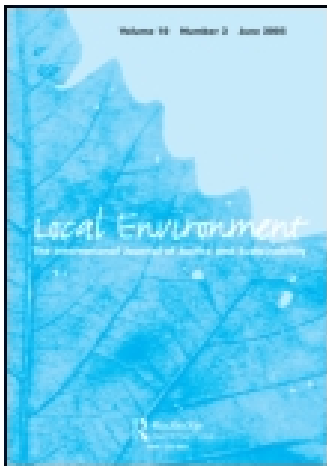


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Multiple territorialities of alternative food networks: six cases from Piedmont, Italy

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Multiple territorialities of alternative food networks: six cases from Piedmont, Italy

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Originally conceived as practices of resistance against a globalising food market, alternative food networks (AFNs) have recently gained a growing international scientific attention and policy support in the field of rural development. However, it remains difficult to define AFNs as they may assume very differentiated forms and follow very different paths, both from their objective and their spatial organisation viewpoint. This paper proposes a territorial, theoretical and empirical approach to the analysis of AFNs, based on the concept of territoriality as defined by Claude Raffestin and other geographers. On the basis of said concept, AFNs are analysed through three correlated dimensions: space, resources and relations. It is hereby argued that the analysis and definition of AFNs strictly depend on their specific territorial dimensions, assessing on a case-by-case basis their organisation and environmental, social and economic relations, with reference to their diverse organisation scales. At the same time, multiple AFNs may coexist in the same territory and concur to re-define the local food regime and the relationships among food production, distribution and consumption, and territory.

Keywords: alternative food networks; territoriality; Italy

Introduction

Originally defined and conceived as practices of resistance against a globalising food market, alternative food networks (AFNs) have recently gained a growing international scientific attention and policy support in the field of rural development. However, they may assume very differentiated forms and follow very different paths, from both their objective (as they can be either alternative or competitive with conventional food markets) and their spatial organisation viewpoints (as they can be differently embedded in local/global supply chains and markets). At the same time, multiple AFNs may coexist in the same territory and concur to re-define the food regime and the relationships among food production, distribution and consumption, and territory. Perhaps more than in other European countries, the Italian food culture is deeply founded on highly regionalised productions, with a long-lasting tradition in quality and direct selling. In this context, Piedmont is nationally recognised as a territory with a plurality of cultural-food sub-regions strongly embedded in typical production systems. In the last years, Piedmont has been

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widely interested by the diffusion of different typologies of AFNs: from the worldwide known initiative of Slow Food (started in the cultural region of Langhe at the end of the 1980s and focused on the enhancement of the cultural value of food) to many micro-experiences of farmers markets, direct selling and other short supply chains in mixed urban and rural contexts.

This paper has been written on both theoretical and empirical bases. In the first part, the international literature on AFNs is critically and chronologically reviewed, sub-dividing the debate into two major phases: ethical and critical. The second part discusses two different typologies of definition of AFNs: functional and substantial. It is hereby argued that both pose several problems of interpretation and analysis associated with the risk of falling into the trap of ideological and “romanticised” definitions of AFNs. The third part introduces a territorial approach, founded on the concept of territoriality as defined by Claude Raffestin and other geographers. The AFNs were analysed on the basis of three correlated dimensions of territoriality: space, resources and relations. The fourth part concerns the empirical aspect of the paper and it draws a geography of AFNs in Italy and Piedmont. The fifth part presents six cases studies from the Region of Piedmont, analysed through the lens of territoriality. Finally, the conclusions argue that assuming a territorial approach suggests that the importance of AFNs depends on their specific territorial dimension, assessing on a case-by-case basis their organisation and environmental, social and economic relations, with reference to their diverse organisation scales.

Towards new geographies of food?

Farm shops, farmers markets, “pick your own”, box schemes, home deliveries, mail order, community-supported agriculture (CSA), regional products, roadside sales, production codes, food miles, local shops, organic catering, consumer cooperatives, labelled products, bio-districts, farm shops, e-commerce, collective supermarkets, certified productions, products of origin, traditional products, etc. The fact that something is changing in the way food is produced, marketed and consumed is nothing new. For at least the past 15 years, more and more literature has focused on the countless empirical experiences associated with AFNs, including the ones listed above. During the same period, theoretical considerations about the new geographies of food (Gatrell *et al.* 2011) sparked an interdisciplinary interest which actively involved several disciplines ranging from sociology to rural economy, as well as economic and social geography. However, they all shared a common focus: the way in which food supply chains are subject to increasingly pervasive changes in the organisation of their social, economic, environmental, cultural and spatial set-up.

Based on what Goodman (2004) calls a “quality turn” in food geographies, the debate became increasingly focused on exploring how production and consumption practices and experiences – defined differently and grouped under the heading AFNs – were changing the relations between food and territory, between producers and consumers, and between large and small retail groups, etc. With this in mind, studying and examining “alternative” production and consumption experiences – based on simple actions like purchasing and consuming food in what is considered a non-mainstream manner – presupposes a broader multidisciplinary theoretical approach (Mansvelt 2005). Said approach involves several fields of debate which are only partly related: literature on innovative niches within social and technical systems (Smith 2006), the relationship between local practices and global processes, social and spatial justice, or even the neo-Marxist considerations on practices to resist the imposition of the global neoliberal model.

