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From recipe to collective improvisation

An ethnographic vignette about food assistance in Barriera di Milano, Turin

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Collecting food donations at the market

It is a Wednesday morning mid-November 2019. It has been raining for several weeks now, and it is wet and cold.[1] Nonetheless, Nadia, the local leader of the 'Fa Bene' project, meets with a few volunteers at the Casa del Quartiere in Via Aglié, the community centre of Barriera di Milano. They are there to collect the material they need – trailer bike, leaflets, grocery bags – to head for the open-air market of Piazza Foroni. The volunteers usually walk around in the middle of the marketplace for hours, waiting for donations until the market's closure. On that day, due to bad weather, the volunteers already knew it would be extremely hard to collect enough food: there are few costumers and, with the end of the month approaching, both customers and vendors are in an economically difficult situation. The volunteers decide to distribute leaflets on which it is written: "friends of Fa Bene. Donate part of your shopping here". Then, they head back to the community centre

Fa Bene (https://www.fabene.org/) is a food aid project that emerged in 2014 in the Barriera di Milano neighbourhood (it subsequently extended to several other neighbourhoods in Turin) with the objective of collecting and redistributing unsold food surplus or client's donations at the marketplace. The collected food items are redistributed to families in need, which in turn make their own abilities and knowledge available to volunteer within the local community. Every Wednesday, each of these families receives a package of fresh food, mainly fruit and vegetables, some bread and, more rarely, meat and dairy products. The project was developed by the Organising Committee S-nodi (part of the Italian Caritas) in collaboration with the social cooperative Liberi Tutti and it was funded by the banking foundation Compagnia di San Paolo. In this sense, the project is a telling instance of the way the social sector is evolving in Turin, with an increasing reliance on both private funds and the work of social organisations (Ravazzi, 2016; Bolzoni, 2019). According to the Fa Bene website, the initiative has different goals, including: (i) to promote social inclusion and support for families in need at the local level, and (ii) to develop community-based entertainment and capacity building both in the marketplace and in the neighbourhood community centre (Fa Bene, 2020).

In the middle of the market, among the vendors' stands, the Fa Bene team gathers around Nadia. A woman in her fifties living in precarious working conditions, Nadia has an informal and positive way of doing things and is trusted by market vendors, volunteers, and beneficiaries alike. Knowing the hardships through which she went through, they appreciate her attitude, compassion, respectfulness, and way of caring for others. Nadia always finds a way to collect enough food for the recipients, mostly through well-established relations with several market vendors who donate regularly.

Around noon the volunteers go back to the market to collect donations. As expected, the market is almost

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empty, and the vendors are tired and cold. The Fa Bene group was not there for the whole morning and this probably created a feeling of distance among the vendors. The volunteers did not walk through the market, nor did they engage in conversations with the vendors or people passing by, as they usually do. Upon realising how little it had collected, the group decides that those who can should donate money in order to purchase some extra food. 30 euros are raised, which allow them to purchase additional products, some of which are particularly hard to get through food donations. During winter the volunteers often end up with an excess of different kinds of lettuce or other less appreciated vegetables. That Wednesday, having the chance to personally choose how to fill their trailer bike and knowing that seven families were waiting for a crate, they decide to follow another strategy. Thus they buy potatoes, onions, and carrots, cheap but important ingredients that are common to different culinary traditions. They also take bread and eggs; the latter are quite expensive, and very appreciated. Finally, besides other fruits and vegetables, they also decide to get some lemons, for once. During this time of year they usually collect apples, pears, and old bananas – lemons are a real treat. In the end, despite the challenges, the group manages to collect enough food.

Preparing food packages at the community centre

With the trailer bike full of food, the volunteers head back to the Casa del Quartiere, where they have lunch all together, before moving to the next step. Right after lunch, under the careful guidance of Nadia, volunteers start weighing the food to arrange the food packages to be distributed to the families.

The food collected is always categorised under three different labels – (i) clients' donations, (ii) vendors' donations, and (iii) unsold food – and the information collected is then sent to the Fa Bene leaders who map and monitor the weekly developments of the project in the whole city. In Barriera di Milano, a working-class and multicultural neighbourhood situated in the north-eastern corner of Turin, the ones who donate most are vendors, with whom Nadia and the volunteers have over time developed relations of trust and solidarity. This is one of the neighbourhoods that suffered the most the economic and occupational crisis that followed the deindustrialisation of Turin (Cingolani, 2018; Salone et al., 2017). Notwithstanding the urban regeneration efforts of the municipality during the last two decades, the neighbourhood's inhabitants often live in precarious conditions and feel that the institutions have left them behind. It is especially in such a precarious context, as one of the market's historical figures, Enzo, observes, that the project may prove to be beneficial for the whole community.

The volunteers move to the inner courtyard to prepare the food boxes. This is a delicate phase. The volunteers have to touch and smell the fresh food, remove anything that is no longer edible, and evenly portion the fruit, vegetables and bread. The number of families coming to collect the boxes is different every week and each family has different needs and personal tastes which, week after week, the volunteers learn to recognise and remember. The challenge is that of making even crates with the same amount of fresh food while, at the same time, trying to satisfy each family's personal taste. Some families have children, some do not. Some are Muslims, some are not. Likes and dislikes. Forbidden food. It is not easy to keep in mind the different details, especially with those items - e.g., fresh pasta, marmalade, sausages - that can hardly be portioned. That Wednesday afternoon the sky finally clears and the volunteers are eventually satisfied with their portioning job. The crates are slightly smaller than usual but are full of colours and include a diverse mix of fresh food, unusual during winter.

