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What is This?
Sustainable community movement organisations

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Abstract
In the current economic crisis, social movements are simultaneously facing two types of challenges: first, they are confronting institutions which are less able (or willing) to mediate new demands for social justice and equity emerging from various sectors of society, and second, given the highly individualised structure of contemporary society, they are also experiencing difficulties in building bonds of solidarity and cooperation among people, bonds which are a fundamental resource for collective action. It is in this context that protests waves, which may be very relevant, are in fact often short-lived, and it is in this context that we detect the rise and consolidation of new mutualistic and cooperative experiences within which (similarly to the past) new ties and frames for collective action are created. This article discusses and analyses social movement organisations which focus on both the intensification of economic problems and the difficulties of rebuilding social bonds and solidarity within society, emphasising solidarity and the use of ‘alternative’ forms of consumption as means to re-embed the economic system within social relations, starting from the local level. While discussing what is new and/or what has been renewed in new Sustainable Community Movement Organisations, the article will develop an analytical framework which will combine social movements and political consumerism theories by focusing on two basic dimensions: consumer culture and identity and organisational resources and repertoire of action.

Keywords
sustainable Community Movement Organisations, political consumerism, new forms of political participation, individual and collective responsibility

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Introduction

Contemporary Western societies have been identified as particular variants of advanced capitalism due to the shift from the primacy of production to that of consumption and for the centrality assumed by the figure of the ‘consumer’ and the declining relevance of the ‘citizen’ (Clarke et al., 2007) – a process that, as often pointed out, has favoured the individualisation and fragmentation of contemporary society (Bauman, 2007). In fact, while the idea of ‘citizen’ may be strongly linked to the notion of ‘common good’, the term ‘consumer’ is linked primarily to personal and instrumental preferences which need to be matched typically by ‘private goods’.

Given the centrality assumed by consumption in late capitalist societies, it does not come as a surprise that many contemporary social movements have started to appeal to individuals in their role of consumers and have identified ‘political consumerism’ as an important form of action through which to achieve social change. The growth in the number of ‘political consumers’ has generated considerable scholarly interest. Many of the studies on the topic, however, have analysed this phenomenon mainly from the individual consumer perspective (Forno and Ceccarini, 2006; Micheletti, 2003; Stolle et al., 2005), while less attention has been paid to social movement organisations which promote a political vision of consumption and mobilise consumers, emphasising solidarity and the use of ‘alternative’ forms of consumption as means to re-embed the economic system within social relations (Alexander and Ussher, 2012; Balsiger, 2010; Grasseni, 2013; Graziano and Forno, 2012; Sassatelli, 2006). Such limited attention is quite surprising since an increasing number of movement organisations acting regionally, nationally and globally have started to incorporate political consumerism into their repertoire of action, asking citizens to make use of their ‘shopping bag power’ to achieve greater environmental and social justice. Our contribution aims at providing a framework for analysis which, from a social movements and political consumerism perspective, will allow readers to make sense of the plural forms of community-led initiatives for sustainability (Seyfang, 2011) that have emerged over the few years in several areas such as renewable energy, food, housing and alternative money.

Political consumerism refers to the purchase of goods and services based not only on price and product quality but also on the behaviour of producers and production methods (i.e. environmental sustainability, workers’ rights, human rights, etc.). As Micheletti (2009) argues, political consumerism stresses the individual’s responsibility for the common goods by recognising the act of consuming as a fundamental part of the production process and thus providing an implicit (if not explicit) political meaning to consumer behaviour.

The notion of political consumerism is not new: both its negative form, known as ‘boycott’, and its positive form, known as ‘buycotts’, have been used frequently also by social movements of the past, as in the case of the movement fighting for the European and US abolition of slavery between the end of the 18th century and the 19th century (Friedman, 1999; Micheletti, 2009). Positive and negative forms of political consumerism have also been utilised frequently more recently by civil society actors as a tool to oppose companies that treated their employees unfairly or as a form of opposition to
governmental choices, as in the case of the boycott organised against French nuclear testing at Mururoa in 1995 (Della Porta and Diani, 2006).

Traditionally more diffused in North America and Northern Europe, since the mid-1990s, political consumerism has experienced a major growth also in contexts where it had long been a niche phenomenon (Ferrer-Fons, 2006; Koos, 2012). Throughout the Western world, the overall market demand for food, manufacturing or services from companies adopting codes of conduct that respect workers’ rights and the environment has recorded a considerable growth, indicating that political consumerism increasingly meets cultural, political and economic opportunities that favour its diffusion.

