Chapter 4
Cautious Entrepreneurship: Strategies and Business Orientation of Small-Scale Farmers in the Alternative Food Economy

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ABSTRACT

Employing qualitative empirical data collected in Italy and England for a doctoral research on small-scale primary food producers in the alternative food economy, this chapter provides an interpretation of the peculiar nature of the entrepreneurialism that characterizes those small-scale farmers who entrust their economic reproduction (at least partially) to short, direct supply chains and alternative food networks (AFNs). The chapter summarizes the strategies implemented by farmers to 'go alternative' as well as the subsequent transformation of growing and business practices that such a process entails, for then comparing the researcher's empirical results with four studies on farmers' entrepreneurialism. Issues of care, trust, change-orientedness, risk-taking, lifestyle, and autonomy are discussed, and farmers' entrepreneurial spirit is found to be cautious, due to the interplay of a traditional farming business orientation, a more pronounced relational disposition, and the characteristics and requirements of the alternative economy in which farmers are embedded.

INTRODUCTION

In the critical scenario that currently affects the global and local food systems, processes of food 're-socialization' (Kneafsey et al., 2008; Sage, 2011; Goodman, DuPuis, & Goodman, 2012) and 're-localization' (Hinrichs, 2003; Mount, 2012) are increasingly being spurred by new organizational structures aimed at re-embedding food production, distribution and consumption practices within the frame of local and sustainable systems. The reference is to *short food supply chains*, which can either take the form of a non-intermediated exchange between producers and consumers, or be organized and man-

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aged by organizations of citizens or businesses of various kinds. In general, these initiatives have been labeled *alternative food networks* (AFNs): they are food chain organizational schemes – in most cases horizontal – setting up and managing short circuits to re-valorize local, traditional and sustainable production. These novel economic infrastructures provide farmers – especially small-scale family farmers, for they are seen as the bearers of a much more societally-desirable productive model – a whole new set of commercial opportunities, contributing to the construction of what is defined as the *alternative food economy*. In many localities, indeed, farmers' markets, purchasing groups, box schemes, food coops, and CSAs – which are the most common types of alternative food procurement schemes – are increasing their weight in the local foodscape, proposing their small localized economies as increasingly viable alternatives to the long chains of the *conventional* food system.

As a consequence, in the last two decades a great effort in research has brought about a robust literature on alternative food networks and the phenomena of re-localization (among many others, see for example: Feenstra, 1997; Renting, Marsden, & Banks, 2003; Kirwan, 2004; Watts, Ilbery, & Maye, 2005; Higgins, Dibden, & Cocklin, 2008; Jarosz, 2008; Kneafsey, et al., 2008; Goodman, et al., 2012; Psarikidou & Szerszynski, 2012; Barbera & Dagnes, 2016; Grivins, et al., 2017). However, the productive component of these networks remains relatively unexplored, i. e. the productive-entrepreneurial archipelago which is mobilized by these networks and which finds in them (at least potentially) a new center of gravity.

Aiming to contribute to filling this gap in research about agriculture and AFNs, the author carried out his doctoral investigation with the purpose of advancing the knowledge of the social and economic world of small-scale farmers selling their products through short chains and AFNs-related commercial circuits. The study was conducted between 2015 and 2018 in Italy and England, where the author scrutinized the innovative practices farmers realize to seek viability for their businesses, while keeping under control the variability of the forms and expressions of 'alternativeness' assumed by the different experiences within and between the two countries. The research also addressed the innovations and transformations that the emergence of these novel economic platforms is prompting at the level of the farm unit, and therefore adopted the farmer/producer's perspective as the standpoint for the analysis. This also allowed for an empirically-rooted evaluation of the peculiar nature of the *entrepreneurialism* that characterizes those small-scale farmers who entrust their economic reproduction (at least partially) to the alternative food economy, which this chapter takes as its objective to portray and interpret.

The study employed qualitative methods and investigated two specific fieldsites: the province of Milan and its surroundings (Italy), and the north-western region of England (Lancashire, Southern Cumbria and the Manchester area). The methodological design included an initial mapping of the distribution of alternative food initiatives in the two fields and a recognition of the rural-productive fabric of the two regions, followed by a data collection process which resulted in thirty-nine in-depth interviews[1] with farmers, complemented by fifteen months of ethnographic non-participant observation (nine in Italy and six in the UK) at the sites where local food is produced and exchanged. During these months the author carried out more than fifty informal interviews with various actors of the alternative food scene, including consumers, practitioners, AFNs organizers and participants, local food shop owners, and food scholars. Concurrently, many AFNs were visited, the selection of which was intended to reflect the distinct composition of the alternative food initiatives in the two countries; among these: farmers' markets, purchasing groups, farmshops, box schemes, CSAs and food coops. A desk analysis of the discursive and symbolic production of both AFNs and farmers in their communication (website, advertising, leaflets, meeting reports, and so on) completed the study's methodology.