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Governing the “Food Matter”: Urban Food Policies as new arenas of urban governance

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This essay will deal with changes in contemporary forms of public regulation occurring at the urban level. On the one hand cities are directly involved in processes of redistribution of power among different political scales. On the other at the urban level is possible to observe the inclusion of non-institutional actors in the production and implementation of public policies. This paper will introduce the “food matter” as a new field of study for social sciences to analyse these political changes. The analysis will focus on the case of Urban Food Policies (UFPs) which are rapidly spreading in Italy and also at a global level. UFPs will allow to observe how cities are “taking possession” of food matter and how public actors are experimenting the construction of urban food policy networks. In particular, UFPs will be interpreted as new emerging forms of urban governance arenas where local governments, private players and a third sector are engaged in the management of local food system.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the seventies, two processes have changed the forms of public regulation in terms of inclusion of non-institutional actors in policy-making processes and of power redistribution among new political scales. The transition from *vertical-government* to *network-governance* has opened the policy-making to new actors, redefining methods of governing society (Rhodes 2007). Contrarily, the centrality of the national state government has been re-discussed in favour of supranational, transnational or local levels, and of «mobile modes of neoliberal governmentality» (Peck and Theodore 2015:4). Both processes have affected cities, which have assumed a new role in the globalized world (Sassen 2007), experimenting new patterns of urban governance and self-organizing networks (Edelenbos and Van Dijk 2017).

These political changes can be observed through the emerging case of Urban Food Policies (UFP): processes that aim to structure new food governance arenas connecting professionals, companies and associations involved in local food systems. These experiences form part of the debate on the political downscaling of food encouraged by transnational actors (UN, FAO, UE) that identify the urban level as the privileged scale to manage food-related problem. Urban Food Policies allow observing closely the process of construction of urban governance systems in which local government do not have *ex-ante bodies* to governing the food matter. In this way, non-institutional actors can enforce their *agency* in defining urban agenda, policy strategies and political goals.

In the first section, a brief review is proposed on the debate on political rescaling processes and the concepts of urban governance and policy networks. The second part outlines how food is becoming an urban matter. Finally, the theme of Urban Food Policies will be introduced as a case to observe contemporary urban policy-making.

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1. FROM GOVERNANCE TO URBAN GOVERNANCE IN MULTISCALAR DYNAMICS

The process of inclusion of non-institutional actors in the production of public policies has been framed by the concept of *governance*, which has been widely used in social sciences in describing, observing, analysing and interpreting contemporary policy-making. Governance theories focused on processes and interactions among different actors (public and private) that intervene in the production of policies (Bevir 2011). In other words, governance systems refer to the structuring of interaction patterns between actors coming from politics, economy and society (Moini 2012). Moreover, the concept identifies the interdependence among public, private and voluntary sectors (Stoker 1998) in terms of resources, competencies and technicalities necessary in policy production and implementation. In the governance perspective, the public authority is questioned leaving room for less hierarchical relationships: this "waiver of verticality" is redefining the role of non-institutional actors in contemporary policy-making. These processes are justified also by the normative dimension of the concept of governance. This dimension is highlighted in studies dealing with collaborative governance systems, which are defined as «the processes and structures of public policy decision making and management that engage people across the boundaries of public agencies, levels of government, and/or the public, private, and civic spheres to carry out a public purpose that could not otherwise be accomplished» (Emerson and Nabachi, 2015: 18). In this definition, collaboration among public and private actors is described as the only effective configuration to achieve policy aims.

A further transformation concerns the reconfiguration of scales of political power. The *political rescaling theory* (Brenner 2004) described and analysed these processes showing the transfer of political power from the state to others institutional level. This rescaling affected both the institutional system and the allocation of functions (Keating 2014) and contributed to a redistribution of competences on different policy issues. The transfer of functions and competencies was carried out on a vertical axis, where the two extremes represent the trans-national and local/urban levels. In other words, political rescaling has implied «the emergence of a new scalar order» (Nelles and Durand 2014:106). According to d'Albergo, «who, how and where» exercises power in the economic and social regulation (2014:218) represent the stakes of these processes. Thus, the contemporary policy-making process is carried out by transnational, national, local and urban actors in *multiscalar dynamics* (Sassen 2007), that can favour political integration or the emergence of conflicts between scales with divergent interests and strategies.