In this regard, research conducted on ‘critical consumers’ emphasises that the increase in the use of political consumerism recorded over the last 20 years among wider sectors of the population binds with the emergence of a new type of citizen who combines a strong support to democratic principles with growing distrust towards public institutions and traditional representative channels (such as, for example, political parties). These ‘new’ citizens have been also called ‘critical citizens’ (Norris, 1999). The ‘critical citizen’ – who is characterised by a specific socio-economic profile, having usually a higher level of education and income – shows a particular willingness to bear the costs (both in terms of money and time) of experimenting with innovative ways of action and participation for the promotion of the ‘common good’.

In the late 1990s, the rise of political consumerism was strongly influenced by the events that followed the so-called Battle of Seattle (the demonstration against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1999 which took place in Seattle). As it is known, the Global Justice Movement has identified the market as one of its main privileged arenas for political activism (Della Porta, 2003; Micheletti, 2003). And it is during this period that political consumerism began to extend to an increasingly large number of people.

The diffusion of political consumerism was also made possible by virtue of the development and use of new technologies of communication among wider sections of the population (Rosenkrands, 2004; see also Parigi and Gong, this issue). A number of successful boycotts during these years were initiated via the Internet. Through boycotts, transnational activists have publicised grievances and built new transnational awareness across borders to step up pressure on corporations. While globalisation has stretched the distance between workers and consumers, boycotts have helped to build a broader sense of community by stimulating individuals to consider the conditions under which goods are produced in an increasingly global market (Collins, 2003; Micheletti et al., 2004). Furthermore, between the old and new century, there has also been an incredible increase in the number of published books, manuals and magazines, both printed and online, which presented critical assessments of the various products, increasing easily available consumer information about different issues and campaigns (e.g. ‘No Logo’ by Naomi Klein became a sort of a ‘bible’ of anti-global and anti-brands movements during the end of the 1990s; Klein, 2000).

After a phase of expansion during the anti-globalisation cycle of protest, political consumerism started to be increasingly utilised as a tool of action also in
several grassroots initiatives, mainly taking place at the local level. To a certain extent, the 2000s – especially in the United States – have become a decade of ‘social movement spillout’ in terms of transnational activity (Hadden and Tarrow, 2007), and some reorientation towards the national and local level took place. For example, the Occupy Wall Street Movement in the United States (2011–2012) and the Indignados movement in Spain (2011–2012) were strongly focused and nationally or locally oriented (for the US case, see Tarrow, 2011).

Beyond spectacular events particularly covered by the media, over the last decade, it is, in fact, especially at the local level that political consumerism had continued to expand. Examples include local organic food schemes, community renewable energy initiatives, eco-housing, community currencies and time banks. Within these initiatives, the act of buying is not simply promoted individually, but socialised among a group of people, organised either formally or informally (see also Sage, this issue). As we will discuss in greater detail below, social movement organisations promoting community-led initiatives for sustainability share several traits with ‘classic’ social movement activities, but at the same time present some novelties which have been overlooked until now.

Our point of departure in trying to address comparatively the main features of what we will call Sustainable Community Movement Organisations (hereafter SCMOs), which have gained increasing relevance in numbers and size, is to focus on (a) their links with the Global Justice Movement and (b) their main features. SCMOs can be defined as social movement organisations that have the peculiarity of mobilising citizens primarily via their purchasing power and for which the main ‘battlefield’ is represented by the market where SCMOs’ members are politically concerned consumers. Clearly, this does not imply that all the members share the same level of political consciousness (similarly to other social movement organisations), but it implies that the main motivation for such a social movement organisation to exist is only marginally (if existent) linked to the benefits that collective consumption may offer. In this regard, SCMOs are different from Groupon or other collective purchasers since the act of buying is typically associated with the expression of broad political and social preferences.

The article is divided as follows: after a discussion of the main definitional features of SCMOs, and its cultural affinity with respect to pre-existing movements (especially with the Global Justice Movement) in a cultural and organisational perspective (Section ‘The culture and organisation of SCMOs’), we focus on what we consider the most important dimensions of analysis in understanding the SCMOs (attitude towards consumption and territorial scale of action – Sections ‘Variants of attitudes towards consumption and the expansion of the repertoire of action’ and ‘From global to “glocal”: Re-embedding the economy into society for a sustainable world’) and conclude with a typology of SCMOs, which we think could be particularly promising for future SCMOs research (Section ‘Conclusion: A typology of SCMOs’).
The culture and organisation of SCMOs

As discussed in the following sections, SCMOs vary in function in terms of both the attitude towards consumption and the predominant target of their action, but they also share some common cultural and organisational traits which deserve to be scrutinised in order to fully grasp their specificities with respect to other previous social movement organisations.

