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CRITICAL CONSUMPTION AND ETHICAL HERITAGE: THE ITALIAN CASE

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INTRODUCTION

As is well-known, one of the most interesting aspects of Karl Polanyi's thought is linked to his introduction into economic debate, of the concept of "economistic fallacy". This formulation gave the Hungarian scholar the possibility of clarifying that the logical error made by economists, especially those of the neoclassical persuasion, consists in establishing "an equality between human economics in general and its market forms" (Polanyi 1977: 28). According to this author, when we attempt to reason on economic sphere, we must bear in mind the fact that it can be distinguished in two very different ways, the formal and the substantial, and that the two must be kept quite distinct from one another. In a formal sense, economics is understood as meaning the means-ends relationship in conditions of scarcity. But the substantial sense must be added to this vision: human beings live in relation to each other and in relation to their surrounding environment and so, their basic human needs are not only of a material nature, but also concern the historical and institutional foundations around which their lives revolve. In addition, the choices made by economic actors are not necessarily linked to the principle of scarcity: this scarcity "can happen if the means are sufficient or if they are not. The moral choice is indicated by the intention of the agent to do what is right: this situation, at the crossroads between good and evil, constitutes the objective of ethics" (Polanyi 1977: 49). Therefore, if we only reason by way of formal economics, we risk erasing a large part of the history of mankind.

If we tried to see all the different economic forms which, under varying names, could be traced back to solidarity economics, through the eyes of orthodox economists, we would probably have to give in to the fact that we are in the presence of some of the more colorful phenomena present in our society. But it is thanks to Polanyi that we are able to study these phenomena, and can accord them the dignity they deserve.

1. THE ALTERNATIVE OF FAIR TRADE

Of all the experiences which can be traced back to the varied world of solidarity economics, *fair trade* has an important role to play. It is "a free association between producers and consumers in the search for the price of human labor, which responds more to vital needs and less to so-called market laws" (Perna 1998: 86). Going beyond the autonomous mechanism between supply and demand, from which price is derived, and which belongs to the self-regulating market analyzed by Polanyi (1944: 88), the price of human labor is not fixed by market laws, but is the result of a free agreement which, from the supply point of view, allows the worker to live above the subsistence threshold and, from the demand point of view, eliminates the extra profit for those who can be defined as *shareholders*. It is an attempt to build a new market form, with the idea of creating an alternative to the dominant model of the capitalistic market, whose sole objective is still to maximize profits (Perna: 2001), according to the principles of *Social sustainability of the production process, Economic sustainability, and Environmental sustainability*:

- *Social sustainability of production process*. Every single segment of production process is based, first of all, on democratic principles and, for this purpose all producers must be able to exercise control, through the ownership of the land they work (Ransom: 2004). In this way the general level of workers protection is increased so that they can work in safe and healthy places (Becchetti and Paganetto 2006: 118).

The ethic sphere of production is also confirmed by the absence of any sort of discrimination against the individuals defined "disadvantaged", whether they be invalids

or members of ethnic minorities; obviously, no form of discrimination is committed against women who actually play a key role in the field of fair trade (Cammarota 2005: 133).

The full recognition of trade unions from the producers joining the fair trade, will ensure that, also when there is no connection between owners and workers, the latter can get organized in free trade unions. The certification of ethic dimension at last is guaranteed only if it can show the total absence of exploitation of children labor (Ramson 2004).

Fair trade philosophy is based on the belief that any industrial settlement in a specific area, should not confine to be a simple instrument of economic growth. It is therefore essential that, a quantitative development corresponds with qualitative growth of the whole social aggregate in which it acts, in a positively related way. In this way, the economics will become, once again, functional to society through projects geared towards the attribution of social awards to improve the quality of life of local communities. To this end it is applied a principle of solidarity that a part of surplus of local products (usually around 5%) is invested to enhance the average level of our standard of living, through the creation or optimization of "common assets" as schools, hospitals, job training and so on. In these places local community become responsible of good development of the projects (Perna 2001; Becchetti and Paganetto 2006: 119).

