

Local productions as cultural goods and identity representation

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This contribution is the result of some reflexions launched by a national sociological research project (PRIN 2004) coordinated by the University of Teramo about "Innovations within the development of local systems of the Third Italy". In particular, it refers to the role local productions (above all food farming, wine, and handcraft) have been reaching within cultural local development processes. Within this research project, both theoretical and empirical attention has been focused upon the configuration of likely "Districts of Taste", in the province of Teramo (Abruzzo Region).

After a first exploratory stage of the research, which has been conducted on the whole territory of the province, three different "Districts of Taste" have been picked out, each aiming to satisfy some exploratory variables: the area around the town of Torano Nuovo, the area around the town of Atri and the area of the Sicilian Valley. Looking at them closely, we can note that each one can be placed on a different position, when compared to the others, according to the following variables:

- *geographical position* → each district has been picked out in a different area of the province, in order to represent the whole territory, in terms of both geographical and economic specificity. Torano Nuovo is in the North East of the province and is set in

a hill territory, Atri is in the South and is a typical Adriatic city, being right along the Adriatic coast, whilst Sicilian Valley (in the South-West) is a Typical mountainous context.

- *presence of tradition related to a particular dimension of taste.* Each one of the three districts underlines a particular traditional field, in association to a different declension of taste. In the case of Torano Nuovo, a model centred on gastronomy prevails; whilst in the case of Sicilian Valley, the dimensions of environment and handicraft prevail. Finally, in the case of Atri the attention is focused on tourism in its rural dimension.

Taste between material and immaterial dimensions

If we consider the contemporary social scenario, as being mostly represented by the complex dynamics between local and global stances, then typical/traditional productions (both food-farming and hand-crafted ones) gain an important added value, especially in terms of local cultures and identities valorisation. In this context, in fact, their value has seemed to overtake the mere materialistic essence and to achieve an immaterial meaning, according to which they can become more successful and more sought after than industrialised products, even though they are often more expensive.

Just to give an example: eating a certain kind of cheese, drinking a certain kind of wine, using a certain kind of ceramics tableware gives these daily gestures an extra-ordinary value which finds its reason on a symbolic level. In other words, these local productions are sought after and consumed not only because they respond to a material need but mostly because they can satisfy what we could call a “hunger of imaginary identity”. It means that while eating or drinking we are consuming, at the same time, their inner sense of place. For these reasons, the above products can be considered as culturally connoted; for their consumers, they come to represent the whole territory (its inhabitants included) in which they have been produced. That is why, a right definition to describe them could be that of «cultural objects» (Lai 2006); they are strongly differentiated goods and they gain success on markets just because of their strong territorial identity. Their use gives the opportunity to reach a close contact with local social reality and know-how; through their consumption, users can also approach a whole culture. They can visit the place where the products are made, talk to their producers, ask about the production processes, look at work practices.

Therefore, within these valorisation dynamics, the concept of “taste” places itself on three different levels; the first one being the most materialistic one, whereas the other two show a more symbolic aspect.

1) As just anticipated, on a first level, taste has to do more with its material essence and, in a certain sense, we could refer to it as “flavour”. That is the aspect that links the notion of taste to the issue of quality. In other words, we eat this food and drink this wine, simply because they taste good. They have a different taste from the goods we consume every day. Their quality has to do with authenticity and it is surely a better one, when compared to mass produced goods. Therefore, they convey what can be called as “a promise for quality”.

2) This first level of taste is tightly related to the second one, which instead has to do more closely with the environmental issue. In front of the complex and various aspects risk has been taking over in contemporary society, the renewed attention toward environmental patrimony seems at times going together with the search for good food and drink, as synonymous both of “healthy nutrition” and sustainable productions, under both social and ecological perspectives. At the same time, local food-farm, because of its close relation with rural world, identifies thoroughly itself with it, when related to our cultural representations. Such an identification can be so strong, that sometime it gives the sensation to taste both the “flavour of past times” and that of a “recovered nature”. Gastronomy, slow food, biodiversity, protected areas, local identities and traditions are all part of the same “prestige team” which sets itself inside the globalisation as its own alternative complement. Notwithstanding, they are all within the same family of dynamics (Clemente 2006). This relation between healthy food and environmental politics is well represented by Slow Food Association, which is now asserting itself as a global movement. Born as an antidote to fast food and fast life, the movement matches its idea of good quality gastronomy with the idea of safeguarding biodiversity from homologation, even under the perspective of taste. In order to reach its aims, the Association proposes a more balanced life style to be conducted in harmony with nature.