In cultural terms, the expansion of SCMOs comes both from an alternative political culture and from the growing concern about the consequences of economic policies placing emphasis on unlimited consumption. Although, in this regard, these movements can take different forms depending on their country of origin, SCMOs do share some common traits as the various articles contained in this special issue show.

First, the prevailing cultural traits move from a strong criticism towards materialism and standard consumerism (see Balsiger, this issue; Carfagna et al., this issue). Several SCMOs point out that current standards of consumption damage the environment, contribute to climate change and use up resources at a rate that is unsustainable. Furthermore, an excessive attention paid only to the price of products has undermined the guarantee of labour standards and accentuated exploitation of workers with the aim to reduce the overall unitary cost of labour. This specific cultural trait derives from the Global Justice Movement’s focus on environmental social justice concerns (Andretta et al., 2002).

Second, SCMOs are particularly interested in contrasting mass production and supporting artisanal products, natural materials and handmade items. The general attitude is not necessarily a ‘luddist’ one since only the ‘anti-consumerism’ movements (such as, at least to a certain extent, the de-growth movement) are against production per se. The general attitude is, rather, an attitude that favours small-scale production, guaranteeing fair profits for the workers, and limits (if not abolishes) the retribution of intermediaries in the value chain. For example, fair trade organisations provide a social premium to producers allowing them to benefit from set prices (typically above market prices), and producers are mainly small cooperatives which better guarantee the local allocation and distribution of the profits (Doherty et al., 2013).

Third, SCMOs are not ‘parochial’ in the sense that not only do they support local producers (and/or community projects), but they also are concerned with the transnational distribution of wealth and life opportunities. For example, Slow Food promotes local products but at the same time supports transnational food networks in order to increase food cultures and experiences (as in the case of the biennial event of Terra Madre where local producers from all over the world meet in order to present to a wide – paying – audience their products and food cultures). Such examples show how peculiar the global/local link can be in the cases of SCMOs – Slow Food being a case where the predominant local activity is inserted into a global framework of action.
Fourth, SCMOs try to go beyond the capitalist market setting by encouraging ongoing and direct relationships between producers and consumers, if not coproduction. For example, sustained community agriculture creates and consolidates local social relationships between producers and consumers which is also characterised by the presence of a monetary exchange (i.e. buying specific products) but is primarily centred on the social relationship created and not on the commercial one. Typically, consumers know the producers, often ‘company visits’ are organised in order to further consolidate the relationship between them. Put differently, in the case of SCMOs, the commercial or economic exchange is a by-product of a social exchange (relationship) and not vice versa – as in the case of more standard forms of consumption.

Finally, another specific trait of SCMO culture is the presence of diffused mutual solidarity – not only between producers and consumers but also among consumers and among producers per se. As mentioned above, relationships and commitments go beyond the existence of a commercial or economic exchange and, in case of specific need, active solidarity between producers and consumers (e.g. under the form of low interest rate loans) or among consumers (e.g. delivery costs may be shared) and among producers (e.g. by supporting the creation of producers’ links in order to support ‘solidarity economic districts’). Such mutual solidarity is deeply rooted in the territory but is often facilitated by new technologies, such as Internet, which make communication and connections faster and cheaper.

More in general, the above mentioned key cultural traits support strategies and practices based on networking, information sharing, awareness raising, educating and lobbying at the local level: such cultural traits pay a huge debt to the previously developed political culture developed by the Global Justice Movement (Della Porta, 2007).

Although in differentiated fashions due to different social and cultural contexts, it seems clear enough that SCMOs are contributing in several ways to aggregate shared interests around similar projects covering a growing number of stakeholders: consumers, social movement organisations (from environmental groups, to pacifist organisations etc.), small producers and small traders, actors dealing with sustainable tourism, fair trade and ethical finance, farmers’ associations, some voluntary sectors and the world of cooperation as well as some local public administrations.

Acting locally by thinking globally is a slogan which is very well suited for SCMOs, although – as it will be discussed in the following sections – the mix between global and local targets vary to a great extent as the specific attitude of alter- or anti-consumerism expressed by the organisations.

Variants of attitudes towards consumption and the expansion of the repertoire of action

Tactics represent important routines for SCMOs. To be effective, they need to be emotionally and morally salient in people’s life. Like the majority of contemporary
social movement organisations, SCMOs also share the conviction that reform cannot come from above. In the view of these SCMOs, social change needs to be promoted through individual consumption and should be primarily pursued on the market.

In the current situation, political consumerism seems in fact to respond better to a condition in which social movements are simultaneously facing two types of challenges: first, they are confronting institutions which are less able (or willing) to mediate new demands for social justice and equality emerging from various sectors of society; second, given the highly individualised structure of contemporary society, they are also experiencing difficulties in building bonds of solidarity and cooperation among people, bonds which are a fundamental resource for collective action.