- *Economic sustainability.* Another unusual element of conventional market is represented by the choice, of North importers, to improve the pre-financing of South commercial partners, once the firm order is placed. A sort of stability and serenity is guaranteed to producers, through an advance that can reach 50 % of the total amount. In this way producers do not need to use bank loans (often not granted for lack of pawns) or, as worst, usurious loans (Becchetti and Paganetto 2006; Perna 2001).
- *Environmental sustainability.* As regard environmental sustainability, production take shape through a strong ecological sensibility. This last is developed not only through procedures with the lowest environmental impact, avoiding to use poor and not reproducible raw materials, but also choosing a policy turned to produce according to the main principles and parameters of organic farming. That will meet an increasingly demand from responsible consumers (Becchetti and Paganetto 2006; Guadagnucci and Gavelli 2004).

All these elements ensure that fair trade products can satisfy an increasingly demand from North consumers who, in a systematic way, base their purchases on ethical values, following new forms of social protest.

2. ETHICAL ACTIVISTS AND CONSUMERS LIFE STORIES

One of the most important pieces of international research published over the last few years was certainly, "Fair Trade in Europe 2005", a study carried out in twenty-five European countries, in order to document the state of European fair trade. The results are extremely interesting: during 2005, turnover of fair trade in Europe (twenty-five nations amongst which, countries which are not part of the Euro area) was estimated at around 660 million Euro, a significant figure, if we consider that only five years previously, the figure stood at 260 million, an increase of 154%. (Krier 2005).

Over the last five years, growth has been registered in almost all the countries taken into consideration by the research, and also, according to current forecasts, there will be a further increase in sales figures over the next few years. The success is obvious, especially if we consider that total costs for marketing, public relations and training are minimal.

This aspect underlines the fact that consolidation of this phenomenon cannot be attributed to "canonical" variables such as publicity campaigns, special offers or promotions.

The research gives us great insight into solidarity economics, but an analysis of the socio-economic variables alone, is not enough to explain a phenomenon such as ethical consumption which could be explained in relation to substantial economics alone. For example, a correlation between per capita income and per capita ethical consumption is invalid. The case of the United Kingdom is exemplary; even though it is only in twelfth position in the table relative to per capita income (UNDP: 2003), it is third in the list relative to per capita ethical consumption. The same index, used on data relative to secondary education (UNDP: 2005), underlines the almost total independence of ethical consumption from the variables relative to formal education levels. For example, Switzerland, which is twelfth in the table relative to education, is in first position for per capita consumption of fair trade products. This proves that the motivations for consumers' actions lie principally in the institutional sphere.

Research carried out to date in Italy, gives us a clear picture of the ethical consumer and, in particular, of the fair trade consumer. We have an accurate identikit: we know where they live, how their family is structured, their habits, preferences, what job they have, how much they earn, how they spend their free time, whether they believe in God, are agnostic or atheists (Becchetti and Costantino 2006; Lori and Volpi 2007).

In this research paper, I have tried to go beyond these indicators, which are, nevertheless, extremely useful, and tried to understand the motivations which lead the fair trade consumer to undermine the assumption that he is a "homo oeconomicus" and which in a way, give rise to what Polanyi calls "the double movement". In the face of a capitalistic economy which reduces human motivations to mere economic calculations, and is increasingly inclined towards the commoditization of land, work and money, there is an opposing movement for the self-defense of society, a contrasting force based on what I have defined as "ethical heritage", or that group of values, cultural factors and social ties which are passed on to successive generations in the form of moral rules and responsibilities towards ourselves and others.

Within this framework, there are some important questions to be asked: why are some people more sensitive than others, especially as far as ethical problems are concerned? What are the reasons and what are the experiential processes that determine their formation? What is the cause of this awareness, responsibility and sensitivity on the part of the consumer? What are the socio-cultural components which determine their formation?

These are all questions which are extremely difficult to answer fully using quantitative methods.

For this reason, it is necessary to examine this phenomenon through the use of qualitative methods such as narrative interviews, in an attempt to extract the necessary understanding and interpretation of the sense that individuals attribute to their actions.

