

EMERGING TYPES OF CONSUMPTION AND NEW CITY/COUNTRY
RELATIONSHIPS: DIRECT SALES OF FOOD IN THE PERI-URBAN AREA OF SOUTH
MILAN

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SOMMARIO

Short supply systems of agricultural products respond to the growing request for high-quality goods produced with respect for the environment, but are also an instrument for the promoting the development of areas close to large cities where agriculture, weakened by the processes of urbanisation, is relying on multifunctionality for its future. This article reflects on the potential of short distribution chains in Italy and the role that these have in the specific case of south Milan where the presence of a large agricultural park, established in 1990, could become the opportunity to strengthen these chains, provided that the constrictive policies implemented so far are abandoned in favour of systemic planning aimed at fostering a new alliance between the city and countryside.

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1 Introduction: Interpreting commerce without ignoring minor forms of sales³

In Italy the restrictive legislation which has governed the commercial sector since the end of the 1930s has promoted the creation of a distribution system with a number of original characteristics: a significant presence of small, family-run sales' outlets able to following the dispersion of the population in a myriad of small and medium-sized residential centres is associated with a late onset (from the 1990s) of the spread of shopping centres and large retail outlets; a spread that, although capable of revolutionising consolidated arrangements in sectors and territories, has not, with the exception of Lombardy and a few other regions in the North of Italy, yet reached levels comparable to those in the main European countries (Pellegrini, 2001). We are accustomed to viewing the recent, intense transformations experienced by commerce in a dual logic that leads to a contraposition between the modern and traditional distribution systems, between large commercial areas and small shops, between urban commerce and extra-urban street markets or shopping malls with their broad range of attractions. Imprisoned by this dualistic pattern, there is the risk of not paying due attention to the *extraordinary complexity* of the commercial sector and of neglecting alternative distribution systems that occupy small niches of the market, but within which there are signs of growth that should not be undervalued, and indications of new awareness and emerging consumer practices that follow different logics from the dominant ones. This is the case of direct selling of agricultural products, which is the subject of this article: this is a historical form of distribution, based on valorising the physical proximity and relationship between producers and consumers (short supply chain), which has not been eliminated by the modernisation of commerce. Indeed, quite the contrary is true: direct sales in Italy show a surprising vitality, accentuated in these years of financial crisis, although it would be reductive to interpret this only as an effect of the crisis. Short supply chains, including those in the field of food consumerism, have erupted into the debate on sustainability that is spurring a change in the orientation of lifestyles and seems to herald a third industrial revolution (Rifkin, 2011). Short supply chains are the reaction to the "long walk" that food now makes, bolstered by the progressive liberalisation of the international markets of agricultural products and innovations in their methods of conservation and transport⁴. The statement by the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize winner, Al Gore, is startling: to arrive on the table of a western consumer, a meal travels, on average, 1,900 km – although many products certainly cover much larger distances, with environmental, economic and social costs that have long been neglected but are ever less sustainable faced with the advantages related to the variety of food and the availability of products out of season.

³ The work is the result of shared thoughts, but paragraphs 1, 2, 3 are to be attributed to M.L. Faravelli; 4, 5, 6, 7 to M.A. Clerici.

⁴ A tendency confirmed by the growing trend in importation of agricultural products which, in Italy, rose from 8,507 to 11,101 million euros between 2005 and 2010 (data from ISTAT, the Italian National Institute of Statistics).

It is difficult to quantify precisely the weight of short supply chains compared to other channels of distribution⁵ and, although they are increasing, they could not easily replace supermarkets and traditional shops. Nevertheless, short supply chains make their contribution to enriching the panorama of commerce and draw strength from the ongoing transformations in the field of consumption which now make it impossible to compartmentalise consumers into a few categories on the basis of the traditional parameters of income, age and gender. The demands are multiplying, lifestyles are diversifying, and consumption is becoming personalised, giving rise to a new profile of the eclectic consumer, who is keen to experiment and mix products (including food) and who uses different, apparently irreconcilable places to buy products. This is a tendency that has been present for some time, but one that the recent financial crisis seems to have accentuated, such as to lead to the hypothesis of a real “food polytheism” (Censis, 2010), that is, the emergence of new profiles of “universal consumers” who use a variety of sales’ outlets to reconcile contrasting requisites: the quest for high-quality foods and local products, with the exasperated search for standardised products at a low cost. It is, not, therefore, surprising that there is a clear decrease in spending which in Italy is accompanied on the one hand by a shift in consumption towards supermarkets and ‘hard discount’ shops which rely on cheap prices and, on the other hand, the proliferation of forms of direct sales of agricultural products that reward local produce and non-industrial methods of production (Cersosimo, 2011).