Literature on AFNs is sufficiently varied to be able to illustrate the two main stages of its history. Starting in the mid-1990s, the debate was based on the 1980s' literature on "food sustainability" (for a review, see Brklacich *et al.* 1991). AFNs were considered a radical, antagonistic alternative to a dominant system centred on industrial agriculture and organised on large-scale distribution (MacKenzie 1990, Anderson and Cook 1999). The development of alternative geographies of food (Murdoch 2000) was based on multiple arguments which varied depending on the context: food safety, food quality, fight against obesity, food scares, cultural, culinary and aesthetic values of food, as well as its social and environmental externalities (Harvey *et al.* 2004).

The differentiation between the dominant system and alternative experiences was physical as well as ideological. Mostly driven by a radical shift in consumers' attention to the quality of food, the demand for AFNs was directed towards areas which were not part of the industrialisation associated with the capitalist process of globalisation (Ilbery and Kneafsey 1998). In the agricultural sector, said globalisation involved the mass standardised agro-industrial production model considered socially unjust, environmentally unsustainable and "risky" from the point of view of health and food consumption (Goodman and Redclift 1991, Moran 1993, Whatmore and Thorne 1997). Given the above, AFNs emerged as a niche (Gill and Battershill 1998) which embraced numerous very tangible and ethical experiences defined as local, correct, profitable, sustainable and qualitative (Feenstra 1997). AFNs were used to redefine the relations between food producers and consumers. Initially, their relationships focused on separation and ignorance, whereas now they appear characterised by mutual trust, direct relations and ongoing information concerning products, both bought and sold (Whatmore *et al.* 2003).

From 2000 onwards, literature on AFNs has made a giant leap forward to comprise empirical case studies and statistics including localised and short supply chains, farmer markets, CSA, community gardens and organic schemes (Allen *et al.* 2003, Hinrichs 2003, Kirwan 2004, Jarosz 2008, Macias 2008), as well as the theoretical perspectives used to analyse these practices (Penker 2006, Sonnino and Marsden 2006, Feagan 2007, Tregear 2011). An increasingly critical stance tried to play down this ethical vision by using different disciplinary approaches to examine the unsolved issues and ambiguities of the AFNs from social, economic and environmental viewpoints.

The dualistic concept of a food market divided into two distinct and contrasting fields (the long industrial food chain and the AFNs) gradually gave way to a vision in which AFNs are seen and analysed as one of the possible ways to organise the production and consumption of food within a relationship of competitive coexistence and occasional superimposition with traditional food chains (Marsden *et al.* 2000, Sonnino and Marsden 2006). Unsurprisingly, there has been a gradual convergence between AFNs and conventional forms of production and consumption increasingly focused on intercepting consumer preference as regards quality, safety and specificity of food products. It is difficult, and perhaps unnecessary, to establish whether or not certified organic products – produced using highly standardised processes and easily purchased on the shelves of the major supermarkets – should be considered part of AFNs (Smith 2006). The same is true for many other ways in which food products are produced and consumed.

Over the last 10 years, the on-going debate on AFNs and the advent of less ideological and more critical standpoints have raised definition and analysis issues. Although there is widespread recognition that various practices can be included in a general definition of AFNs, confusion still remains regarding how to define the characteristics of these practices and, in particular, to what extent they are alternative:

sometimes it is the nature of the channel structure that is considered alternative (...), sometimes it is the governance or financing arrangements (...), sometimes, it is the characteristics of products (...), finally, some are deemed alternative because of the goals of motivations. (Tregear 2011, p. 423)

Defining AFNs

In an attempt to systematise the various definitions of AFNs in literature, it is hereby proposed to consider a distinction between two different kinds of complementary yet distinct perspectives: “formal” and “substantial”. Both these perspectives focus on the relationship with the spatial dimension. Their boundaries partially overlap and they can be used so as to identify those which, according to different authors, appear to be the founding characteristics of AFNs. The former take into consideration the spatial form of organisation in which AFNs become structured during production, distribution and consumption. This approach is used by one of the most popular classifications which identifies three different forms of AFNs (Marsden *et al.* 2000): face-to-face (the relations between producers and consumers take place due to a physical co-presence relationship), spatial proximity (production, distribution and consumption take place in the same place/region) and spatially extended (production and consumption occur in places which are different and far away from each other). Short food chains, food miles, km0 (as forms of face-to-face or spatial proximity AFNs), fair trade networks (as an example of spatially extended AFNs), etc.: these are all definitions directly associated with this kind of “formal” categorisation of AFNs. With this in mind, AFNs re-spatialise and re-localise food (Feagan 2007), in the sense that they introduce a spatial reorganisation of food networks, which does not necessarily privilege the local scale, but takes place simultaneously on more than one scale.

Social actors (producers and consumers) use AFNs to produce new relational scales and contexts which are not envisaged (or are less “focused on”) by the large-scale agro-industrial production and organised distribution. Focusing on formal aspects makes it possible to study either an individual AFN or experience, or a group of different AFNs and practices, or even entire territories. This enables to observe how the relationship between innovative and conventional food networks reorganise and influence the role of territories within the food production and distribution chain. Growth in organic, traditional and certified products involves not only the reorganisation of entire territories in which this kind of production was absent (or very weak), but also their inclusion in a more global geography of food in which specific territories are recognised as being producers of specific products.

The intrinsic characteristics of AFNs, instead, are characterised by “substantial” differences, in other words what makes them perceived as unique compared to conventional forms of production and consumption. Special attention is given to how AFNs re-socialise food, emphasising the role played by context components (environmental, social, cultural and economic) in giving value to food in specific spaces/places, juxtaposed against a dominant regime described as “dehumanising” and socially marginalising (Sage 2003, Kneafsey *et al.* 2008). The studies belonging to this category define AFNs in terms of food quality, local specificity, social trust, community relations, environmental compatibility, etc.