We interviewed forty-three ethical activists (Tallontire *et al.* 2001) and consumers from *world shops* in eight different Italian cities, equally distributed between north, south and central Italy.

Thirty-three women and ten men, between the ages of nineteen and seventy-one, from Milan and Livorno (in the province of La Spezia) for the north-west; Solesino (in the province of Padua), Bologna and Terni for the central-north-east; Naples, Messina and Catania for the south. The choice of the different territorial areas was not casual: we wanted to underline the diversity of the interviewees as much as possible, and not only their ages, but also the "field" in which these people live, act and structure their vision of life. From here, therefore, the need to subdivide the national territory not simply according to the classical geographical formula of north-south, but by segmenting the different areas of the country on the basis of economic and social differences, whose combination does not determine their sum (Bagnasco 1977). The north-west, the central-north-east and the south, from this point of view, represent "three social systems with their own characteristics, in a certain sense specific for their economic structure, social organization and political systems" (ibid).

The education level of the interviewees is medium-high¹, and amongst them are fifteen students, two teachers, fourteen white collar workers, three pensioners, a university researcher, two educators, one freelance professional, and finally, five are unemployed or looking for their first job.

Almost all of them state that they received a Catholic education (except two who state they were not baptized), although only fifteen confirm that they are still practicing Catholics; the others, on the other hand, define themselves as atheists, agnostics or non-practicing believers.

Finally, from a political point of view, a minority declare they have distanced themselves from the political sphere, while most declare (in different ways) they lean towards the left, even though most of them state they don't feel completely comfortable with this classification.

Once the life stories were collected, we passed on to the codifying of the protocols that were derived from them, in order to proceed with the 'thematic' analysis of the same. The information collected has been divided into four categories: education received in the family, with particular reference to the values that the interviewees believe they received and re-elaborated; the sphere of rooted values through the mediation of people external to the family nucleus which, on the whole, have significantly influenced on their *modus vivendi*; the ambit of the experiences that have marked the individual biographies and, finally, ample space that has been dedicated to the reflections of the interviewees on their life style.

3. At the Roots of Substantial Economy

3.1. The Role of the Family in the Construction of their own Values System

A study that has the aim of investigating on the training of the individuals' consciences cannot but start from the family as original social system in which people are formed as individuals, thanks to the interiorisation of regulations and values shared in that definite process of socialization (Berger and Luckmann 1969).

¹ Eighteen people had a high school diploma; and twenty-five stated that they had a university degree (although it is important to note that some of these only had a first level degree).

This is the field in which we learn the first social rules, in which we trace the guide lines for living in the world; it is also in the family context that we start to build our self, through that element which, according to Erikson, will accompany the life of every person: the research of identity.

The first interesting aspect, which we can gather from many people's tales, is given by the family of origin to open up towards the external world, towards friends, towards others.

There are those like Ilaria, for example, a 30-year-old sociologist from Naples, who attribute to this type of education an important influence derived from strong Christian faith of her parents:

Strong attention was paid to humanity, considered as respect for others in any situation; also a certain vocation for the 'support' of others, above all coming from my mother and which I in some ways have interiorized. It is a family in which there are many people, many friends (...) There is a real openness to human nature, really.... not only are my parents practicing Catholics, but they are also part of a community and therefore are certainly very busy in this... it really marks their existence!

On the other hand, Elisa, who is 23 years old and comes from Novara, says that she received an education based on liberty, something that has allowed her to mature the principle of responsibility at an early age, and she believes that this aspect is derived from different cultural setting of her parents.

They have always given me the freedom of choice and from the beginning they have always tried to give me some responsibilities, making me, therefore, aware of what I was doing (...) Catechism, oratory... these things certainly had an importance... both on the Catholic side, that may have come from my mum's family, as well as my father's side who, when young, was very involved in politics, in any case a different point of view. The thing that in my opinion is shared by both sides is the person, the wellbeing of the person, which also, maybe, is very present in the Catholic way of thinking.

It is useful to see that, even with more flexibility compared to the past, the Catholic religion continues to be one of the strong points of the family.