2 The development of short supply chains of agricultural products

Short marketing circuits of agricultural products are still less widespread in Italy than in France, Germany and Great Britain⁶, even if an intense growth has been registered in recent years. According to data from the Observatory of Direct Marketing⁷, the number of agricultural businesses that exploit this channel of sales passed from 38,400 to 60,000 in the years between 2001 and 2008 (Gardini *et al.*, 2009). In 2008, among the farms registered with the Chamber of Commerce, 6.8% used short marketing channels, through which they generated a turnover of 2.7 milliard euros. Wine is the most widely marketed product (43% of businesses), followed by fruit and vegetables (24%), olive oil (16%), fresh and cured meat (8%), dairy products (6%), honey and other goods (3%). There is a marked territorial difference between the spread of direct sales’ channels: while the proportion of farms in the north-west of Italy which use short chains is very high (11.3% of the total) and close to that in countries in northern Europe⁸, the proportions are smaller in the centre (8,9%), north-east

⁵ In Italy the data highlight the contrast between large organized distribution and traditional shops, relegating the other distribution models (including short supply chains) into a single category which, in 2010, accounted for 10.1% of the total market of food products (data from Federdistribuzione).

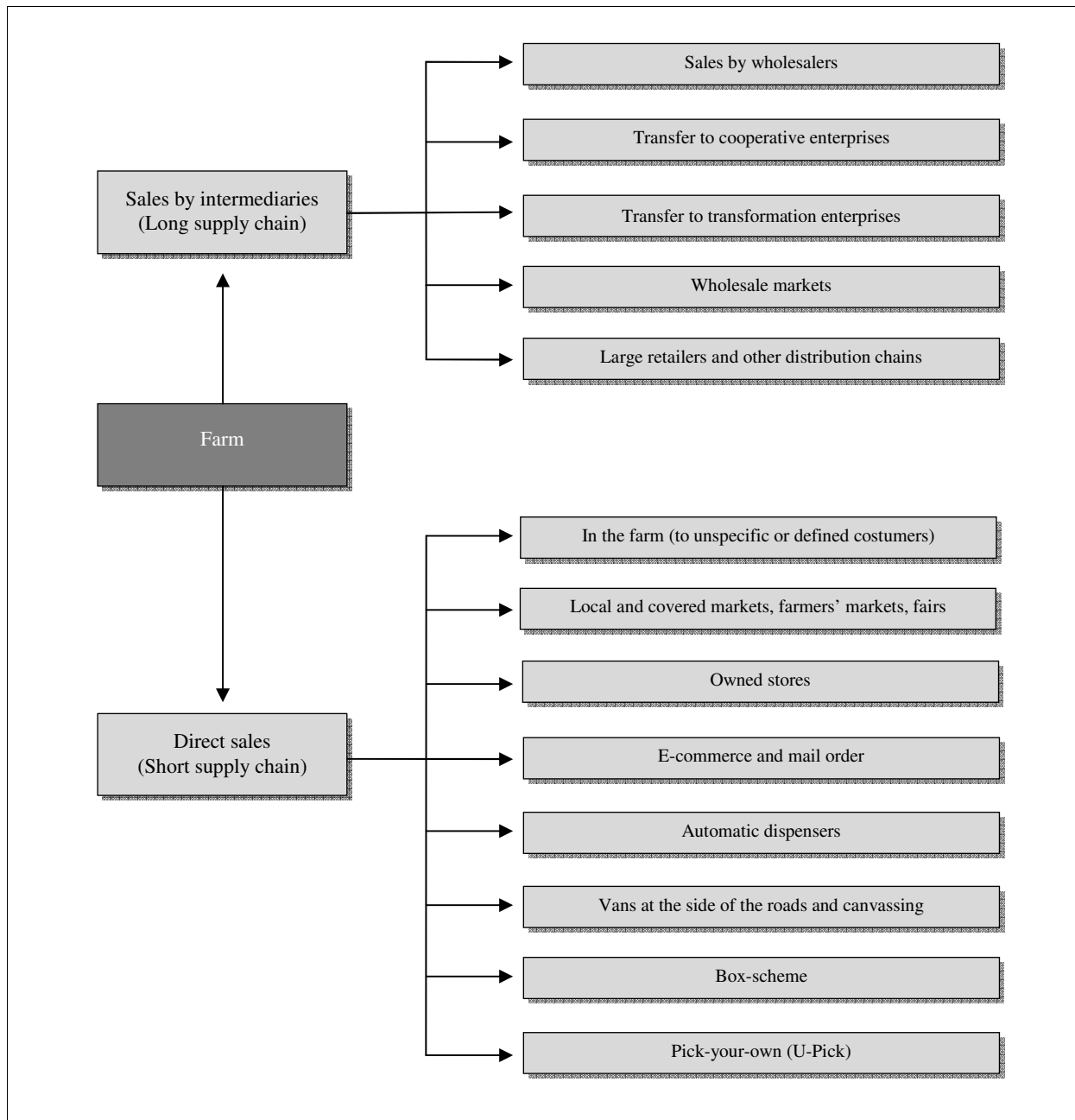
⁶ In these countries about 15% of all agricultural businesses use direct selling.