Cities have been directly involved in these political changes in terms of new political competence and "ways of governing". Cities are redefining their institutional arrangements to achieve a «growth first» development model (Peck and Tickell 2002:394) and considering themselves as political entities (Savitch and Kantor 2002) in a global competition. Local governments are also engaged in the solution of collective problems once regulated at the state level (Le Galès 2006). In this perspective, new conceptualizations on governance and political rescaling have addressed their attention to the local and the urban scale (Stoker 2000; Pierre 2011), favouring the rise of a new urban paradigm (Pierre 2015). Moreover, recent studies have focused on governance systems of metropolitan areas, where the integration occurs on different policy sectors, especially in strategies of economic development (Nelles and Durand 2014; d'Albergo et al. 2018). Focusing on the urban level, scholars argue that local governments have a direct responsibility in coordinating local actors towards common goals (Edelenbos and Van Dijk 2017), and, at the same time, non-governmental actors are increasing their influence in public-decision makings (Denters 2011).

In particular, network governance' configurations favour a broad discretion for all the actors involved in policy-making (Eckardt and Elander 2009). Such networks cannot be imagined as predefined models, but they can assume different empirical forms depending on political and

discursive contexts (Sørensen and Torfing 2016). The concept of *policy network* is a useful analytic tool to investigate these patterns of interactions among public, private and third sectors and to analyse how these players take part in contemporary policy-making, also at the urban level. Policy networks are defined as «sets of formal and informal institutional links between government actors and other actors structured around shared interests in the development and implementation of public policies» (Rhodes 2007:2). As Borzel argues, in a policy network «actors who are interested in developing a certain policy and who have the resources (material and immaterial) necessary for the formulation, decision or implementation of the policy, form links for the exchange of these resources» (1998:259). An interpretative key to analyse the policy networks *interdependence* (Stoker 1998) concerns the different resources (and competencies) that the networks' participants can employ, which can directly affect the policy outcomes (Marsh and Smiths 2000).

To sum up, the inclusion of non-institutional actors and the multiscalar dynamics have made more complex the policy-making processes, also at the urban level. In this perspective, the structuring of a (urban) governance system has become a challenge for public actors. These systems need political coordination to achieve their political goals (Enroth 2011) and to avoid confusion on different tasks. In fact, urban governance systems do not exist in a vacuum (da Cruz et. al. 2019) and must negotiate their actions with other political scales and with the local stakeholders. This negotiation affects also the configuration of these institutional architectures that varies from country to country (Nunes Silva and Buček 2017). In this perspective, to examine the power relations between actors and political scales becomes important in studies on urban governance systems. The analysis of relations among public and private players allow observing *how public actors redefine their role in networks, why non-institutional actors intervene in the decision-making process (the stakes), how the network participants define objectives, strategies, actions and pursue political results*. These questions can refer to both traditional policy sectors (mobility, housing) and to emerging ones, such as the urban food governance systems, which can be considered as a new form of pluralistic urban governance (Haysom 2015). In the next section, "food matter" will be introduced as an empirical case of a multiscalar issue, involved in a process of political rescaling towards the urban/local scale.

2. HOW FOOD BECAME AN “URBAN MATTER”

Public regulation of "food matter" is entrusted to a multiplicity of actors that are located on different scales of political power. The main aim of public regulations concern access to food for the greatest number of people and the protection of the healthiness of products coming from agriculture and breeding. These aspects are respectively summarized in the concepts of *Food Security* and *Food Safety*. Food Security is reached «when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious foods to satisfy their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life»² – an aim for over 820 million people worldwide³. Instead, Food Safety means «the absence, or safe, acceptable levels, of hazards in food that may harm the health of consumers»⁴.

The achievement of Food Security is the purpose of supranational organizations such as United Nations (UN), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Health Organization (WHO), which operate at a global level. The guarantee of Food Safety is the main institutional task of the European Food Safety Authority. At the same time, European governments deal with the establishment of rules on production and trade for state members in the context of the Common Agricultural Policy. In Italy,

² <http://www.fao.org/docrep/003/w3613e/w3613e00.HTM>

³ <http://www.fao.org/state-of-food-security-nutrition/en/>

⁴ <http://www.fao.org/food-safety/en/>

the government of food is entrusted to the Ministry of Agricultural, Food, Forestry and Tourism Policies, and to sections of regional institutions such as the Italian "Assessorati all'agricoltura". In other words, food matter is characterized by its multiscale nature (Sassen 2007) which makes necessary integration between the different levels that are often in conflict with each other, as in the case of the conflicts on "Milk quotas" between the European Union and the Italian Government.