Christian values, "religious ethics" are tied to political and civil ones of liberty and autonomy, without ever losing sight of attention to others, "taking care" of others.

In the family we learn from the beginning "that not taking care of people is like leaving them" (Jedlowski 2005: 122). In the family we develop a disposition to listen, which is also the ability to welcome and the intelligence to understand (*ibidem*: 123). The attention to others, together with the strong push to autonomy of one's own children, ensure that the family becomes the fertile territory in which the "principle of responsibility" can take root.

3.2. The Other Meanings

Once we overcome the phase of socialization in the family, people start to confront themselves with the world outside and, above all, from adolescence, it happens quite frequently that people confirm their very selves through the approval or the rejection by others.

As time goes by, in fact, many "Other Meanings" follow on and "if we know who it was and who is important for the image that someone has of himself, we will have a noteworthy conscience of

that person" (Gerth and Wright Mills 1969: 110).

This role, in many circumstances, is attributed by the interviewees to those institutional figures, such as teachers or vicars, whom we meet outside of the family nucleus. This is the case of Tiziana, a 22-year-old from Catania:

My Latin and Greek teacher introduced to the class some themes which did not have anything to deal with Greek and Latin: she gave each of us a book or a poem to read and that next lesson we commented on them together;(…) She asked me to read a book by Sibilla Aleramo, "A woman", and that was a very strong moment as, until that moment, I used to take into consideration only the plot, the mere story; instead, after chatting with her she managed to be a sort of Socrates, meiotic, she helped me get out all the most interesting contents, the most important ones in a woman's experience. I was only fourteen, and yet I said: "wow! What a great conversation we had!"

Giovanna, a graduate searching for her first job, has always been part of the Catholic Action. She says that for her, it was an adult who, through the 'strategy of example' offered her the possibility of a 'different' way of thinking:

a person who expresses practical and possible alternatives to the situations that are around us and which seem to be irresolvable, that seem larger than us. And compared to which, maybe, we can tackle in two different ways: or, once more, on the plain of individual commitment, for which it is morally, ethically correct... I don't know... to not surrender to the strength of the Mafia, because it is ethically correct and that is one way; on the other side however, there is a strong link to the community, and the subject can be tackled also from this point of view, and there the subject becomes more a path link to faith, to a very different reading of reality....

From our interviewees' life stories it seems clear that, in the forming phase of oneself, a central role is attributed to the people that are around us and that, more or less voluntarily, end up by marking in various ways the life of the individual with which we have contact.

The Other Meaning, both individual and collective, covers a fundamental role in the building of identity, being that which, confirming the values of the family, offers the starting point for enriching one's own vision of the world, one's own way of thinking, leaving other possibilities to be seen.

3.3. The Value of Experience

It is possible to detect those factors which, more than others show the need to realize meaningful experiences that can allow the individuals to experiment and try themselves.

Therefore, a strong experience ends up by determining a real change in their existences, to produce awareness, a solid knowledge that will radically influence on the life choices.

Even when the experiences are searched for, the consequences are almost always unexpected and, breaking the routine of daily life, they become tools for re-elaborating the image that one has of oneself and of the world around them.

It does not matter if it is casual experience or a specific choice; the important thing is that, once

lived, this produces in the individuals a meaningful transformation in the perception of reality. (Jedlowski 1994).

A lot of people tell us, for example, about journeys in countries where injustice and the unbalance of a globalization that comes from an increasingly greedy capitalistic system show themselves for what they really are.

These are such important experiences that they determine significant changes in what were the original life styles of those who lived them, as is the case of Giuliana, a 38-year-old teacher from Milan:

When I was about twenty years old, I travelled to Peru, and there I met a completely different world. (...) At twenty years of age, I had lived in Milan, my school, college, in a much protected situation and it was fairly shocking to actually touch this reality. And this is where the idea of what to do was born... I didn't change from one day to the next, but in time I understood that this trip had been very useful for me. I acquired something that then became part of me and continues to be so!