Embeddedness appears to be the distinctive characteristic of AFNs, in other words the reference to specific social, environmental, local and cultural contexts that define the specificity and uniqueness of every experience, network and territorial practice of food production and consumption. The concept of embeddedness has evolved from a long debate and discussion within the field of social sciences (Granovetter 1985, Storper 1992,

Ray and Sayer 1999); it interprets the link between different experiences of AFNs and specific social, cultural and territorial contexts where relations between producers and consumers take place (Hinrichs 2000, Winter 2003). According to Feagan (2007, p. 28): “trust, relations of regard, social interaction, and more comprehensive information are said to create the conditions for this more relational food transaction environment”.

Even the definition concerning the concept of food (during production and consumption) is re-embedded and re-socialised (Murdoch *et al.* 2000). On the one hand, especially in large-scale distribution, there is a gradual increase in quality certification based on criteria which are “objective”, verifiable and related to a strict definition of production processes and single products (required to satisfy specific characteristics); on the other, especially in AFNs, quality emerges as a multi-dimensional social product resulting from negotiation between producers and consumers, and referring to the context in which the product was made (Goodman 2003, Harvey *et al.* 2004), as well as to its traceability, identity and cultural traits (also its aesthetic and nutraceutical criteria) (Sonnino and Marsden 2006).

Although the difference between formal and substantial perspectives makes it possible to place the main studies on AFNs in a concise table, it also poses several interpretation and analysis issues (Higgins *et al.* 2008) associated with the risk of falling into the trap of ideological and “romanticised” definitions (Hinrichs 2000). From the point of view of formal approaches, this means considering certain spatialities as specific to AFNs (for example, face-to-face relations or spatial proximity). It also means assessing them a-priori as more just, equitable or environmentally sustainable, ignoring the fact that they are influenced by power relations, inequalities and negative externalities as well (Goodman 2004, Tregear 2011). From a substantial viewpoint, it means falling into the “local trap” of considering embeddedness as a synonym of alternativeness (Higgins *et al.* 2008) and creating “false dichotomies between globalised food systems and alternative consumption practices” (Winter 2003, p. 31). Even the concept of embeddedness, in all its many ambiguous and confused forms (territorial, social, socio-cultural, territorial, geographical, re-embeddedness, local, spatial, environmental, etc.) (Buller and Morris 2004) now appears devoid of meaning and unsuited to describe the distinctive characteristics of AFNs (Penker 2006).

Territory and territoriality of AFNs

On the basis of the analysis carried out on the AFNs in Italy, and Piedmont in particular, it is hereby proposed to use the concepts of territory and territoriality as interpretative tools for two main reasons. First, because in the Italian debate concerning practices that Anglo-Saxon literature calls AFNs, territory plays a major role in academic studies, marketing policies and the practices of grassroots operators. AFNs are considered and defined as a radical structuring of the relations between food and the territory based on the revival of a spatial, social, cultural and economic link among places, producers and consumers. Second, because territory and territoriality can, in our opinion, provide excellent interpretative tools to overcome the limits which have emerged in the debate on AFNs and introduce new analytical perspectives that hold together both formal and substantial definitions. More than introducing a radical alternative in the studies on AFNs, a territorial approach may be used as a common background to better consider, understand and analyse the connections between the different multiple dimensions of food networks as their spatiality, embeddedness and social relations.

This paragraph proposes an approach based on the considerations of the territory, which emerged as being part of the debate in the so-called “Italian territorialist school” (Governata and Salone 2004, Dematteis and Governata 2005, Magnaghi 2005). The latter began as part

of the Italian debate on local development and industrial districts (Becattini *et al.* 2003). Today, it resurfaces in the renewed dialogue between the Anglo-Saxon considerations regarding geography and the ideas developed on the continent (mainly in French-speaking and Italian countries) regarding the concepts and definitions of space, place, territory and territoriality (Wolch and Dear 1989, Jessop *et al.* 2008), as illustrated in the works of several founder-authors recently reviewed in the international forum, for example, Claude Raffestin (Klauser 2012, Minca 2012, Raffestin and Butler 2012) and Giuseppe Dematteis (Fall and Minca 2012).

In these approaches, the meaning of territory is much broader and includes more than just a geographical area (Sack 1986). Territory is considered as an ensemble of complex material and immaterial relations involving the spatial dimension, the relations among actors (at all scales) and between the latter and local resources. This being considered, the territory is in actual fact a “territorial system”, a crossroads of complex social, economic, cultural and environmental relations organised in superimposed but not coincidental scales. The territory is the result of an international work carried out by the social actors who express their territoriality (Raffestin 1980) – in other words, the strategies used by the actors to organise themselves throughout the territory – by exploiting resources and entering into relations at various levels in order to achieve their strategic objectives. Raffestin’s proposal – only partly juxtaposed against the more famous proposal advanced by Sack (1986) in the Anglo-Saxon debate (Murphy 2012) – involves rethinking geography basing it solely on the concept of territoriality, and considering it as a process sparked by several actors, from individual to collective, on different scales (Murphy 2012). More specifically, Raffestin defines territoriality as the ensemble of relations that humans maintain with exteriority and alterity, with the assistance of mediators. Said relations are maintained for the satisfaction of one’s own needs, with the aim of attaining the greatest possible autonomy, that is the capacity to have aleatory relations with one’s physical and social environment, taking into account the resources of the system (Raffestin and Butler 2012, p. 139).