Scholars have noted the active role of cities in managing food-related problems. Pothukuchi & Kaufman introduced the key concept of "Urban Food System" (UFS) (1999) in the political and academic debate, arguing the need to manage the food system at the urban level. Authors denounced the lack of interest of local institutions for the food system, considered the "least visible" (1999:214) compared to other city systems such as transport and housing. The concept of UFS consists in the integration of 4 phases: production, distribution, consumption and waste management. In this way, considering the food matter in holistic terms has become possible for the local governments, which are involved in a new challenge regarding the adoption of food policies on an urban level. This new (urban) perspective has favoured the development of a new form of *urban planning* (Morgan 2013), which also involve food firms (Donald 2008).

According to Morgan and Sonnino, cities are directly involved in a New Food Equation (2010), whose factors are: climate changes, rising food prices and national security. As the authors claim, cities are «at the forefront of the NFE for both ecological and political reasons» (2010:210). These changes affect both the Global South and Global North (Morgan 2015), especially in terms of social inequalities. In this perspective, Deener analysed the relationship between social inequalities and the appearance, in US cities, of *food desert* (2017): «[area]with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, particularly such an area composed of predominantly lower income neighbourhoods and communities»⁵. To sum up, cities are involved in the management of food connected with food security – even in terms of internal inequalities – and with food safety. At this point, it is possible to introduce two questions: *how food has become an urban problem* and *which actors are promoting this "cities engagement" to the food matter?*

Since the early 2000s transnational actors (UN, FAO, EU) have contributed to the creation, dissemination and implementation of food policies around the world. For instance, in 2001 FAO has launched the "Food for the Cities programme", which aims to: strengthening capacity of local actors within a local food system; strengthening rural-urban linkages for more inclusive, efficient and resilient activities of small-scale agriculture; fostering participatory multi-stakeholder dialogue process to build ownership of actors⁶. At the same time, EU has included a topic reserved to food within the URBACT programme⁷. In both programmes (UN-FAO, EU), the urban scale is indicated as the most appropriate level for the management of food-related problems and the local policy-makers are identified as the privileged recipients of programme actions. These programmes define the agenda of local administrations, provide policy solutions and promote new forms of lesson-drawing and policy transfer (Rose 1991). Moreover, transnational actors disseminate imaginaries (Jessop 2009) focused on non-conflictual concepts, such as sustainability and resiliency.

As mentioned above, the actions of transnational actors are complemented by the initiative of local administrators who work on the construction of city networks relating to food matter. In this connection, the "Milan urban food policy pact" – signed during EXPO-2015 by over 100 cities – represents a significant attempt to create a common (global) framework for (urban) public action on food. The creation of city networks take place on different scales: at the national level, we can find the "network of cities for sustainable food" (which includes 57 cities in the United Kingdom), whereas

⁵ <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=42729>

⁶ <http://www.fao.org/in-action/food-for-cities-programme/overview/what-we-do/en/>

⁷ <https://urbact.eu/food>

at the transnational one we can find the "Urban Network for African Food Security" as a part of the broader Hungry Cities Partnership which includes China, India and Mexico.

The initiatives of transnational actors and local governments show how the relationship between food and city is becoming welded. In this perspective, a process of *political rescaling* (Brenner 2004) of food – in terms of *political downscaling* – can be glimpsed. Although this process is at the initial stage, it is possible to hypothesize the production of a multiscale of political power that deals with "food matter". As we will see in the next section, the case of "Urban food policies" will allow us to closely observe how cities are trying to structure an urban governance system of food. Moreover, we will try to introduce some related questions, concerning the consequent conceptualization of urban governance. In particular, observing UFPs, *we will focus not on the inclusion of non-institutional actors into existent systems of action, but on the construction process of brand new non-hierarchical urban policy networks.*

3. URBAN FOOD POLICIES AS A NON-HIERARCHICAL URBAN POLICY NETWORK

In the second part of this work, we show how cities and their governments are "taking possession" of the food issue and which actors are favouring this process of *political rescaling*. In this perspective, local governments are experimenting with the cooperatively structuring of new governance arena to manage their food system. These efforts, named Urban Food Policies (UFPs), are rapidly spreading in many cities on a global scale. UFPs can be defined as «processes and experiences that put food among the priorities of the urban agenda and use food as a key to encourage innovation processes on different areas» (Calori and Magarini 2015:47). In other words, UFPs implies «interventions designed and implemented by the local government to promote the development of a food system» (Borrelli and Mela 2017:650). Depending on the local experiences, such processes can also be named differently, such as the Canadian Food Policy Councils (Blay Palmer 2009) or the Australian case of the Food Alliance (Caraher et. al 2013).