Marco, from Milan, says:

Then there was the meeting with "Comunione e Liberazione" (political association with catholic orientation) which was fairly long, I was there for five and a half years and then I left with a fairly decisive break (...) leaving school, leaving home, the type of society that I met with when I went into houses, going into the suburbs, certain projects, and certain ideas seemed not to work anymore; above all it seemed to me that the idea of defending well-established order no longer worked....

If the desire for participation remains the same and the institutions are experienced properly, it is indispensable to find other ways, other paths for expression. This is what Carla thinks:

I belonged to Terni's section of Rifondazione comunista (left party): this experience ended up quite badly due to a conflict between the youth section and the secretary which was made up by the older people (...) from that moment I left! I was already inscribed in the association "the robins" which was involved in fair trade. I continued there and left the party.

The experiences so far analyzed - paradigmatic of the culture of the world of fair trade – are all linked by one element, a common thread that links the experiences of the individual transforming them into a collective experience: the sensational force of the "moral law" that marks its existence. The impossibility of retreating, because we are morally obliged, regarding others. From here is the necessity of carrying out alternative life styles, because it is not merely a question of ethical consumption, but rather of "living differently".

3.4. Behavior and Reflections of the Ethical Consumers

The globalized West is characterized, according to Bauman (1999) by a sort of ambivalence in social action which, if on one side involves that which he defines as the tendency to "diazotization", intended as a detachment of a good part of the individual actions in the sphere of moral judgment. On the other side, however, we are assisting in strategies of life that, without passing through the conventional bureaucratic apparatus, give place to the moral conditions of

the post-modern man.

To give voice to the moral impulses has the consequence of "taking responsibility for others, something that, in its turn, brings about involvement in the destiny of others and to commit oneself to its wellbeing" (*ibidem*: 50).

This is the sense that the ethical consumers attribute to their action, as Federica, a 22-year-old girl from Messina, tries to explain:

The aim of this thing is not to help for the sake of helping, which rather than giving destroys, but that of offering an alternative to the traditional way of doing business (...) an alternative for us consumers, but also for the producers of the South of the world who are not looking for handouts but who want to work with dignity and this is the most beautiful aspect.

The sense of action of the ethical consumer consists in the very attempt to give concrete aid to the southern part of the world, overcoming the humiliation of charity, of the pitiful procedure of 'doing good'. From this point of view, especially in Milan, the consumers show that they have clear ideas, as Marco does when he affirms that:

I must tell the truth: after the first two, three times that I bought fair trade products I thought it was a really cool thing, in the sense that it combined a project of solidarity (...) there is a concreteness, it wasn't about buying an object that, even if it was made badly, you buy it anyway because it was made by a disabled kid, that then you will never use and leave in a corner to collect the dust: but you buy it for solidarity.

Such a kind of system dismantles a certain Eurocentric vision which is based on an asymmetric economical power, such that for which, if the citizen of the North feels morally obliged, he however expects, in the ambit of a two directional dynamic, to receive equal attention from the producers: an aspect however that Lucia strongly underlines here:

In the first phase we acquired whatever we found. But then, that's ok. I respect your work but I can not change my habits: I cannot start eating sticky pasta, for example – this should be understood!

The observation that consumers hold as a priority the guarantee of ethics does not mean, however, as Lucia underlines, that this is the only prerequisite taken into consideration: the *quality* and *aesthetics*, indeed, draw great consideration, to the point that the majority of the interviewees attribute to these one of the motives of success of fair trade.

From this point of view, fair trade satisfies both the personal pleasure as well as the respect for others, guaranteeing a satisfaction on various levels (Di Nallo 2004: 71-81).

Once we have started this alternative life style, all the interviewees declare to have started to adopt other forms of responsible consumption as well.

Critical consumption seems to be the more widespread practice, even though many highlight the difficulties: this life style, in fact, suggests a very strong motivation, that justifies the time and energy spent in accurately choosing every single product.