⁷ Established in 2005 through a partnership between Agri2000 and Coldiretti.

⁸ For a more detailed treatment of short supply chains in Lombardy, see Nomisma (2010).

(6.2%) and, in particular, in the south of the country (4%), despite the fact that the primary sector here has more weight than either industry or the tertiary sector.

Figure 1 – Major marketing channels for agricultural products (without export)



Source: authors' elaborations

The geography of direct sales is influenced by three main factors. First, the spread of agritourism and food and wine tourism, which are expanding rapidly in Italy (Montanari, 2009): the numerous events related to wine (Open Cellars, Chalices under the Stars...), Open Farm days, the establishment of Cities of Products (City of Bread, of Oil, of Chestnuts...) and Roads of Wine and Tastes, exalt the central role of forms of direct selling in the relationship

with consumers. Secondly, the size of the agricultural business is important since the literature is concordant in indicating that small, family-run businesses, the driving force in Italy, have a greater propensity to direct sales. Finally direct sales are more common in areas in which modernisation of the distribution network is still limited and in which there is less recourse to vertical integration in the form of associations or consortiums (various authors, 2012). Numerous methods are used for direct marketing (fig. 1), but two prevail clearly over the others in Italy: sales on the farm itself and farmers' markets (or green markets), spaces specifically equipped to accommodate agricultural producers. While these structures have existed for some time in other countries⁹ and their sites and sizes have been the subject of detailed studies which highlight their central role in the commercial network of cities (Tong *et al.*, 2012), in Italy the spread of farmers' markets is only recent since the legislation instituting them was passed only in 2007. These markets are, however, a rapidly growing form of distribution: although reliable data on their number are lacking, a recent comparative analysis on a national scale reached an estimate of 947 farmers' markets, located mainly in the northern regions of the country (61% of the total) and in urban centres with a population between 10,000 and 50,000 inhabitants (Franco and Marino, 2012).

3 A growth related to many factors

How can the growth of short supply chains be explained? A first factor is related to the advantages for the farmers who, through short sales channels, can not only find a buyer for surplus produce, but can also have a stronger influence on the prices of their goods and oppose price squeezing, unlike the situation in long supply chains in which the producers' profit is squeezed to the benefit of the wholesalers and the other intermediaries who come between the producer and final consumer. However, financial considerations are not the only reason for the success of short supply chains: their flourishing can also be interpreted as a reaction against the process of globalisation. From this point of view, short supply chains share the characteristics of a broad range of emerging food systems (organic, local, home-made...) defined alternative food networks, on which there is a substantial body of literature that has applied analytic perspectives related to political economy and rural sociology (Venn *et al.*, 2006; Tregear, 2011). Globalisation pushes for the standardisation of behaviours, for the supremacy of big businesses at the head of worldwide distribution chains and for the "end of geography" but, almost paradoxically, these trends are accompanied by an explosion of diversity and places (Graham, 1998), as well as the proliferation of small businesses whose success is based on flexibility and the ability to exploit niches in the market. This trend is also clear with respect to food; on the one hand this product is subject to growing standardisation which renders it dull, non-geographical, without links with a specific context; on the hand, it is undergoing increasing "re-positioning", in the sense of recuperating connections with local

⁹ Farmers' markets go back to the 1970s in the USA, and to the 1990s in France and Great Britain.

realities and recounting – through the proliferation of brands and the close relationship between producers and consumers – territories, cultures and methods of production that have escaped standardisation (Renting *et al.*, 2003; Grillotti Di Giacomo, 2007; Cesaretti and Annunziata, 2011)¹⁰.

The reaction to globalisation in the field of consumption has already been seen with the opposition to the great brands of fashion wear (Klein, 2000) which imposed lifestyles and colonised the historic centres of cities with their spectacular flagship stores. This reaction has now extended to food. In advanced societies, as the level of income increases, the proportion of resources destined to the purchase of food decreases, but this does not make it “secondary” in models of consumption; quite the contrary, it is invested with new meanings. Food is no longer simply to satisfy a need, but a means of socialising as well as being one of the most effective expressions of the culture of a place (Franchi, 2009).