If we focus on the various dimensions of political consumerism, we may fully grasp its peculiarities. More specifically, the modus operandi of political consumerism distinguishes itself from other forms of protest not only because it shifts the locus of conflict from the state to the market, but also because it incorporates at the same time the three logics of protest of the modern repertoire of action (Della Porta and Diani, 2006: 170–178): the logic of numbers, the logic of the damage and the logic of bearing witness.

Practising certain values and actions, political consumerism aims at re-socialising wrongdoers and changing business activities through the ‘power of number’ (DeNardo, 1985). Moreover, as in the case of other forms of action, such as demonstration or petitions, in the case of political consumerism, the logic of numbers plays an important symbolic function for the movement activists themselves. Successful boycotts can empower participants by spreading the feeling of belonging to a large, successful community. To the logic of numbers, political consumerism also adds the logic of material or commercial damage – or, alternatively, advantage. Through the use of political consumption, individuals and groups seek to inflict as much damage as possible to their opponents in a way that is similar to a strike. Similar to the situation when workers block production through a strike to damage the employer and force negotiation, by choosing what to buy or what not to buy, consumers try to damage producers and to encourage them to change their production policies or support producers who are in line with the preferences (and values) of the consumers. Through the strategy of naming and shaming, SCMOs have put the spotlight on the abuses of several multinational companies which are considered ‘enemies’. Among the most famous boycotts in recent years were the one against Shell, criticised for polluting the North Sea and the Niger River; Nike, accused of subcontracting production to small enterprises in Indonesia and Vietnam that use child labour; Novartis, condemned for denying to millions of (poor) people life-saving treatments they were in need of; and McDonald’s, blamed for supposedly using the meat of animals raised extensively on antibiotics (Forno, 2013). Finally, these actions incorporate also to the logic of bearing witness. One of the goals of the groups involved in the dissemination of critical consumption is in fact to demonstrate the potential of these forms of civic mobilisation by showing
how organised consumers can have a political impact. As Della Porta and Diani (2006) argue ‘Presenting consumption as a potentially political act, ethical consumerism stresses the central role of individuals in taking responsibility for the common goods in their everyday life’ (p. 177).

The repertoire of action dimension is particularly important for the analysis of political consumerism since, historically speaking, fundamental innovations in the forms of contention actions arose with the development of capitalism and the formation of the nation-state. The concept was developed by Charles Tilly (1986, 1995a, 1995b) in his research dedicated to the study of the characteristics of contentious actions in different historical periods and territorial contexts. This term refers to the set of ways in which individuals and groups organise their claims. The metaphor of the repertoire is used by Tilly to highlight that when mobilising, people tend to use forms of action that are familiar to them and which seem to be particularly successful in terms of visibility. As in the theatre piece, the term refers not only to what individuals do but also to what they have learned to do and what others expect them to do. The existence of given repertoire of action limits but at the same time makes possible collective action. Due to such reasons, the repertoire of protest changes usually very slowly and, in general, when it changes, new forms of action tend to build on the edge of well-established practices. In addition, to shed light on the ways in which groups and individuals advance their claims over time, historical research has shown that the repertoire of protest changes because of shift occurring in the interests at stake, the organisation and opportunities for action (Tilly, 1986).

More specifically, in traditional societies, the ways in which the claims were advanced were characterised by being parochial (i.e. addressed to local representatives of national actors) and specific (in the sense that they were related to specific situations). Forms of struggle typical of this period were food riots, the invasion of lands or forests, armed rebellions against the tax collectors, battles between villages and executions of popular judicial processes. The reduction of the influence of local patrons over the destinies of the people with the processes of centralisation has made traditional forms of contention ineffective and has led to the testing of new strategies of pressure. In the 19th century, the old repertoire of protest was replaced by the modern repertoire of action that included strikes, demonstrations, public gatherings, occupations and so on. The new forms spread thanks to the development of the media and the growth of the role of political parties, trade unions and other national associations (Tilly, 1986).

The type of pressure exerted by these strategies was indirect, that is, mediated through the means of communication and power groups (Lipsky, 1968). Compared to earlier forms, these actions were different also because they were cosmopolitan (as they targeted interests and issues shared by different localities and which were directed to actors whose power extended over wide areas), modular (meaning that they were utilised by different groups to pursue different goals) and autonomous (meaning that they were able to establish contacts between different centres of power and could be started directly from those who put forward the claim).
character (Tilly, 1995b). For years, the variants of the modern repertoire of protest continued to be the strategies predominantly used in conflict situations still today, confirming how protest forms tend to remain stable over time. If this is true, however, more recently, the way in which individuals and groups advanced their claims has recorded interesting changes which can be explained by looking at the same contextual changes considered by Tilly in his historical analysis of the characteristics of the mobilisation, as they seem to be due to changes regarding the interests at stake, the organisation and in the opportunities for action in an increasingly interconnected and globalised world (see also Balsiger, this issue).