3) On a third level, taste has to be taken mostly in its aesthetic dimension. That is, typical/traditional products use can correspond directly to a consumer choice and to the assertion of a particular life style. In other words, these goods (especially because of their cultural connotation) can encourage the affirmation of both development and consumer models which present themselves in contraposition with homologating “mass culture”. To such an extent, the recourse to typical productions and to its imagery can give its users the idea to regenerate from some “bad taste” modernity has produced. For this reason, it also

comes to characterise in a cultural way individual consumer styles. Choosing to consume a typical product instead of an industrialised one can express a “taste choice” which wants to take distances from mass culture products, considered as anonymous, tasteless (sometimes kitsch), and meaningless in terms of intellectual interest. In fact, if modernity is more and more often associated with the idea of artificiality, then a potential answer to this limit can be found in the recourse to its opposite, that is tradition, as synonymous of “good taste”, simplicity, naturalness, genuineness (Dei 2002).

Local productions as territorial trademarks

What has been said so far about the relation between typical goods and the territory in which they are produced, leads to the possibility of considering these specific productions as a sort of territorial trademark.

If we consider the issue of what has been referred as «no homologated agriculture» (Belletti 2001), in most case, a place finds its own image not only in its history nor in its architecture or in its landscape but also (and particularly) in the food-farming and craft goods it produces. That happens in a special way in all those cases in which a product’s name becomes successful also in association with its origins’ place. Some examples of this process can be traced in the “districts of taste” we have identified in our research, such as the “Montepulciano delle Colline Teramane” (the only DOCG wine we have in our region) which shows an association to the hills landscape near the city of Teramo; such as the “ceramica castellana”, produced in the town of Castelli, such as the Panducale, which refers to the Dukes of Atri.

The success of these typical products has little to do with the production process and conditions, but instead it is most related to the specific and unique elements of a specific territory; to its own climatic, historical, cultural and organizational peculiarities. In other words, the product results from being tightly anchored to a locality from which it cannot be separated, because it is from it that it draws its specificity and its capacity of being recognizable within global market.

Exactly in the same way as any other trademark, local products carry out some of the functions expressed from their logic :

- A) First of all: local products work like a trademark because they carry out a symbolic power. In the same way a trademark recalls both the real and the imaginary characteristics of the product it represents, a local product evokes symbolically a whole territory, both in its material and immaterial dimension.
- B) Secondly: local products work like a trademark because, in the same way a mark represents a stable and recognizable long-lasting point of reference, which is able to guarantee recognition the product it represents, typical production carries out the possibility, for the locality in which it is shaped, to be known outside its original location.

Moreover, all these functions explicate according to a double-sided process, just like all those carried out from any other trademark, work (Goldfinger 1994). In fact, each trademark performs its role both inside and outside the production process. When looked from the inside, it carries out an aggregating task because all the operators of that company identify themselves to it. Instead, when looked from the outside, it works as a concentrate of information which sums up the product and the company contents into symbolic images. The valorisation process concerning typical productions works exactly in the same way, because on the one hand (the inside) it encourages cooperation within local community, whilst on the other one (the outside) it promotes and develops the knowledge of the territory. Therefore (just like in the case of trademarks), typical products' main strength lies in their capability to generate association: between a territory and its people.

Through the identification and valorisation of a typical product which focuses on territorial patrimony, local societies trace those elements able to define «places statute» (Magnaghi 2000), to be meant as the result of environmental, social, cultural and economic components.

The district as a participatory way of territorial valorisation

One of the most needed conditions to trigger this virtuous mechanism of lasting “reputation” (Belletti 2001), is represented by social wish and collective initiatives. The hypothesis we have followed during our research is that local production can turn into successful cultural development (meant as an occasion of social innovation) only when adequately supported by

endogenous strengths. And that happens only if, on the micro-level of local communities, both producers and the other field professionals can grasp the chances coming from the macro-level of the demand. As a matter of fact, because of post-modern stances, and because of per-head income increase, macro-economical dynamics lead to important changes in consumer models and, at the same time, to the expansion of consumer variety, also encouraging the development of no homologated food-farming and craft productions.

A key role in the processes concerning the development of such local consumer/production systems is certainly played by socially constructed resources. The general idea is that a district of taste can come to a successful realisation only if interested social actors (stakeholders) organize themselves in cooperation. Only if they follow an “interests community” which gives establishes the rules for the management and for the common defence of local resources. In other words, what really matters in no homologated food-farming and handicraft field is to give typical production that value we usually ascribe to a “common good” (Zamagni 2007)¹. In fact, the behaviour of a single individual can influence the collective valorisation process whereas community behaviour can modify the single initiative.

When resulting from the consolidation of collective action, typical products start to be involved in an important mechanism, defined as «reputation» (Belletti 2001). This mechanism, while contributing to the attainment of product notoriety and development, is at the origin of the so called “value chain” (Ibid.), because turns cultural surplus value (that is cultural connotation of the product) into an economic one. This collective action has both a material and immaterial nature. On a first stage (the immaterial one) it contributes to turn the product into part of the local identity patrimony, while on a second one, it builds notoriety process, also by labelling the product geographically (that is giving it the same name of its origins place). At the end of this chain (which is also a new beginning) reputation becomes part of the product itself and, due to that, it contributes to realizing economic valorisation. Therefore, it is mostly thanks to the mechanism of reputation that users can match goods to their specific origin locality.