We live in a society dominated by risk and our anxieties are fully reflected in food: while the pursuit of pleasure related to food increases together with a burgeoning interest in discovering new gustatory territories, there is growing concern about health, food safety, and the certainty of the origin of products. There is also greater sensitivity to environmental and ethical issues related to production, which, among other things, is the foundation for the development of fair and supportive trade, one of the major elements of the so-called critical consumption.

The consumer becomes more informed and active, better able to impose his wishes on the world of production and thus propel it to a less exaggerated individualism than in the past. Behind the short supply chains there is a consumption that returns to being a socialising factor and a shaper of relations; this can be seen in the forms of direct sales that enhance the exchange of information between producers and consumers, but also in the silent and continuous growth of ethical buying groups, real “communities of consumption” based on aggregation of individuals who have generally known each other for some time and share similar lifestyles, beliefs and activities (Martinengo, 2007).

In Italy the interest in these forms of marketing has exploded in conjunction with the financial crisis and the shortening of the distribution chains has been widely interpreted as a way of containing the price of food products. However, the financial motive is a frame to more complex causes which could go beyond providing a contingent response to a difficult economic situation, towards new models of consumption. There are numerous examples related to short supply chains: this has been clear for some time in international studies (La Trobe and Acott, 2000; Bubinas, 2011) but is also beginning to emerge in Italy, where some studies on farmers’ markets not only highlight – only a few years after the appearance of the markets – the multiple types of offers but also stress their capacity to “capture” consumers

¹⁰ In Italy, 241 products are identified as DOP (=PDO; Protected Designation of Origin) and IGP (=PGI; Protected Geographical Indication). As far as concerns wines, there are 70 recognized DOCG (=CDOG, Controlled Designation of Origin Guaranteed), 329 DOC (=CDO, Controlled Designation of Origin) and 118 IGT (=TGI, Typical Geographical Indication) (data from March 15, 2012).

driven by contrasting interests (Franco and Marino, 2012). Some consumers are very price-conscious and interested in the return of food supplies in the city (lost with the spread of shopping centres) while others, placing cultural considerations before financial ones, are attracted by genuine foods and the valorisation of traditional products, rooted in local contexts, which defy the logic of standardisation.

A new scale of values is imposed through the short supply chains, rewarding sustainability, quality and safety¹¹; all this could provide the foundations for forms of “food citizenship” heralding broader forms of citizenship, with an important implication: the transformation of commerce from an “object of criticism to critical subject” (Fabris, 2010: 4). Being freed from needs, to pursue desires and whims, consumption and its “cathedrals” have become the focus of complaint (Ritzer, 1999; Bauman, 2007), but, through short supply chains, the new demands accompanying the purchase of food point the way towards a consumption that is disassociated from the ephemeral to become a critical instrument of opposition to the prevailing mentality, a means through which the consumer gains a more active role than in the past. The signals are weak, but should not be underestimated.

In the context of the European Union, another factor is encouraging the development of short supply chains: the 1992 reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which incorporates the multifunctionality of agriculture as a key element. This reform distances itself from the previous productivist paradigm, based on mechanisation, standardisation of production and high yields per hectare; the farmer is now required to take care of the environment, protect biodiversity and safeguard local products, while generating a series of goods and services previously neglected because they were considered secondary to the production of food (Wilson, 2001; Zasada, 2011). These duties, which are a prelude to the new figure of the farmer as a “guardian of the territory”, are greatly appreciated by people living in cities who tend, increasingly, to “consume the countryside” and to associate this latter with positive values such as health, a beautiful landscape, conservation of the heritage and the possibility of finding wholesome food and strong social networks (Marsden *et al.*, 1993; Marsden, 1999; Van der Ploeg, 2008). In the panorama of multifunctionality, direct selling becomes a privileged channel of diversification of agricultural activities and can contribute effectively – given the central role of consumption in contemporary society – to the creation of systems of local development that can enable rural communities to resist the processes of urbanisation.

¹¹ Even if this is not necessarily guaranteed by short supply chains, which, at least in Italy, have two main problems: the traceability of the products (the regulations are less severe than those related to other channels of distribution) and the origin of the products given that the legislation imposes only “predominant provenance” from the agricultural business but this does not exclude that other goods (up to 49% of the total) of different origin can be offered.