More specifically, the increasing adoption of economic and market-based practices among different movement organisations corresponds in fact to important modifications that have affected traditional democracies in recent decades. In particular, the process of globalisation has led to significant changes in the relationship between work, production and consumption and in the connection between economy and local society (Bauman, 2007). Several Western companies have started to look at new markets and to relocate their production in search of greater profits. The higher facility in the movement of goods and services as well as the increased economic competition has also limited the redistributive capacity of the state which put major pressures on domestic welfare systems. This new international configuration, exacerbated by the end of the great ideological narratives and by the transformation of the traditional channels of interests mediation (especially political parties and trade unions), has pushed social movement organisations towards the identification of new sites and forms of pressure.

Regarding political consumerism, it is clear that the events that developed at the turn of the new and the old century have helped to generate a different cultural climate, in which multinational corporations, market rules and global finance have been interpreted as the major causes of social injustice and increasing environmental problems (Aguiton, 2001; Andretta et al., 2002; Ceri, 2002; De Nardis, 2005). The implantation and diffusion of these forms of action in fact reflects the increased opposition to neoliberal globalisation, which according to some observers (Andretta, 2005) has operated as a master frame (Snow and Benford, 1988) linking the many events that have taken place in the aftermath of so-called Battle of Seattle, such as the anti-G8 demonstrations in Genoa (2001) and the various editions of the World Social Forums (since 2001). In this regard, it is important to emphasise that the strong growth of political consumerism recorded in the second half of the 1990s confirms the existence of a close connection between the emergence of new forms of action and cycles of mobilisation (Tarrow, 1995, 1998).

In fact, since the late 1990s, the organisations involved in boycott and buycott actions assert themselves among the central players of the Global Justice Movement (or Movement of the Movements), by participating as co-organizers of important social events and protest: from Seattle to Genoa, to Social Forum and marches for peace. The joint action in campaigns and counter-summits of the various organisations active in protests against neoliberal globalisation has favoured, on the one hand, the exchange of content and experiences, and on the
other hand, the fertilisation of forms of protest among different actors (Della Porta, 2003; Diani, 2005). It is precisely this situation that seems to have facilitated the spread of strategies of pressure previously of prerogative of specific groups among a wider spectrum of Social Movement Organisations. After Seattle, alternative forms of consumption begin to be incorporated among the repertoire of action by a variety of different actors: not only groups specifically involved in the promotion of changes in consumption habits and behaviours but also by environmental organisations, pacifist, religious associations and workers movements. The cross-fertilisation of the repertoires of actions (Della Porta and Piazza, 2008) is one of the key features of the post-antiglobalisation mobilisation cycle, and the diffusion of political consumerist practices was made possible by the socialisation of practices which occurred during the various gatherings which continued also in the 2000s.

However, as it is known, the Global Justice Movement had a rather short life (Della Porta, 2007). The lack of institutional allies, the internal and problematic differentiation among the various components of the movement, the violence with which certain demonstrations were repressed and the disappointment of activists for the negative outcome of the great popular mobilisation against the war in Iraq in 2003 had led to a rapid decline of transnational mobilisation.

Nevertheless, the protest cycle developed during the 1990s left also profound changes in the culture and practices of social movements and society at large. Moreover, when mobilisation declined, many activists brought back to their territory not only a different world view but also a new arsenal of tactics. By mid-2000s, the end of the cycle was followed by a substantial re-positioning of some social movement organisations from the global to the local scale of action.

It is in fact within the several experiences such as the ones promoted by Slow Food movement as well as other similar initiatives more focused in the development of specific projects for cultural and societal change such as the Transition Towns Movement, Community Supported Agriculture, Community Gardens, Solidarity economic network, Ecovillages, and so on that political consumerism continued to expand to a larger sector of the society. Unlike other social movements, these SCMOs do not place at the centre of their repertoire predominantly contentious forms of actions but rather organised actions and networks aimed at supporting different forms of consumption.