Albero shows his radical life style, all his "strategies" (de Certeau 1974) of consumption adopted,

also regarding prices – an element which remains an indispensable variable, especially for consumers with low incomes:

Because of my budget, I purchase products from small shops or at the Coop Hard-discounts, where by checking the labels you can see that the establishments are the same... and so I am able to survive. I decided to change life style: I would rather not throw away the water from the pasta rather than buy washing up liquid; instead of using three or four measures of washing powder, I use half - the clothes get washed the same. By reasoning in this way, I support fair trade, but nevertheless (...) my sense of being as an ethical customer is that the consumer is a consumer-actor!

Lucia talks about her attempt of escaping from the absorbing strength of a capitalism which always tends to impose its homologated model:

The supermarkets, shopping malls and nowadays also the stalls are absolutely flat: they all sell the same things (...) which is ridiculous... it is absurd! The more choice there is, the less chance you have to choose: when I find myself faced with 150 different types of yoghurt or 40 different types of toothpaste, I get so angry... I mean what's toothpaste for? Just to clean and protect your teeth!

When I am faced with 40 different types of toothpaste, I do not choose anymore as it is too difficult to understand what I really need. At that point I take any one by chance, and I do the same with the yoghurt.. It is a fake choice, you think you are choosing but instead you end up buying the same product... it's not possible!

The collection of this information gives us an interesting insight into their lives: first of all, it is useful to report that, the Catholic religion remains in place, though perhaps in a more elastic way than in the past, as one of the fixed points in the lives of Italian families. Christian values, "religious ethics", are combined with political and civil ideals about freedom and independence, without ever losing sight of attention towards others, or "taking care" of others. The family teaches, right from the start, that "not caring for others means that we abandon them". This attention towards others, together with our children's strong desire to be independent, means that the family becomes the fertile ground in which to establish "principles of responsibility".

Once the phase of socialization has been reached in the family (Berger and Luckman 1969), individuals start to deal with the external world and, primarily from adolescence onwards, frequently begin to validate their sense of Self through the approval or rejection of others. In this way, and in most individual biographies, we note the presence of a priest, a teacher, a peer with different cultural and experiential baggage or even a grandparent, who is "elected" as a role model; a guide who, as the years pass, is recognized as being a "mentor".

In their search for unconventional ways of life, the ethical consumers we interviewed are clearly showing the difficult relationship they have with the classical institutions: the strong need for participation and civil commitment which is described by all the interviewees does not find any correspondence in those systems which, in our modern world, have always represented the most natural place for them to express their own personalities.

Religious organizations, political parties and trade unions are viewed with great suspicion: condemned as being too self-referential, with rigid and outdated rules, they are no longer able to satisfy the needs and demands of a society that is constantly changing.

Whether from central Italy, from the north or south, whether the commitment is political or

religious, the analogies are obvious.

The disappointment becomes even worse for those who believed implicitly in these institutions, hoping to find in them the necessary reflection of their own system of values, as their expectations are often left unfulfilled.

If there is still the desire to participate, and the institutions are increasingly recognized as being inadequate, then it is important to find alternatives, other ways of expressing oneself.

In a rapidly moving and changing society, which is still limping towards finding a new form, the ethical consumer is a person who does not fully recognize himself within the modern institutional apparatus, and decides therefore to turn consciously to those values which derive from what I have defined as "ethical heritage".

4. THE ETHICAL HERITAGE OF ITALIAN CRITICAL CONSUMERS

From an overall point of view, the results produced by this research show some very interesting features. As far as geographical location is concerned, there are some cultural differences which significantly affect the formation of the consumers' critical awareness.