Table 1 – The impacts of short supply chains on the environmental, social and economic context

<i>Impact areas</i>	<i>Direct sale in the farm</i>	<i>Farmers' markets</i>
Environmental sustainability		
Impact on natural resources and landscape		
Increase of biodiversity and extension of production opportunities	++	+
Environment and rural landscape conservation in marginal areas	++	++
Diffusion of organic and integrated agriculture		+
Conservation of peri-urban agricultural areas	++	++
Impact on the negative externalities due to transport food (food miles)	+ / ++	++
Impact on the waste production associated to packaging of products	++	++
Diffusion of environment awareness among consumers	/ +	++
Social sustainability		
Impact on social relations		
New relations between producers and consumers	+	++
Relations growth between city-residents and country-residents	++	+
Community revitalization against the dissolution of socialization		++
Construction of local “food-centric” identity		
Community identification in its own territory		++
Acknowledgment of food social value	+	+
Impact on urban structure		
Creation of aggregation stimulus for local community		++
Food retail come back in urban centers		++
Impact on food-chain quality		
Diet improvement (reducing health care costs)	+	++
Improving the quality of food consumed	++	+ / ++
Food education	+ / ++	++
Impact on employment		
Maintenance of small commercial activities and new workers	+	+
Job opportunities for young farmers	++	+
Job opportunities for disadvantaged groups	+	+
Economical sustainability		
Impact on agricultural management		
Reorientation to the market (greater independence from policies)	+	+
Diversification of agricultural incomes	++	+
Transformation of part-time and hobbies activities in professional activities	+	+
Impact on local economy		
Important role of the agriculture in the local economy	+	++
Wealth conservation in the territory (multiplier effect)	+	++
Impact on the value of products sold		
Advantage for producers (price increase)	+	+
Advantage for consumers (value increase)	++	+

Source: Franco (2011), with authors' adaptations

New communication technologies also contribute to the success of short supply chains in that – apart from the sales methods that take advantage of e-commerce – these promote direct contact between the producer and consumer, thanks to the fast, cheap communication that can expand the potential markets. Thus, although the phenomenon of direct selling is recent and still limited, it seems to have a significant economic, social and environmental impact (tab. 1).

4 Direct sales of agricultural products in peri-urban areas

In areas close to large cities (peri-urban) the direct sale of agricultural products takes on a particular value because it is the opportunity for the regeneration of agriculture, for local

development and for the construction of new alliances between the city and countryside (Houston, 2005; Jarosz, 2008; various authors, 2009). Peri-urban areas play a key role in the contemporary city because they host activities essential for the latter's function (office blocks, shopping centres, logistics centres, prisons, hospitals ...) but, at the same time, are real "battlefields", in which the spread of housing and businesses clashes with the protection of open spaces. It is not easy to evaluate the peri-urban context which, as Turri (2002) recalls, incorporates the two dimensions, "territory-problem" and "territory-laboratory". On the one hand the peri-urban area is a complex, chaotic space in which urban and rural features are hybridised: a real conundrum for researchers trying to describe it and seeking possible order in the apparent chaos (Antrop, 2004; Secchi, 2005). On the other hand it is a "laboratory" in that it raises questions and challenges that are difficult for public policy makers, particularly with regards to relations with the city, the provision of infrastructure, quality of living and preservation of environmental values, severely tested by a pattern of dispersed settlements which leads to a growing use (waste) of land.

The survival of agriculture in the vicinity of large cities cannot be ensured only by constraints; positive actions are needed to valorise the role of agriculture and open spaces as fundamental – not residual – elements of the organization of the territory and of urban life. The work of Donadieu (1998) and the "Italian school of territorialists" (Magnaghi, 2000; Ferraresi, 2009), who inspired the creation of agricultural parks in densely urbanised settings, is a step in the direction of reconciling city and countryside, for a long time antagonists, in a single project. Peri-urban areas should no longer be subordinate to the logics of the city which gradually encroaches on the open spaces, nor should they be subject to restrictive policies in an attempt to prevent the expansion of the city; rather, peri-urban areas should be seen as public goods, as green infrastructures, essential for the life of the city and in which agriculture is required to take care of the land.

In Italy the problem of peri-urban areas is crucial because, unlike in Germany, for example, there is no law to limit the consumption of land which, even in recent years, is proceeding much more intensely than in other European countries and also in relation to families and businesses. In the specific case of Milan this problem is even more relevant since the city is already intensely urbanised and subjected to pressures for transformation which are rely on the recovery of abandoned areas within the city but also on the large-scale decentralisation of housing and businesses, continuing a drive that began in the 1970s and is still ongoing (tab. 2). In order to counteract the encroachment of land around the Region's capital, in 1990, the South Milan Agricultural Park (SMAP) was established. This park is the largest protected area among those surrounding the city as well as one of the major agricultural parks in Europe (fig. 2)¹². Will the SMAP be able to overcome the mentality of constraints to develop a

¹² 47,000 hectares, 61 municipalities, 794,000 inhabitants in 2011 (excluding Milan).