While different in many aspects, all these initiatives share the notion that the modern industrial economy and agricultural system are damaging both the environment and society, and that the solution is to reorganise consumption and production into small-scale units aiming at reducing food miles and stimulating new local economic activities. Within these experiences, boycott especially becomes a tactic widely utilised as a means to build new economic alliances between different economic actors – traders, farmers, entrepreneurs, more or less organised consumers groups, civic and environmental organisations and local public administrations – operating in the same territory. Other actions have been more radical, that is, not simply aimed at finding or providing means for alternative forms of
consumption but also supporting actions against consumption as such – as in the case of the simplicity movement, the casseurs de pub and de-growth movements (see Bossy, this issue; Zamwel et al., this issue). In other terms, political consumerism actions have taken two directions: one which can be labelled ‘alter-consumerist’ that supports alternative (i.e. environment-friendly and social justice–friendly) forms of consumption, and one which can be labelled ‘anti-consumerist’ (i.e. against consumption per se). Unlike other more individualist forms of political consumerism, SCMOs develop collective actions which go far beyond the traditional repertoire displayed by more ‘classic’ social movements.

From global to ‘glocal’: Re-embedding the economy into society for a sustainable world

The shift from the global to the national and local level observed within social movement organisations promoting political consumerism can be read as a consequence of the closure of the transnational decision-making system to the instances of the Global Justice Movement (GJM).

In fact, as it has been often observed, social movements tend to expand in situations where the political, economic and social opportunities systems are neither fully open nor completely closed to these actors’ claims. This implies that mobilisation tends to remain confined within small groups of activists when the instances ‘from below’ are immediately implemented and channelled through traditional interest mediation channels, or when collective action fails to gain support from powerful allies and/or is repressed through violence (Kriesi et al., 1995).

In this regard, when looking at the history of social movements, it is possible to recognise some historical periods during which social movements have directly opposed the dominant locus of power through intensive mobilisation, while there are others in which movements have challenged the structure of power by proposing and supporting forms of self-organisation at the local level. This is the case, for example, of the movements that have emerged and developed during the first half of the 19th century, such as the mutualistic and cooperative movements (Forno, 2013).

The experience of the cooperative and mutualistic movements is particularly important to understand the shift observed in several social movement organisations from the global to the local level. During the years of the industrial revolution – an historical time characterised by great changes and a system of opportunities not particularly favourable to the action of social movements – the cooperatives became an instrument of economic organisation and emancipation for workers (Hilson, 2009, 2011; Scott, 1998). Regardless of their type, size, geographical location or purpose, cooperatives provided a tool through which it was possible to achieve one or more economic goals, such as improving bargaining power when dealing with other businesses, bulk purchasing to guarantee lower prices, obtaining products or services otherwise unavailable, gaining market access or broadening market opportunities, improving product or service quality, securing credit from
financial institutions and increasing income (Forno, 2013). Through their educational work, social life and internationalism, cooperatives were also fundamental for the spread of a culture of cooperation and the formation of social ties among their members, which in several cases led to collective actions undertaken by specific social groups (Gurney, 1996). The bonds that were formed within these organisation have been also an important resource for both the workers’ movement and for the mass action of the popular parties. As Diani (1997) has argued, social movements do not only rely on existing social ties, but they also produce and sometimes create new ties. Put differently, the local dimension of organisation of social movements is not something new but deeply rooted in the history of social movements history. To be sure, the case of SCMOs is particularly interesting since the local ‘turn’ followed a transnational tradition which was in place since the end of the 1960s when the first students’ movements tried to create (weak) transnational ties and had international targets (such as the end of the war in Vietnam).

Although today we are in a clearly different situation, many traits that characterise the SCMOs seem to recall forms of self-organisation of the past. As it was for cooperative and mutualistic movements, also SCMOs address both the intensification of economic problems and the difficulties of rebuilding social bonds within society emphasising solidarity and the use of ‘alternative’ forms of consumption as means to re-embed the economic system within social relations, starting from the local level. After all, an interesting common trait that distinguishes SCMOs from other contemporary social movement organisations is the emphasis given within these experiences at the same time to both consumption and production. In other words, faced with increasing environmental and financial challenges, new forms of cooperation between consumer–producer groups are somehow regaining momentum both in Europe and North America, to some extent reappraising the 19th-century ideas on the need to reorganise economic life on the basis of human and social needs, beyond capitalist accumulation.

Through these experiences, individuals have the opportunity not only to satisfy a series of consumer-related needs in an ethical way but also to join together to make their voices heard (primarily on environmental and social justice issues). As noted by Mayer (1989), to a certain extent, consumer cooperatives, particularly food cooperatives, have been rather important for reducing the cost of goods and for empowering citizens by giving them more control over economic institutions at the community level (p. 81).

However, it is important to note that the local dimensions emphasised by SCMOs (which, for example, often focus on the importance in daily consumption to prefer local food and products coming from local business and local economies) as already mentioned above it is not ‘parochial’. SCMOs rose in fact along the lines traced by those organisations – associations, cooperatives, small and medium-sized enterprises and so on – that during the Global Justice Movement had actively contributed to translate conscious consumerism and grassroots advocacy into political action by stimulating at the same time the production and commercialisation
of environment-friendly and fair trade products and a new global consumer culture.