¹ A common good is a good that at the same time belongs both to the individual and to the community. It is not dividable and it can only be shared among everyone. It can be reached, enhanced and fostered, only by being together and keeping close to each other.

Collective reputation is then reached when strategic choices of both the individuals and the enterprises involved are on the same level, that is when they are lined up, when they share the same intents. Micro-dimension and no homologated agriculture support this lining up which can be easier when there is a limited number of actors and a stronger mechanism of social identity, based on the wish to safeguard the cultural connotation of the products.

It is then clear that the production and the marketing of a typical product imply the starting of a complex process which can put in to action the participation of a whole local community. Farmers, breeders and craftsmen are surely the most important actors, but, in order to feed the notoriety of the product also outside the micro dimension, all the other social actors need to take part into the process. Professionals from other fields will have to deal with the confection of the products, with marketing, with institutional promotion, with tourist communication, with advertisement etc. In other words, all social actors need to build a network around the product, and this is our innovative idea of district of taste. Thus, the district is not to be meant as a mere economic cluster but as a community of intents, where relations between stakeholders and diversification in production practises are the keys for innovation and social change.

Typical products between tradition and innovation.

As we have already noted, the success of these specific production is particularly linked to cultural and territorial dimensions. An important element which contributes to anchor these typical goods to locality is represented by tradition. Thanks to the relation it has with the past, and to tacit knowledge, it becomes a guarantee for quality. In the contemporary global scene, consumer choice in direction of traditionally connoted productive systems responds to a quality choice, since it declares itself as a contrastive means against quantity in series. At the same time, recourse to traditions can come to satisfy, to a certain extent, the need social groups express to keep “distinctive” relations with other groups and individuals.

Notwithstanding, we have underlined that tradition is no longer what it used to be. In post modern contexts tradition can be safeguarded only in a non-traditional way (Giddens 1999). That means that it retains some meaning only if it opens itself towards dialogue and comparison with other traditions, rather than trust faithfully its own inner ritual truth.

According to this meaning, tradition rather than standing for unchanged process, becomes the result of a “never stopping” re-interpretation and reconstruction activity which aims to link the past to the present and which turns itself into a way of organising the future. Therefore, traditions are to be meant not only as a past patrimony to be rediscovered and fostered, but rather as a continuously changing process which involves both economic resumption of territories and social and cultural confirmation of their identities.

This post-modern reading proposes different models of the way tradition can be represented. In order to simplify the complex relation between tradition and local productions, we could sum up these representations into three different categories.

1) *Tradition as trace*²: in this typology, we include all those practises and objects of material culture which are exposed to the risk of “deculturization”. These traditions have already lost their practical function, although they keep being in use and fostered only to an emotional purpose.

2) *Revitalized tradition*: in this typology, we include all those practises and objects of material culture which are in use at the moment after having a disappeared. These traditions have gone through a new re-elaboration on the basis of a pre-existing model which comes from past times. Most gastronomic productions can be included in this typology.

3) *Invented tradition*: in this case we have adopted a category which was coined at the beginning of 80s by two historians, Hobsbawm and Ranger. In this typology we include all those food and wine traditions (especially local fairs), which started to spread during the last century for leisure purposes.

Anyhow, besides all the different perspectives from which one can read this phenomenon, it is quite evident that all traditions (both in food-farming and in handicraft) after a period of decline have started to go through a complete re-invention and re-functionalization: food goes beyond its primary function (the feeding one) and becomes an expression of life style. At the same time handicrafts lose completely their utility to become high design furniture.

² The term «trace» is quoted from Arnaldo Bagnasco's *Tracce di comunità* (1999) but instead of using it with concern to community as he does, I use it with concern to tradition. This term – as the Author explains – can have different meanings. In the present meaning it could recall the notion used by chemists, who call “trace” the small amount that remains of a substance. In the same way we can speak of “traces of tradition” with concern to those traditions which are going to disappear because they have lost their function, but which are still felt as having a certain authority, in terms of cultural representation.

Conclusions

The safeguard and valorisation of typical products quality is not only a means to redistribute development resources and benefits into local communities but also an innovative answer to the changes happened at a macro-level. They can be read as a possible solution territories and their inhabitants are expressing to confirm and re-produce their locality (Appadurai 1996) within a post-modern context. In doing so, they resort to all forms of tradition which are considered as an opportunity to make their specificity visible in the global village.

Just because of that, we can no longer consider tradition in a modern way, simply as a heritage which comes intact from the past. Instead, it is the other face of innovation. Then, it should be seen as a knowledge container from which local communities get that cultural capital they need to establish their own way to development, to stimulate their social creativity, to improve their sense of participation and, last but not least, to enforce their economic capital (even if in a more culturally sustainable way).

For all these reasons, traditional typical productions which have been valorised are to be taken as the result of innovative solutions, even if elaborated on a pre existing model. Therefore, they have to be set in the frame of those strategies that are particularly appropriate for the future even if they look at the past to find their source of inspiration.

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