In this context, making food packages becomes a collective decision and an imagining process during which the group caters to the tastes and needs of families. This entails using senses such as smell and touch, engaging in moments of discussion and doubt, and developing a general feeling of responsibility for the diet and health of others. Working with and through emotions is an important component of this process, as it is more generally the case with third sector and volunteer work. In fact, among other things, this process speaks to issues of unremunerated care work and to a systemic reliance on the emotions and passion of volunteers which serve to fill the gap left by the neoliberal dismantlement of the welfare state (Busso and Lanunziata, 2016).

Giving out and the direct engagement of beneficiaries

Families slowly join the group in the early afternoon, while boxes are still being prepared. Some people arrive alone, while others join with a friend or children. Volunteers help beneficiaries to collect their food, putting it in bags or directly in the back of the car. Nadia then asks some volunteers to stay and help at the community centre by working on small tasks such as reordering the dining room. Nadia explains that the beneficiaries' direct involvement in relevant tasks is a way to favour inclusion and goes beyond more classical charity projects in which the beneficiary remains passive.

The food distribution to the beneficiaries is a social moment, an encounter among them and the volunteers. The network of volunteers who help Nadia is composed of a diverse group of people: from local youngsters who are eager to support people in need, to older persons who want to spend time in the company of others. Nadia and her role at the centre seem to be the "special ingredient" which facilitates exchanges between them, the vendors, and the recipients. Nadia is a trusted confidant for all the families and successfully navigates beyond any kind of cultural or language barriers. Among the members of Fa Bene, when words are missing, gestures are used to communicate and understand each other. It is easy to understand certain gestures, like the one that a beneficiary uses to ask if a vegetable is bitter, or to express her appreciation for specific products put in the crates. Gestures are also fundamental for volunteers to explain how to prepare some food, especially when dealing with fruit or vegetables that are not always fresh.

The portioning step is a very delicate moment: volunteers have to touch and smell fresh food, pick out anything that is no longer edible, and cut and portion fruit, vegetables, and bread

Conclusions

This ethnographic vignette explores the ways in which an urban food assistance project develops in everyday practice in northern Turin. Based on the fieldwork conducted by the two authors and an in-depth observation of the "ingredients" of the project, the authors investigate the functioning of such system, or societal recipe, and its consequences, in terms of context-specific interactions and ways of doing things. At the market of Piazza Foroni, the Fa Bene project takes a specific meaning related to the socio-economic characteristics of the area as well as the project's local leader and other actors. Barriera di Milano is often depicted by the media in stigmatising and negative terms (Cingolani, 2012). Many of its inhabitants are quite used to discontinuous support from institutions and see associations as a way to get faster responses or to contribute (in the case of the volunteers) to the well-being of local community members.

This vignette shows how improvisation is an integral part of the Fa Bene project, highlighting the sensorial, material and social dimensions of this specific practice of food assistance. It sheds light on components such as the affect and emotional labour of Nadia and the volunteers, as well as, more generally, the impacts of changing seasons on food availability or market vendors' frustrations linked to moments of economic hardship. Similarly, the time passing by and factors such as the scents and colour of fresh food shape the activity, characterising the market atmosphere and the type of food donated. In the background of this ethnographic account, two spaces of meaningful interaction clearly emerge: (i) the marketplace and (ii) the neighbourhood community centre. Nadia and the volunteers are the social link between these two spaces. With their own ways of doing, they create a relationship of solidarity with the vendors and a one of trust with the families. "We are humble people!": with these words, Nadia, already in one of our first exchanges, expressed her idea of power dynamics and relations between the people of Fa Bene: an equal and balanced involvement. Her ability to be in the position of the facilitator, volunteer and beneficiary, all at once, can be considered one of the "special ingredients" that render the everyday life of Fa Bene in Barriera di Milano distinctive.

At the same time, the importance of interpersonal relations and affect in associational life should be analysed in relation to the changing nature of the welfare and to how social work is reorganised in the third sector, especially in relation to the precarity of social workers, the commitment of volunteers, and the end of funding (Busso and Lanunziata, 2016). This is also proved by the recent developments of Fa Bene that see Nadia once again on the front line: the project, whose funding ended at the end of December 2019, is currently being continued autonomously by herself, the volunteers, and the families, with little external support. This seems to indicate a certain adaptability of the network to changing economic and social circumstances, but more importantly serves to highlight the lack of structural and continuous institutional support. The vignette is thus an invitation to reflect on current developments within the social sector characterised by a key role of associations. With the downsising of the welfare state, associations are left responsible to respond to individuals' primary needs such as food. In this system, food is not being guaranteed as a right for all people in need, but it is transformed into an issue of charitable intervention that is subject to many different variables and political configurations.

In the context of Turin, food is at the centre of the contemporary urban branding of the post-industrial city and at the heart of its economic and urbanistic transformations (Vanolo, 2015). As narrated above, food is a key component of the work of the third sector and the reconfiguration of social assistance, rendering its access subject to volunteer work and improvisation and, sadly, exposed to risk in times of emergency. After the beginning of the Italian lockdown due to the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020, in only a few weeks poverty increased and a wide food insecurity crisis broke out, especially in Barriera di Milano. To face this emergency, the third sector was promptly involved, along with individual citizens' solidarity, to develop thousands of food aid packages, but these efforts still remain insufficient to support all persons in need. It is not the authors' intention to further expand on the dramatic current situation but to highlight how the recent pandemic emergency has rapidly confirmed the serious contradictions of this urban recipe.

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