Table 2 – Resident population in the province of Milan (1971-2011)

Territorial areas	Resident population (N°)		% Resident population on total province				
	1971	2011	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
SMAP's municipalities	514,181	793,806	13.8	16.1	18.7	19.5	19.8
Milan	1,732,000	1,324,110	46.5	41.8	36.6	33.9	33.1
Other municipalities	1,481,660	1,888,414	39.7	42.1	44.7	46.6	47.1
Total	3,727,841	4,006,330	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: authors' elaborations on ISTAT data

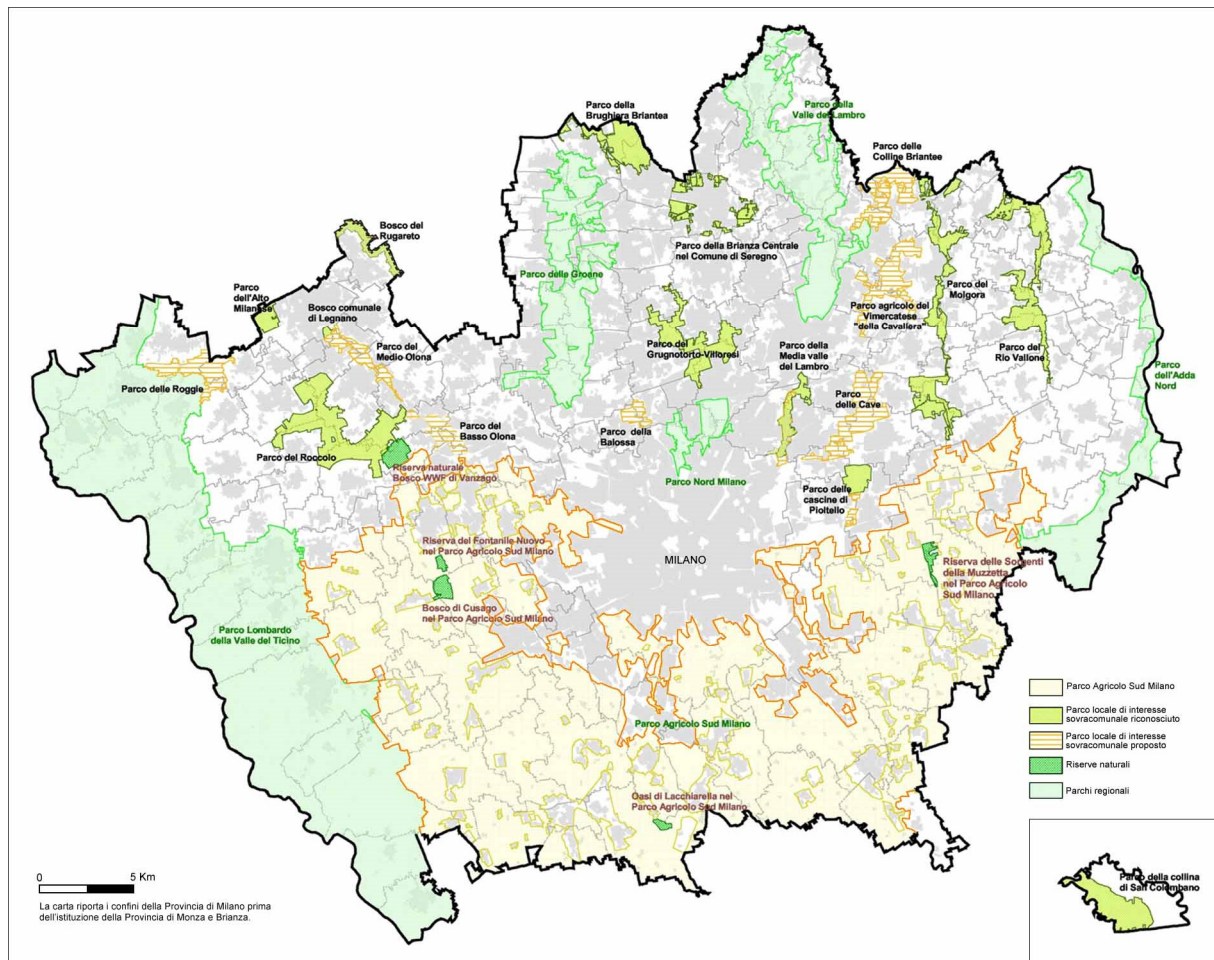
systematic plan to support the practice of direct selling, which would help agriculture to resist in the peri-urban zones? This is an important question since short supply chains have their own geography which influences the characteristics of the territory and the geography of traditional and modern commerce; furthermore, they are considered winning strategies for the survival of agriculture close to large cities, even if the contribution that territorial planning could make to their success is usually neglected (Vendermeulen *et al.*, 2006; Giacchè and Mazzocchi, 2011; Paül and McKenzie, 2013).