In this regard, particularly important during the 20th century was the experience of the Fair Trade movement (Reynolds et al., 2007), which aimed to help producers in developing countries to make better trading conditions and promote sustainability. In several countries, the different fair trade initiatives have been able to organise in national associations which somehow guaranteed their capacity to continue to grow even when the mobilisation cycle – and the attention of public opinion towards global justice – lost intensity. And, indeed, it was in connection with these experiences that SCMOs started to arise.

As empirical research has started to show (Forno and Gunnarson, 2010; Grasseni, 2013; Parigi and Gong, this issue), in the formation of SCMOs, local friendship and kinship ties clearly play an important role. In many cases, however, what also appeared to be important is the common experience among ‘core activists’ (or local initiators) in groups and organisations that had participated in the Global Justice Movement. Within SCMOs, it is, for example, common to find people who during the Global Justice Movement protest cycle had been active in movement organisations such as Via Campesina, the family farmers’ international; Peoples’ Global Action, a loose collection of often youth groups; Jubilee 2000, the Christian-based movement for relieving international debt; Friends of the Earth, the environmentalist international; and some think-tanks like Focus on the Global South and Third World Network, as well as some large internationalist and transnational trade union organisations, people acting in NGOs, trade unions, faith-based and peace groups and so on.

The convergence of people coming from different experiences is particularly interesting in the context of SCMOs. Moreover, by concentrating their action also in the creation of alternative provisioning systems (as for example alternative food markets where organic products can be purchased at a lower price), SCMOs often attract individuals who may at the first place just be interested in purchasing good quality products at a lower price and that by simply purchasing could learn that a certain type of consumption means also better land management, support to small producers, greater attention to the production process not only from the technical point of view, but also for those who work there. This means, for example, that SCMOs are often constituted by a mix of hardcore fair trade activists and other members, which may have been attracted by the availability of convenient products and thus not motivated ‘politically’.

Unlike previous social movement organisations, as seen, SCMOs mobilise and structure their claims not primarily via open, contentious activities, but by identifying and pursuing alternative forms of consumption – or trying to eliminate market-based forms of consumption – at various territorial levels. To a certain extent, the contentious dimension of SCMOs is embedded in the act of buying or not buying, using the market and not the streets as their ‘battlefield’. Furthermore, SCMOs are much more involved in a constructive and thoroughly organised form
of dissent towards contemporary capitalism by acting simultaneously at a cultural, economic and political level.

At the cultural level, SCMOs seek to oppose consumerism as an economic order that encourages the purchase of goods and services in ever-greater amounts through the affirmation of ‘new imaginary’ (Latouche, 2010). Such ‘new imaginary’ is supported by convivial activities, the organisation of seminars and conferences, guided visits to local small producers through which these movements attempt to generate forms of social exchange based on reciprocity between actors which are among other things – economic actors.

At the economic level, these experiences encourage greater economic self-sufficiency through the use of special local currencies, time banks, and so on, as well as facilitate the construction and sustainability of economic circuits which favour local production (the ‘zero-mile’ paradigm) and consumption of seasonal, fresh, traditional, often organic products. If coordinated in specific projects, collective purchases and other organised forms of critical consumption can in fact create consumer alternatives able to replace the supply of large retailers, often unscrupulous to small producers. Besides food, some SCMOs, such as the Transition Town organisation, aim at creating ‘energy reduction plans’ and adopting alternative energy sources to reduce reliance on fossil fuels (insulation, efficient appliances, carpooling and community transport) and support the use of renewable energy.

At the political level, SCMOs experiment innovative models of environmental regulatory governance based on voluntary actions and participation, which instead of imposing coercively a certain behaviour have the objective of stimulating a way of acting that promotes conservation of natural and cultural heritage and sustainable development. Furthermore, setting bridges between local consumer practices and local representative politics, some SCMOs turned into lobbying organisations and in some cases even supported civil electoral lists which participated to local elections (see Graziano and Forno, 2012). Put differently, SCMOs have amplified their repertoire of action by incorporating forms which typically pertain to interest groups (lobbying) and political parties (competing in elections) at different territorial levels.

To sum up, within the changes related to the scale of action, not all the organisations have positioned themselves in the same way: some SCMOs have focused primarily on the local level (for example, farmers’ markets, community-sustained agriculture, slow food, time banks, etc.; see Bossy, this issue; Carfagna et al., this issue; Parigi and Gong, this issue), while others have focused primarily on the global level (such as clean clothes campaign, fair trade, de-growth or simplicity movements; see Balsiger, this issue; Bossy, this issue; Zamwel et al., this issue).