Dematteis (2007) provides a successful interpretative approach of the ensemble of relations between actors and territory that defines territoriality (for a previous application of the model, see Bagliani *et al.* 2010). These relations can be conceived at three complementary levels:¹ (i) the spatial dimension of the relations, that is the organisation of the relations between the actors in space and the various geographical scales (from local to global); (ii) the dimension of the material and immaterial resources mobilised through the action of the actors, that is the resources present in the territory that are functional for achieving the strategic objectives of the actors and (iii) the dimension of the social relations among the actors, that is the way in which the actors reciprocally enter into the

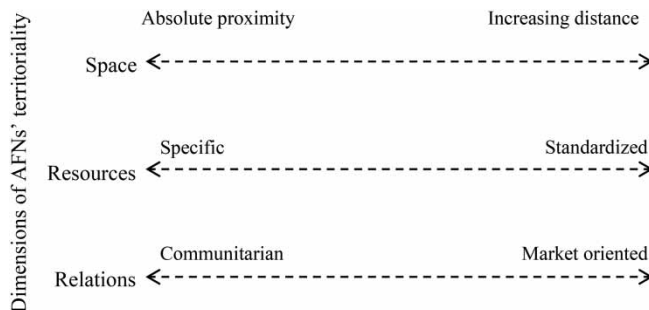


Figure 1. Dimensions of AFNs’ territoriality.

relationship to enhance the resources of the territory and pursue their own strategic objectives.

These three dimensions can be used to analyse and describe the territoriality of the different types of AFNs, considering both the formal and substantial aspects at the same time. In fact, whatever the organisational form of the AFNs, the latter necessarily have to express their own specific territoriality, which can be defined depending on the relations created with the territory as far as space, resources and relations (Figure 1).²

- *Space*: This refers to the organisation of AFNs in space, and in particular the physical and functional distance among the actors participating in the network. Distance can be considered in terms of proximity or “zero” distance in those cases in which it assumes a minimum value (for example, in urban agriculture or community gardens, where producers and consumers coincide), or it can be extended up to covering quite wide physical and organisational spaces (up to an international dimension in the case of spatially extended AFNs, such as fair trade).
- *Resources*: This refers to the type of elements (material and immaterial) recognised as resources used in the different AFNs. These resources can be extremely varied. On the one hand, they can be highly specific traditional and local resources embodying the cultural values and meanings of a specific locality and not available or reproducible elsewhere (i.e. products with a certificate of origin or, in Italy, the Slow Food outlets, where a specific cultural value expressed by the territory is associated with the product). On the other, some resources are more standardised: this is the case, for example, of organic products or integrated management in which local environmental conditions are respected in order to produce certain products and not others, but however ones which are not closely linked to cultural conditions and values that are either unique or belong to a certain territory of production.
- *Relations*: This refers to the type of social relations among the actors who belong to the different AFNs. On the one hand, these may be experiences with an explicit community dimension, based on face-to-face relations and strong trust-based relations. For example, box schemes, GASs (Gruppi d’Acquisto Solidale – Solidarity Purchasing Groups)³ or various forms of CSA, practices with a very strong social and ethical dimension (for example, the voluntary work these forms need in order to survive). On the other hand, these may be functional organisational forms of relations operating in what can be considered a more abstract market. Even in this case, these experiences are based on specific social relations (for example, the supply and sale of products), but are not community relations. Above all, they are not restricted to a specific territorial context or local scale. This is the case of markets selling organic products. These markets increasingly use producers involved in large-scale organised marketing networks which often coincide with those of the large-scale distribution.

Intended as such, the territorial approach offers an innovative contribution to the analysis of AFNs. Being focused on both spatial and social relations, it is useful to overcome the limit of considering AFNs as monolithic objects, anchored to the local scale and featured by the sole relations of solidarity and trust. Multiple territorialities are available at the same time and at different scales: from the little niche highly embedded in communitarian and local relations to more standardised and spatially extended productions distributed through mainstream channels. Considering the territoriality as a tool for the interpretation of AFNs, it is possible to identify at least three main fields of analysis.

First is the way different AFNs are originated and shaped by territorial relations. Some networks may be developed through the activism and involvement of local groups of consumers and producers moved by common objectives. Others, instead, may be originated by the individual initiative of “innovative” producers willing to invest in emerging markets and products that better meet the changing preferences of food consumptions. Still in other cases, the nature of the product itself may influence the origin of AFNs. This is the case of very specific and traditional productions that may be recognised as potential resources by local producers. In such case, social relations are aimed at the commercial and economic enhancement of a territorial resource through different commercial networks (such as certification of origin).

Second is the way AFNs as a whole redefine the relationship between food and territory. Rereading the concept of “transformative potential” by Goodman and Goodman (2007), the “alternative” offered by AFNs comes as the result of the interaction and overlapping of multiple different territorialities, and not as the imposition of one form over the others. If the mainstream used to be characterised by a unique and dominant mode of organisation of production and distribution of food, at present multiple different networks insist and interact at different scales. At the same time, consumers and producers may choose between and within a plurality of food modes of supplying and distribution, differently spatialised and territorialised. The consolidated dichotomies between rural and urban, industrial and traditional, long and short supply chains have to be reshuffled and renegotiated: a territorial approach urges to consider all these different experiences (both AFNs and conventional networks) as part of the same territories, in which different spatialities, scales, resources and relations take place on the basis of producers’ commercial strategies and consumers’ preferences.