5 South Milan: a commercial system dominated by large retailers

As far as concerns the arrangement of the distribution system in the SMAP, there are two salient features: the weakness of the networks of small sales outlets and the substantial presence of large commercial centres. The former characteristic derives from the past since, in the 1970s, at the start of the urbanisation process that involved this territory¹³, there were already fewer commercial outlets in proportion to the resident population than in the rest of the province (tab. 3). This scarcity can be traced back to a historic weakness in the urban framework characterized by a widespread network of small living centres. The reorganization of commerce, which is very active in the area of Milan, has penalised small shops and the SMAP has also been affected by this tendency; in fact, the historical lack of small businesses has been further exacerbated. In the province of Milan, the proportion of workers in commerce with respect to the resident population is growing as time passes and, in 2001, it reached its peak value, precisely within the SMAP, with a reversal of the situation present in 1971 (tab. 4). These dynamics reflect the transformation of the commercial network based on intense development of the large commercial areas in the south of Milan, which grew both because they spread at time when this quadrant of land was the protagonist of the urbanisation process and because of the initial paucity of small shops. The characteristic introverted market towns and street-markets of large parts of the SMAP are now the sites of major commercial poles of the area of Milan, organized in radial and tangential systems or distributed in isolated points at the intersections of main roads (Faravelli and Clerici, 2004). The presence of large commercial outlets in the area of the SMAP is destined to increase, not only as a consequence of cumulative growth in the already existing municipalities which currently act as poles, but

¹³ Up to the 1970s, the process of urbanisation had been concentrated mainly in the area north of Milan, particularly because of the poorly profitable agriculture typical of dry plains.

Figure 2 – Park's system in the province of Milan (2011)



Source: Province of Milan, Sector of Planning and Infrastructures

also through the creation of alternative poles with consequent modifications of the balance of commerce within the SMAP. There is an ongoing shift of the barycentre of modern commerce from the area where it is most consolidated in the south of Milan, between the two main roads ‘Vigevanese’ and ‘via Emilia’, towards the east. This is a shift that will culminate with the creation of the enormous Westfield Milan shopping centre (170,000 m², 250 banners) in the municipality of Segrate, destined to reinforce a regional road which is emerging also in line with the new transport infrastructure. Faced with the inexorable advance of large commercial outlets, the small commercial enterprises have diversified: in the period 2006-2011, in conditions of crisis in many small municipalities and some historical poles, the network of neighbourhood shops, distributed patchily in the area of the SMAP, has, in some cases, strengthened against the trend.

6 Direct sales of agricultural products in South Milan

The geography of commerce described above should be combined with that of the short supply chains of agricultural products. In a survey of the SMAP 92 cases of direct sales of agricultural products, 55 sites of agritourism and 15 farmers’ markets were registered. Apart

Table 3 – Local units retail trade in the province of Milan (1971-2001)

Territorial areas	Local units			Local units/1,000 inhabitants	
	1971	2001	$\Delta\%$	1971	2001
SMAP's municipalities	6,357	5,976	-6.0	12.4	8.3
Milan	27,568	16,748	-39.2	15.9	13.3
Other municipalities	19,851	16,407	-17.3	13.4	9.5
Total	53,776	39,131	-27.2	14.4	10.6

Source: authors' elaborations on ISTAT data

Table 4 – Retail trade employees in the province of Milan (1971-2001)

Territorial areas	Employees			Employees/1,000 inhabitants	
	1971	2001	$\Delta\%$	2001	1971
SMAP's municipalities	12,473	22,269	78.5	24.3	30.9
Milan	72,030	49,429	-31.4	41.6	39.3
Other municipalities	37,791	47,283	25.1	25.5	27.3
Total	122,294	118,981	-2.7	32.8	32.1

