surveyed them online, both consumers and producers, because we want to work on the different label of reconnection, between consumer and producer. And we have now finished, just finished to do in-

depth interviews with all of them, and also we ran last week a focus group because we would like really to shed some light on this hard work of reconnecting, as we think that this this is something that I always thought since I started to work on solidarity groups, that this experiment might contain some mechanisms that we might be able to understand deeply. And to help the diets of people to go towards a more sustainable path. And thank you for listening. It took me a little bit more time, but now I'm switching off.

Thank you very much for your presentation, giving us some insight into the platform project and your next project. I really enjoyed it and I have a question, but I would first ask if there's another question in the room. I'd be happy to open the floor. For questions to you.