Third is the way the issue on AFNs’ sustainability has to be reinterpreted. According to Raffestin’s definition, as mentioned above, territoriality involves relations with exteriority (the external environment) and alterity (the social realm). Despite different definitions being possible (Bagliani *et al.* 2010), a “sustainable territoriality” means that it is necessary to take into account the impacts of human interventions at multiple levels (from the physical environment to the other social dimensions such as economic, cultural, political and so on with the other dimensions of sustainability) and different scales (from the global to the very local one). However, since a univocally accepted and universal definition of sustainability does not exist (Eden 2000, Sneddon 2000), the priorities given to the various dimensions of sustainability result from a continuous process of social negotiation and interaction. Studies on food geography suggest that the relationship between AFNs and sustainability cannot be taken for granted and has to be empirically defined according to spatial organisation (how many food miles and emissions are related to different models of food production and distribution?), resources (how are local values, tradition and cultures reinterpreted and reshaped by food networks?) and relations (how much are AFNs’ relations just and equal for different categories of people?).

AFNs in Italy and in Piedmont: questioning territoriality in practice

Several studies (Parrot *et al.* 2002, Marsden 2004) have highlighted the profound differences among AFNs in the North and South of Europe. Despite a massive and growing international debate on AFNs, according to their intrinsic character, it must be assumed that AFNs mean at least partially different things in different places. In northern European countries – such as the UK, the Netherlands and Germany – the growth of AFNs “is often based on modern and more commercial quality definitions, stressing environmental

sustainability or animal welfare, and on more innovative forms of marketing” (Sonnino and Marsden 2006, p. 186); in southern European countries, and in particular in Italy, food culture is based more on a highly regionalised production involving many small family-run farms or agricultural holdings and a time-tested concern for quality (even if defined more in cultural than in formal terms) and direct sales, either at the farm or in urban and district markets.

Concerning food miles, in Italy many products are distributed in production/consumption circuits organised independently either regionally or locally (for example, fruit and vegetables). In these cases, the innovative traits of AFNs are not their substantial characteristics (i.e. the fact that they represent a particularly innovative reality in the socio-economic and cultural context of the country). Instead, these consist in their ability to reorganise themselves in a new manner on the market, to intercept a demand increasingly interested in the product, in their quality and informative content (place of origin, quality, etc.) and in their ability to induce radical changes in the relationship between food and territory. This is another reason why these contexts are chiefly based on the more “traditional” forms of expansion of AFNs, such as direct sale, farmers markets and the consumption of local products (forms of consumption which have always existed in Italy’s food culture).

Italian AFNs: a heterogeneous scenario

Although we cannot provide a full and comprehensive report in this paper,⁴ the Italian situation confirms the picture outlined above. There is an increase in the number of different kinds of AFNs. In 2001, there were approximately 36,000 holdings involved in some form of direct sale (Gardini and Lazzarin 2007). In 2010, the number of holdings involved in direct sale to consumers rose to 270,500 (approximately 16.5% of all Italian agricultural holdings), of which approximately 211,000 sell exclusively on site, while 90,000 also use (or exclusively use) external channels (for example, shops, markets, fairs, etc.).⁵ Approximately 6600 holdings use e-commerce and roughly 2500 operators use certified organic production techniques (Biobank 2011), especially in the central and northern regions of Italy (first and foremost, Emilia Romagna, Tuscany, Veneto and Lombardy).

According to Coldiretti (one of the main Italian agriculture associations) approximately 900 are farmers markets, but the number is increasing rapidly (at the end of 2010 there were 500, but until 2007 they were practically non-existent in Italy) (Gardini and Lazzarin 2007). Even GASs are rapidly increasing: in 2011, 861 were registered of which 14 were networks grouping more than one GAS and working collectively. Even in this case, the data show a significant increase (+44% compared to 2009 according to the Biobank 2011) mainly in the northern Italian regions (60% of the total, Lombardy in first place). Finally, Italy is the first European country in terms of value and numbers (20.7% of the total) as regards products and ranks marked protected designation of origin (PDO) and Consorzio Nociola Piemonte IGP (Italian translation of protected geographical indication); while it is sixth in Europe with regard to the percentage of agricultural surface reserved for organic production (8.6%; Eurostat 2012).

Quite apart from their importance in absolute terms, the widespread presence of AFNs in Italy is significant due to the radical changes they generate in the relationship between public and private actors and food production and consumption activities. With regard to private initiatives, two out of the three main Italian agricultural associations have made direct sales one of their main marketing ploys and activities, and have launched important nationwide marketing and communication campaigns.⁶ From the point of view of territorial and product marketing, and the link between producers and consumers, the Slow Food

association's initiative is one of the most successful international campaigns. In the public sector, apart from several funding opportunities in the framework of community agricultural policies, many local authorities use different kinds of tools to support farmers markets and GASs.

The Region of Umbria, for example, has passed a regional law for the accreditation and financing of farmers markets and GASs. Several GASs are shifting toward enlarging their "solidarity economy districts" (called DES, "distretti dell'economia solidale") and incorporating entire production chains (for example, DES Brianza organises a bread chain from the fields to the sale of the final product), even beyond the food sector (sponsoring, for example, forms of alternative tourism or the collective purchase of renewable energy sources). For some time now, other GASs have been working towards collective management of orders for certain products (for example, the GAS networks in the province of Turin) and promoting small organised distribution models (PDO). The latter are forms of local collective distribution of goods and products created in response to an increase in the number of purchase groups involved. They have also been created so as to avoid "bottle-necks" and blockages caused by an excessively rapid increase in the number of GASs in the same territory (one of the major problems faced by this kind of reality).

Another important experience includes bio-districts. These are organisational forms sponsored by several associations in the organic field (for example, AIAB – Italian Association for Organic Agriculture). They are used by local farmers to promote not only their own products but also those of the whole territory by creating completely organic local chains. All these experiences, together with other more famous and well-known chains, such as Slow Food, have contributed to a food-quality turn in several territories; in fact several places and territories now identify themselves, and are increasingly identified, as food-quality territories.