Source: authors' elaborations on ISTAT data

from these last, located in the major urban centres, the agricultural enterprises that offer direct sales are concentrated in the western part of the park. This is not a casual geographical distribution, but one that reflects the intersection between the three cardinal aspects – environmental, social and economic – described by Wilson (2010) to be at the base of multifunctionality in agriculture and which also condition the direct sales that occupy a key role in the strategy of diversification of agricultural enterprises. In the western part of the park the value of the landscape, with its elevated density of woodlands, hedges and waterways, is high, but the social capital is also particularly developed, as the result of initiatives that have facilitated the coordination of local planning, including the project Walking on Water, aimed at networking agriculture, nature and historical-architectural heritage in the area between the 'Naviglio Grande' and the 'Pavese'. The west of the park will also feel the effects of Expo 2015 which, with its inspirational theme ("Feed the planet, energy for life"), has led to wide-reaching plans for tourist routes, recovery of rural crafts and valorisation of local products. Finally, in this part of the park there is a high concentration of small, family-run farms that are both more at risk of the crisis and more open to innovative choices of multifunctionality which can benefit from the closeness to the city and the new "consumers of the countryside". In contrast, the characteristics of the eastern part of the park are such as to create a certain resistance to multifunctionality: the process of urbanisation has led to greater fragmentation of agricultural land, the landscape is less enticing, the intermunicipal planning has not included open spaces as a core feature, new infrastructure is not expected in the short-term and, finally, the farms are large¹⁴. In this general framework the SMAP is using four strategies to support direct sales: 1) the opening of two 'Botteghe del parco', shops to offer local products; 2) the promotion, in partnership with Slow Food, of a monthly 'Mercato della terra', in Milan; 3) the

¹⁴ In the eastern part of the SMAP there are vegetable crops that could be introduced into short marketing circuits.

publication of a guide to the agricultural enterprises in the park that sell their produce directly to the public; 4) the creation of a brand aimed at making the park recognizable as a laboratory of environmental excellence¹⁵.

There is, therefore, no lack of action within the more general support for multifunctionality which has propelled the park authorities to a substantial commitment towards re-naturalising the territory and to establish standards to guide agricultural concerns towards greater sustainability. Nevertheless, these actions remain partial because the prevailing connotation of the SMAP is one of constraint. Since its establishment, the park has successfully counteracted urbanisation and tried to safeguard the environment, but it has not managed to go beyond restrictions, to the development of systematic planning, to channelling individual energies into a single picture and to reducing the east/west dualism. This is confirmed by the lack – twenty years after its establishment – of plans on how to use the park and valorise the historical and architectural heritage which would have allowed the practices of direct selling to take advantage of tourism and to be strengthened even in the most problematic areas closest to the city.

7 Towards new city/countryside relationships

Peri-urban areas require a rigorous, in-depth understanding, based on an re-integration of different views: the long-prevailing one of the city that moves towards the country, considering it as an undifferentiated space to conquer, and the opposite, weaker view of the countryside as a resource to valorise and a space in which multifunctional agriculture could trigger processes of local development that would enable a renewed dialogue with the city. Commercial activities also require a profound examination. In the peri-urban space to the south of Milan, alongside the two “traditional” geographies of commerce based on the development of large shopping areas along important arterial roads that guarantee the maximum accessibility and on small historical centres, often in crisis and with a paucity of commerce, a third commercial geography is becoming established, a geography which mirrors the vitality of the countryside, with its notable number of farmsteads. It is the geography of the recent spread of short supply chains of agricultural products, in many cases linked to real agritourism. Given the approach used, the new forms of direct sales should not be considered residual, but rather as emerging, new styles of life that go beyond the reaction to the contingent economic crisis. The importance of these forms of commerce reflect the policies of the European Union, which tend to promote multifunctional agriculture, but also the increase in demand for local, high-quality products, able to “tell the story” of an area, as the reaction to the standardisation of products imposed by the logics of globalisation. Almost a revolt of consumers against the dominant model of consumption. It is incontrovertible that

¹⁵ This is the “environmental-friendly agricultural producer”, a recognition divided into three categories (bronze, silver and gold) based on the actions undertaken by the agricultural enterprises in favour of environmental sustainability.

consumption is extraordinarily important in shaping territorial organization in the modern city. The spread of large retail areas has disrupted established hierarchies; likewise, the hyper-specialisation of historical centres in offering certain goods breaks down consolidated arrangements, contributing to weakening the offer in many urban neighbourhoods. If we look at the direct sale of agricultural products in farmsteads and in farmers' markets, commerce appears to have an unprecedented role in building a new alliance between the city and the countryside, directed at overcoming the past subordination of the latter to the former. Territorial planning, provided it does not privilege forms of passive protection of peri-urban areas, could make a contribution in this sense even if, as demonstrated in the case of the SMAP, this is not simple, since the resistance to pressures from the city is based on a system of constraints rather than on a strategy of active planning. Furthermore, there are still the questions of what relationships are possible between short supply chains and the rest of the distribution system and whether synergies could be created that could strengthen short supply chains also within the SMAP.

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