- Overall, in the north-west, the territorial culture is based on a sense of responsibility mixed with a strong work ethic, and the awareness that things can change only if we do something practical; here, the presence of associations has a strong influence, especially voluntary work. Of all those interviewed, the ethical consumers in the north-west seem to be the most sensitive towards themes such as work exploitation and global inequality and their consumer choices are closely linked to their ability to feel indignation and their strong political need to express dissent.
- In the north-east, the long tradition of Catholic (in the Triveneto area) and lay (in the more central regions) co-operativism, of a culture very much based on the idea of the "common good", and the lack of differentiation between the public and the private sphere, represent the foundation on which the consumer's ethical heritage is based. In this area, ethical consumption is recognized as being a tool for expressing those ideas of solidarity and fraternity that also belong to the Catholic culture. Even in traditionally "communist" areas, where the electorate are thought to have very high ideals, the younger generations show a certain disconnection from political parties, while they find that it is much more formative to be involved in the world of associations. The values they received from their families of origin are values which are shared by their social group, and civil commitment is considered a practical application of the example received.
- Finally, in the south, consumers' motivations seem to be inspired by the "principle of proximity" – often confused with familism – which is the more immediate manifestation of the ethical heritage inherited by the younger generations. In the south, even though the church is still responsible for much of the transmission of values, it is often schools which propose alternatives, new frameworks in which to express a sense of community. The ethical consumer in the south feels the weight of living in a marginal part of Europe and adopts strategies in order to show others that it is possible to change the world, but only by altering one's own lifestyle.

From the information collected, the most interesting element, one that emerges strongly, and which almost all the interviewees have in common is, however, linked to the lack of trust towards not only the whole economic system based on capitalism (which is accused of having disguised and hidden the huge social and environmental costs behind every single product surrounding

the consumer) but also towards the larger institutions which are part of modern history: mass political parties, ecclesiastical institutions, large trade union organizations etc.

Increasingly seen as huge containers empty of contents, too distant from everyday problems, overly rigid in comparison to the flexibility necessary to satisfy people's needs and demands, the social institutions no longer feel their central position is recognized (Mostaccio 2008).

Ethical consumers show how, through their actions, individuals are often more prepared than the social institutions and their representatives, to understand the changes taking place and find alternative ways of reacting to them.

The "consciousness raising", the awareness, the critical conscience that we all talk about so much, can be understood as the ability to emancipate ourselves from the state of reification that is part of the capitalistic system, and the ability to react to consumption with a firm idea of the social relationships of production.

On a superficial level, ethical consumption can be seen as an original choice, aimed at a simple differentiation of lifestyles, but on taking a closer look we cannot fail to see how it is no less than a new way of responding to the moral imperatives dictated by our own ethical heritage. Values have not changed, but the instruments with which we express them have.

When we talk about a crisis of values, we risk not understanding the cultural change that is going on. The distancing from the traditional shapes of political or religious participation must be considered as a "conflict between values, between two different conceptions, for style and for content, of society, politics and democracy" (Beck 2000: 46).

The individualism of which contemporary western society is superficially accused, hides instead the rise of an "altruistic individualism" which "finds right in the condemned 'decadence' of the old values the availability to welcome the other" (ibidem: 50) in virtue of the acquired awareness that "whoever lives for himself, must live socially" (ibidem).

As in domestic communities during medieval times, in central and southern Italy, where there was a strong sense of solidarity towards the exterior (Weber 1968), a sort of "responsibility due to proximity" towards neighboring communities, so today, where what is "distant" is ever closer, the consumer responds by adapting an inherited cultural model to a globalised social structure.

This research underlines how it is possible to find a combination of factors which form the framework for the ethical heritage of the Italian ethical consumer. Based on geographical area, it is possible to verify more clearly which institutions have had a greater influence on the development of a critical conscience.

It seems too early to try and speculate whether, over the next few years, the phenomenon that we have described will manage to leave its minority position within the macrocosm of consumerism, and change from being a tendency, into a consumption pattern.

It seems evident, however, that these consumer strategies are closely linked to the individual's ethical heritage. Ethical consumption, after all, is nothing more than a litmus test to help interpret a country that is changing, but which in order to do this, uses instruments which have been handed down by past generations, and by their cultures. "The ethical footprint" becomes the glue which simultaneously holds together the past, present and future.

But above all, in the face of a capitalistic economic system which appears to be increasingly *disembedded*, less connected to the social sphere, the ethical consumer insists that the economy cannot be anything but *embedded*, and deeply rooted in society. In the end, it is what Polanyi had already realized when he wrote: it is "the means and not the needs that are material" (Polanyi 1977: 43).

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