The region of Piedmont: the turn towards food quality

Located in the upper North-West corner of the country, Piedmont (4.5 million inhabitants of which approximately half reside in the metropolitan area of the city of Turin) is one of the Italian regions most affected by the increase in AFNs and the onset of initiatives to enhance "food culture". Different kinds of food productions are historically present in the region: commodities, destined for mass consumption and industrial transformation; specialities, highly territorialised productions, often subject to certification quality (such as wine, meat, cheese); and marginal productions, located in the mountain areas. Despite the fact that commodities are still prevalent, in the last 20 years several mainly private initiatives have led to a significant broadening of the specialities market, not only quantitatively, but also (and above all) in terms of quality. Piedmont is increasingly seen as a food-quality territory, with regard to production, cultural and social content, and consumer awareness.

Undoubtedly, the Slow Food association has played a pivotal role in this process. It was created in 1989 in the province of Cuneo, specifically in the area of the Langhe (the little town of Bra), a rural territory mainly dedicated to the wine sector. Today it is a transnational movement with more than 100,000 members worldwide. The movement focuses on the safeguard of local food culture and the promotion of bottom-up globalisation. Slow Food was created to combat the dominant fast-food culture, the loss of many regional culinary traditions and people's growing disinterest in problems associated with food, and the preparation and taste of food products. According to Slow Food's philosophy, a better food culture plays a major role in the promotion of man and society, as well as in the protection of the planet. These are objectives which can be achieved by defending biodiversity in order

to safeguard our gastronomic heritage, educate people's taste and create a network for producers and consumers (Petrini 2009).

The Slow Food discourse evolved progressively enlarging its vision of food and the connections of food in general and everyday life issues, in a global, transnational and interlocal vision. Today the association focuses on the enhancement of the cultural value of food, the protection of environmental and cultural biodiversity, and the support of local farmers. It also involves a global network of food communities (called "presidi") and marketing initiatives: food production, distribution and delivery, editorial activities, higher education, international cooperation and global events, for example, the Terra Madre project. Said project was launched in 2004 and is re-proposed every two years in Turin. It is an occasion for farmers and producers who are members of Slow Food in Italy and around the world to meet and present their products to the public and discuss initiatives and strategies so as to promote food culture. Eataly, inspired by the Slow Food experience and philosophy, was created in Turin in 2007. It has spread all over Italy with a chain of small and medium-sized sales points specialising in the marketing of typical and quality products. This project is gradually developing into an international success story (its crowning glory: a sales point in New York in 2010 and several outlets in Japan).

These initiatives have created a deep and rich humus in which AFNs have been able to grow. In turn, they have reinforced the "quality turn" in the food and production system of the region. Several kinds of AFNs are supported by a number of local national agriculture associations (Coldiretti and Confederazione Italiana Agricoltori (CIA)). In particular, the latter has sponsored and encouraged the opening of direct, onsite, sales points (involving more than 1000 agricultural holdings in the territory) and farmers markets (roughly 80 in the whole region). The growth in GASs has been more spontaneous. In fact, Piedmont is one of the regions in Italy with the highest number of GASs (100 over a total of 900). These particular GASs in Piedmont reveal a marked tendency towards coordination, self-organisation and reciprocal support especially in urban areas.

The Region of Piedmont has a broad selection of different food geographies which range from more formal initiatives to very ethical and ideological experiences. Rather than focusing on their numbers, it is important to emphasise how they have contributed to a more general reorientation of the territory (with regard to internal strategies and external visibility), towards food quality and the dissemination of a different relationship between food and territory. However, from a broader perspective, AFNs in Piedmont run the risk of being considered pre-established interpretative categories and consequently all similar.

The following paragraph will attempt to show how, on the contrary, there are many different forms of AFNs in the region and how the concept of territoriality can facilitate a better understanding of the phenomenon.

The territoriality of AFNs in Piedmont: six case studies

Based on previous studies (Marsden *et al.* 2000), Table 1 presents the six case-stories involved in the research.⁷ Each one represents tangible experiences of AFNs in Piedmont. They were chosen according to their different organisational structures and specific history. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the management of each institution. Discussions focused on three analytical levels of territoriality (cf. para. 3): space, resources, relations.

In Table 2, each case study is re-elaborated according to the different forms of territoriality.

Table 1. Six case studies of AFNs in Piedmont.