The "Atlante del Cibo Torino" identify 7 recurrent phases in a definition process of UFPs, whose aim is «the adoption of a strategic document which [...] can present the vision of development, the general objectives, specific objectives, individual actions, responsible parties, responsibilities and spending commitments, indicators for monitoring»⁸. These experiences share recurring purposes regarding the governance dimension and the policies goals. A UFPs process aims to establish a formal system of relations between the actors involved in the management of the local/urban food system. This management takes place in «new spaces of deliberation [which are] meeting place for civil society, private players, and the local state» (Moragues-Faus and Morgan 2015:1558-1559). Thus, in an UFPs process, political coordination becomes necessary (Matacena 2016). However, an Urban Food Policy define different policy goals such as: promoting citizen health, supporting local economies and preventing social inequalities in terms of access to food. (Allen 2010; Libman et al. 2015; Prat 2017).

To pursue these political objectives, the actors involved in UFPs define and guide projects, legislative provisions and partnerships. For instance, to achieve the "fight" against food waste, Milan has implemented the "District Hub" project, which aims to redistribute food surplus on a local scale. The project is lead by the local government, Il Politecnico di Milano, the association of "Assolombarda" and its management is entrusted to the non-profit organization "Banco Alimentare della Lombardia". Similarities between UFPs can also be observed in their *policy framing* (Rein and

⁸ Full text available at: <https://atlantedelcibo.it/>

Schön 1993). UFPs imaginaries focus on the concept of sustainable development emphasizing the role of food as a way to achieve it: «we will work to develop sustainable food systems that are inclusive, resilient, safe and diverse, that provide healthy and affordable food to all people in a human rights-based framework, that minimise waste and conserve biodiversity while adapting to and mitigating impacts of climate change» (Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, 2015)⁹.

In the last years, the governments of Milan and Turin¹⁰ have activated two different processes for their food policy. City government in Milan started his process in 2014, signing a “Protocollo d’intesa” with Fondazione Cariplo (FC) that defined aims, commitments and responsibility for different activities. In particular, FC was taken in charge of the mapping of practices and actors of the local food systems and the «study and definition of indicators and monitoring mechanisms participated»¹¹. In 2016 the “Delibera 1041/2016”¹² has established governance tools to manage the food policy including a Food Policy Office and the definition of “tavoli inter-assessorili”. Turin has followed a different process starting in 2014 with the first meeting “Torino Capitale del Cibo”¹³ – promoted by “Torino Strategica” under the coordination of “Slow Food”¹⁴ (a no-profit association). The meeting has opened a debate about food planning to professionals, media and local food movements. It was followed by the project “Nutrire Torino Metropolitana” (2015) – promoted by the Metropolitan City – that involved economic operators in the food sector and citizens, called to define a food agenda to be delivered to public actors. Beyond Milan and Turin, new public-private partnerships are forming in Italian cities, which position the food question among the first points of their agendas – for instance, the projects “Nutrire Trento”, “Parma Social Food” and “Atlante del Cibo Matera”. Moreover, the food policy of Rome is underway, focusing on the strengthening of the links between the city and its countryside (Mazzocchi and Marino 2018).