**Conclusion: A typology of SCMOs**

Since, as seen above, the consumerist identity is so important in defining SCMOs, in order to distinguish among different types of organisations, we may thus consider the *attitude towards consumption* as a key analytical dimension. In this regard,
theoretically, we may consider different attitudes: a more radical one, an anti-consumption attitude, which may characterise those SCMOs that act typically against the market or consider market-based consumption very negatively; another attitude may be not so radical by focusing more on changing the market via alternative forms of consumption. Therefore, we can expect that the first line of differentiation empirically could be the attitude towards consumption (see also Bossy, this issue). Furthermore, since the scale of action has always represented an important analytical tool to read social movements and since globalisation and the development of new forms of social communication (via internet) have amplified the action opportunities of social movements (Bennett, 2003, 2012), we consider that SCMOs may also vary in function of their predominant scale of action: in some cases, the main concern remains – in line with the mutualist and cooperative social movement tradition discussed above – the local one, whereas in other cases the main concern could be the global one – in line with one of the main features of Global Justice Movement organisations. Therefore, the second key dimension we consider relevant in capturing the main features of SCMOs is the predominant scale of action.

Following the two key dimensions, it is possible to make sense of the various types of organisations that are engaged with community-led initiatives for sustainability. In fact, these forms of political consumerism are today encouraged by a diversified range of actors, not only the ones focusing on global campaigns of direct confrontation against big business corporations; on the production, distribution and sale of fair trade products; or on the promotion of ethical banking, responsible tourism, and so on. Especially from the early 2000s, political consumerism has started to be utilised also in a growing number of local initiatives aiming at experimenting alternative ways of sustainable living, and therefore, it seems particularly useful to attempt a first typology of SCMOs in order to fully grasp the specificities of the various types of SCMOs. By using the two key dimensions outlined in the previous sections, Table 1 provides a first attempt in such direction.

The first possible type of SCMOs is represented by an alter-consumerist attitude and a predominant global scale of action. This is the case, for example, of fair trade organisations and organisations supporting global boycotts (such as the ones supporting clean clothes campaigns). The second type is characterised by an anti-consumerist attitude and a local scale of action – such as organisations promoting de-growth and voluntary simplicity, or the casseurs de pub (see Bossy, this issue). A third type shows an alter-consumerist attitude and a local scale of action – such as Slow Food, sustainable community agriculture and other forms of community food networks. Finally, a fourth type – characterised by an anti-consumerist attitude and a local scale of action – is represented by time bank organisations, transition towns and eco-villages. We will not go into the details of the main features of the various organisations since all the remaining articles of this special issue are dedicated to this task. The typology is created inductively, but our ambition is that it may be useful also for capturing the main features of other organisations which are not studied directly in this special issue.
This article constitutes a first attempt to analyse the main features and differences of SCMOs, both diachronically and synchronically. Inspired by the recent evolution of social movement, we provided an exploratory analysis of what we consider to be the most relevant innovative elements of such organisations. SCMOs represent a focused continuation of the Global Justice Movement and also an increasingly diffused answer to recent global crises related especially to food, finance, and climate change, which have challenged assumptions and certainties about current capitalist development and modernisation. As a response, organised activists are calling for significant changes in patterns of production, consumption and finance, and turning their attention to the questions of how to transform institutions and structures that reproduce inequality, vulnerability and environmental degradation.

Contrary to some expectations, the current economic crisis also seems to give a further impetus to the spread of these experiences. Buying food directly from producers, going to local markets or swapping food in an urban warehouse can not only help people to cope better with the financial crisis but also respond to a search for a meaning that involves the aspects of daily life choices (Castells et al., 2012). Put differently, the crisis has provided a great opportunity for the expansion of organisations linked to ‘ethical consumption’ and SCMOs.

Following Castells et al. (2012), we consider these new forms of organisations and actions to be strongly linked to recent trends (and crisis) of globalisation, and therefore, we consider them not to be a passing fad but rather long-lasting phenomena which will most probably expand in the near future.

Acknowledgements


**Table 1.** Types of SCMOs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale of action</th>
<th>Attitude towards consumption</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Global</td>
<td>Alter-Consumerism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fair trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Specific no-sweat groups</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(e.g. United Students Against Sweatshops)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anti-Consumerism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group promoting de-growth</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(e.g. the casseurs de pub)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Simplicity movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Alter-Consumerism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community-sustained agriculture</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community Food Networks</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Slow Food</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anti-Consumerism</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time Bank</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Transition Towns</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Ecovillages</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

SCMOs: Sustainable Community Movement Organisations.
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