Name	Description
Biodiffusione	Established in 2000 in a small municipality in the province of Turin (Mazzé), Biodiffusione Srl focuses chiefly on the marketing of biological products for collective catering (e.g. public municipal and school canteen facilities). It serves approximately 2500 biological meals per day and supplies over 250 producers all over Italy (albeit mainly in North Italy and Piedmont). Apart from biological products, it also distributes local and non-biological products to the regional market. It is a rapidly expanding company, one of the most active in Italy in the sector of biological collective catering
Ecoredia	The initiative was launched in 2002 by approximately 30 families; at present approximately 150 families are now involved with the Ecoredia association (Ivrea). The association manages collective orders of agricultural products from small local producers and promotes sustainable local development projects in collaboration with local public administrations (e.g. projects to reform municipal school canteens using local products). By choice, the association does not use certified biological products, insofar as quality is guaranteed by their trust in the production methods used by producers who are members of the network
Piccoli Produttori Biellesi	The Piccoli Produttori Biellesi was established in 2000 in the municipality of Biella as a mutual aid association of several small farmers in the territory who were not very competitive on the market. At first the association was involved in the collective sale of products using the box-scheme formula; it had organisational difficulties and very little success. The turning point came in 2008: the association opened its own virtual online web portal and promoted it as an online market. Every week the producers indicate what products they intend to sell and buyers can make their orders. Today the association involves 25 producers serving more than 1500 families, who almost completely buy up what is on offer. The association has its own regulations specifying that producers and buyers have to be located in the province of Biella (in order to lower transport and environmental costs) and have to actively participate in the activities of the association
GAS Torino	Established in 2001 as a network of GAS active in the province of Turin. Involved in promoting and supporting individual GAS and, more in general, critical consumption and the solidarity economy. In particular, the association manages collective orders for certain kinds of products on behalf of participant GAS; the aim is to lower financial costs and the environmental impact of distribution. Since 2009 it organises a DES, i.e. a form of local market with alternative solidarity relations compared to the dominant market system in sectors such as agricultural products, ethical finance, social cooperatives, renewable technologies, etc.)
Orto dei ragazzi	Established in 2006 on land belonging to the Città dei Ragazzi Foundation, a diocesan institute which for over 50 years has helped young boys in difficulty. The project was launched by a group of eight young boys who decided to start a biological fruit and vegetable kitchen garden and promote direct distribution by an initial group of 30 families. The initiative was so successful that in 2010 the participating families had risen to over 300. The kitchen garden decided to reorganise by collecting biological products from several agricultural holdings in the province of Turin and distributing them to families. During that period, consumers were involved in the direct management of the kitchen garden through a form of CSA

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Name	Description
Consorzio Nocciola Piemonte IGP	The Consortium, founded in 1994 at Alba (in the province of Cuneo), includes 995 hazelnut producers of the type “Nocciola Piemonte IGP”. This is a specific product with its own brand of protected geographical indication. Thanks to its highly nutritive quality and excellent flavour, Nocciola Piemonte IGP products are used not only to produce quality pastries, but also by the most important national and international producers working in the confectionary industry. Only agricultural holdings located in areas specified in the regulations can be part of the consortium. The Consortium promotes, protects and controls production methods as well as the correct use of the brand

Table 2. Prevalent territoriality of the six case studies from Piedmont.

		Biodiffusione	Ecoredia	Piccoli Produttori Biellesi	GAS Torino	Orto dei ragazzi	Consorzio Nocciola IGP
AFNs' Territoriality	Space	Absolute proximity	/	<i>V</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>V</i>	/
		Increasing distance	<i>V</i>	/	/	/	<i>V</i>
	Resources	Specific	/	<i>V</i>	/	<i>V</i>	/
		Standardised	<i>V</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>V</i>	/
	Relations	Community	/	<i>V</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>V</i>	/
		Market oriented	<i>V</i>	/	/	/	<i>V</i>

Notes: Cells are marked with the symbol *V* when a specific dimension of territoriality is representative for the AFN's typology. The symbol / stands for “not representative”.

The table enables to reach specific qualitative conclusions which are believed herein to be of particular importance so as to enhance the analysis of the AFNs and their forms of territorial organisation.

First of all, the AFNs considered in the study have very different forms of territoriality as far as space, resources and relations are concerned. For example, the territoriality of Biodiffusione is expressed chiefly in the trade relations of purchase and sale of products within the organic market and public institutions interested in their consumption. To ensure uninterrupted supply, the spatial area covered by Biodiffusione is extremely large (in some cases, the whole country). The products are not characterised culturally, but have to be certified. On the contrary, the Piccoli Produttori Biellesi association has chosen a spatial scale of absolute proximity (in fact this has been included in the official regulations of the association: producers must be located and supply their products within the boundaries of their own province). Its network is organised on the basis of collective social relations built around the direct involvement of all the producers present in the management of the cooperative. Instead, the territoriality of the Consorzio Nocciola Piemonte IGP is different: it is based on the enhancement of a specific local resource which is distributed on a spatially broad scale (up to a global scale) and governed by trade relations.

Second, AFNs seem to be able to transform themselves and adapt. To a greater or lesser degree, these six cases show that AFNs evolve over time. In most cases, the changes are not based only on an increase in production, but involve changes in the way they relate to the size of the territory and its resources. For example, Orto dei Ragazzi has a territoriality which changes, first and foremost, in its spatial organisation, shifting from a local “micro” scale to a much broader scale, and has seen an increase in the number of families served. This evolution leads to changes in territoriality with regard to social relations, shifting from an exclusively collective to a more market-based perspective when it comes to purchasing products from other agricultural holdings.

However, a change in scale does not always involve a shift from a collective to a market dimension. In the case of Ecoredia and Gas Torino, an attempt was made not only to disseminate the philosophy of purchase groups and consumption awareness in the territory, but also to develop direct, trust-based relations with producers and local public agencies as a way to build more socially embedded local alternative economy districts. In the case of Biodiffusione, its ability to renovate lies in its choice of broadening its reference market and diversify its product supply over a period of time as much as possible; besides, it is able to deal with organic products as well as conventional and integrated management. For the Piccoli Produttori Biellesi, the shift from box schemes to the virtual market was an innovation that radically changed the kind of network it activated in the territory, from both qualitative and quantitative viewpoints.

Third, this case study evidenced that different forms of territoriality in the AFNs is something which cannot be considered as a fixed dimension of territorial control à la Sack. It is a variable, multi-scalar and multi-dimensional characteristic. However, producers who participate in a local chain can be involved in organised large-scale distribution and, as a result, exploit the advantages of both chains. Alternatively, more standardised products can be purchased in the same GASs, as well as specific products with traditional values and production know-how. Over the years, Biodiffusione has managed to connect with a large number of organic producers throughout the territory. It has also been able to offer them a huge market outlet for their products and provide producers with an opportunity to emerge locally and find a “guaranteed” market for their products on a much larger scale.