These experiences represent two dimensions of analysis: local food practices and policy networks (of food). On the one hand, the process of definition of a UFP is aimed to turn pre-existing individual and social food practices – activities connected to the production, distribution and consumption of food on a local basis – into integrated food policies (Dansero and Nicolarea 2016). Local food practices have been investigated by social sciences from the perspective of (urban) social movements in the analysis of «micro-resistance strategies» (Rebughini 2006: 77) – self-production (in “Centri Sociali”), Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale (GAS), practices of critical consumption (Leonini and Sassatelli 2008; Forno and Graziano 2016). In particular, social sciences have analysed these local/urban practices focusing on the Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) phenomena, which identify a wide range of alternative food supply systems to the agro-industrial one (Forno and Maurano 2016). These studies grasped in the opposition to the conventional food systems (Maye and Kirwan 2010) as one of the reasons underlying the action of individuals and groups, which claim alternative food systems. However, the “opposition” does not seem to be enough in the analysis of contemporary local/urban food practices. As seen above, different actors (banking foundations, non-profit association, local authorities) can converge on specific food practices according to the political objectives of UFPs.

UFPs allow us to glimpse some aspect introduced in the previous sections related to the structuring process of a policy network: a) the heterogeneity of actors involved in an urban policy network of food, b) the redistribution of commitments in designing and implementing policies among

⁹ Full text available at: <http://www.milanurbanfoodpolicypact.org/text/>

¹⁰ Both cities have signed the “Milan Urban Food Policy Pact” in 2015.

¹¹ Full text at: https://web.comune.milano.it/wps/portal/ist/st/food_policy_milano/la_food_policy_di_milano/Documenti

¹² <http://web.comune.milano.it/albopretorio/ConsultazioneDelibere/AlboPretorio.aspx?dtid=99>

¹³ <http://www.torinostrategica.it/torino-cibo-2/>

¹⁴ <https://www.slowfood.it/>

public, private and third sectors, c) the constant reference to the rhetoric of participation. First of all, a UFP can be started by different groups, which can involve later the local government. Thus, in this case, the activation of the policy-making is not a prerogative of public actors. Secondly, the resources – economics, technicalities, expertise – are mobilized by different actors in the network, which have different commitments. These resources contribute to legitimize the role of private actors. Nonetheless, public actors commit to provide political coordination in the process. The steering of these processes is not an exclusive prerogative for local governments, that do not have *ex-ante* government bodies for the food issue. In this way, “big” actors, that play in the cities – for instance, Fondazione Cariplo in Milan and “Slow Food” in Turin – can enforce their *agency*. In particular, in a local/urban scale these actors can draw the boundaries of the network action context, affecting the model of (urban) governance (Pierre 1999), the network structure and the policy outcomes (Marsh and Smith 2000). Moreover, the inclusion of non-institutional actors is the fundamental principle of a UFP both in the first phase and in the following ones. However, this rhetoric may conceal some ambiguity. In this sense, the mapping of actors and food practices of local systems appears as a crucial phase to decide who is *inside* or *outside* the system and who can have access to the public deliberation.

CONCLUSION

This paper analyses the “food matter” in the debate on contemporary political changes in order to introduce a new empirical field to analyse the effects of these processes at the urban level. As we have seen in the first part, the production and implementation of public policies occur within *multiscalar* (Sassen 2007) dynamics, which also involve the urban scale. Moreover, cities “take possession” of different policy sectors with the support of transnational actors that contribute to the definition of political agendas, affecting also the local politics in their policy goals. In this way, cities adopt new patterns of governance to manage policy issues and engage themselves in a “networking activity” with other cities-partner to share policy solutions and best practices.

These processes can be observed also in the emergent “urban food matter”. Cities are trying to establish new governance arenas to manage food-related problems, like preventing inequalities in the access to food, supporting local production and guaranteeing healthy food for the local population. Following this perspective, the paper deals with the case of Urban Food Policies as a new field for social sciences to understand contemporary urban policy-making processes. As shown in the third section, the urban policy-making of food is not only a prerogative of local governments, which collaborate with non-institutional actors – companies, private foundation, non-profit association – in self-organizing networks (Edelenbos and Van Dijk 2017). Moreover, network participants mobilize different resources – economic, cognitive, legislative – in the production and implementations of urban policies of food, contributing to reinforcing their legitimation through the *network’ interdependence*.

In conclusion, UFPs will allow us to contribute to the debate on urban governance observing emergent forms of non-hierarchical networks and analysing/studying different models of urban governance (Pierre 1999) of food considering also independent variables such: a) local politics; b) presence of “big companies” of food in the urban food network; c) the inclusion of the city in national or transnational networks. In this way, new researches – also adopting the *process tracing* technique (Fesenfeld 2016) – will attempt to answer questions regarding: the steering of the urban political network, the stakes of the local food systems and the factors that influence the policies outcomes.

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