At the same time, Biodiffusione has created a network of long-lasting relations with suppliers all over Italy. This has enabled it to shift scales and become not only one of

the major players in organic distribution, but also one of the most important suppliers of products for collective catering in Italy. Gas Torino chooses its products mainly amongst those produced locally, but above all, it turns to producers from all over Italy for collectively managed purchases (the idea to create a coordination group for GAS in the city of Turin was influenced by the need to collectively purchase huge quantities of oranges from Sicily). Producers who are members of the Piccoli Produttori Biellesi cooperative sell their products not only to customers belonging to the virtual market but also to large-scale distribution chains, thereby optimising the advantages of participating in both forms of distribution (local and supra-local, community and market). The hazelnut producers belonging to the Consorzio Nocciolo Piemonte IGP not only send their products to industrial product transformation industries, but also develop separate forms of enhancement of hazelnuts based on direct onsite sales, face-to-face relations with consumers and spreading of information about the product and its territorial features.

Conclusions

The definition, systemisation and analysis of AFNs are still unexplored fields of research. This is due, above all, to the heterogeneous forms of AFNs and because of the gradual convergence between alternative and conventional networks which makes it difficult to establish the functional and substantial differences between the two. By adopting a Raffestin-style territorial approach, this paper has tried to link theoretical considerations concerning AFNs with empirical analysis. It is hereby believed that territorial interpretation makes it possible to take a giant step forward in the comprehension of AFNs by combining their spatial organisation, their link to resources and their social relations. The ensuing interpretative model made it possible to carry out an overall interpretation of rather different AFNs in Piedmont. In our opinion, the “territorial” importance of AFNs lies in their multiple relations with the territory and in the many different territorial forms of AFNs. Owing to their heterogeneity and complexity, AFNs cease to be a simple niche, in other words antagonistic experiences fighting against a dominant system. On the contrary, they represent a whole world of practices, all different from each other. However, if they are considered as a whole they can redirect entire territorial systems as regards the quality of food. This can occur apart from the quantitative importance that these practices may have. Compared to the much more extensive conventional system, said practices may still appear very modest.

At the same time, a territorial approach opens up further avenues for reflection and in-depth deliberation as far as both theoretical considerations and empirical analysis are concerned. With regard to theoretical considerations, it would seem appropriate to continue focusing on territoriality, and in particular on the concept of mediators including, for example, the interesting topics of policies and new technologies. How do public policies affect movements which often develop in a self-organised form, and what forms of territoriality do they support the most? How can smart ICTs boost the creation and functioning of AFNs, and how can they facilitate changes in their territoriality (see, on this issue, the Piccoli Produttori Biellesi)?

From an empirical viewpoint, a further element for in-depth discussion is the relationship between AFNs and the territorial context. On the one hand, AFNs were studied (especially early on) as alternative forms of production and consumption to what was considered a “dominant” model. On the other hand, they gradually became, year after year, reference models with ample use of rhetorical formulas defining them as local, embedded, sustainable, community, etc. A territorial approach suggests that the importance of AFNs is tied to their specific territorial dimension, assessing their organisation and environmental,

social and economic relations on a case-by-case basis, with reference to their diverse organisation scales.

Finally, a territorial approach appears to be useful also from a comparative perspective. Since it moves from the general category of territoriality as a tool to analyse socio-spatial processes, it may be adopted to hold together very different practices: from the more embedded forms of AFNs, common in the southern European countries, to the more commercial- and market-oriented practices mostly diffused in northern Europe and in the USA. Considering all these experiences as different forms of food territorialisation, a territorial approach better reveals the overlapping and the junctures between different AFNs, as well as the possible interconnections between alternative and conventional food systems at different spatial scales.

Notes

1. It is interesting to note how the three proposed definitions of territory can be used either alternatively (according to the degree of complexity assigned to the concept of territory) or as three complementary and co-existing definitions.
2. No dimension should be considered through value judgements, but simply as diverse organisational models present in the theoretical debate on AFNs and in the empirical analysis carried out during research and/or found in literature.
3. GASs represent a variant of Anglo-Saxon box schemes: groups of families who self-organise themselves to make collective purchases from a limited number of “reliable” local producers. Purchases normally and mainly involve fresh vegetables, but may also include meat, pasta and transformed products in general. Italian GASs are usually developed in urban environments and mostly in the larger cities. They create a direct link between cities and their wider territory as selected local producers usually belong to peri-urban areas.
4. There is no current, up-to-date inventory of AFNs in Italy. This is easy to understand when considering how extremely heterogeneous AFNs are and the informal characteristics of some of these experiences (which sometimes develop in order to avoid the logic of classification and regulatory classification within the system). The only way to obtain more information concerning the Italian situation in general and the situation in Piedmont in particular is to review the data made available by the reports of the associations of producers and consumers, online portals and texts on critical consumption.
5. Data obtained from Sesto Censimento dell’Agricoltura (Istat 2010).
6. The initiatives include Campagna Amica by Coldiretti, which gave rise to a network of sales points and farmers markets now consultable online, and La Spesa in Campagna by the CIA (Confederazione Italiana Agricoltori) promoting direct, on site sales.
7. The research is entitled “Green economy and territory. Environmental innovation and territorial practices for the eco-restructuring of society” (carried out by EUPOLIS . . . Dire cos’è? in 2011–2012). The research analysed various types of AFNs and their relationship with the territory, using as an interpretative tool their spatial organisation, relationship with resources and relations among actors. In all, 12 case studies were examined in depth (this paper reports on the most meaningful).

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