

# Our Daily Bread

## Eataly and the Reinvention of Supermarket

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*This paper will explore a rather startling idea: the idea that modern supermarkets might be enrolled in degrowth movement. Of course, we will not ignore or hide the central role that supermarkets play in growth society. Still, we will argue that, like it or not, there is no way to reverse the mounting unsustainability of modern agro-food sector without messing with mass distribution systems. To avoid marginality, de-growth movement will have to mess with supermarkets and decide whether to oppose them or to turn them into allies. In this article we will recommend doing both. By analyzing a newly founded Italian distribution chain named Eataly and its relationships with the eco-gastronomic movement of Slow Food, this paper will try to show how de-growth initiatives could (and should) fight supermarket ideology and compromise with their practices at the same time.*

*“There should be no difference between theory and practice  
and that this is true in theory, but false in practice”  
Yves Cochet at Paris De-growth Conference*

Supermarkets are a tricky subject to raise in a symposium on de-growth, especially if one wish to devote them some attention and interest and not just denounce or blame them.

Indeed, few things are more distant from de-growth thinking that modern supermarkets. If growth society has a belly, that is certainly supermarkets. In the last seventy years, supermarkets have restlessly grown to become *the* interface between industrialized production and mass consumption. And not a neutral one. Supermarkets did not merely adjust to growth society. To a large extent, they crafted it. Every articulation of modern distribution systems has been thoughtfully organized to absorb and fuel the increasing productivity of agro-food industry and to promote a parallel escalation of household consumes<sup>1</sup>. Taking charge of distribution, supermarkets allow producers to concentrate on production and consumers to focus on consumption<sup>2</sup>. To the former, supermarkets guarantee that there will always be outlet for their productive surpluses. To the latter, supermarkets assure that there will be abundance for their buying desire. In a sense, supermarkets accomplish a function that is not dissimilar from that of money<sup>3</sup>, assuring a generalized match between demand and offer<sup>4</sup> (or, at least,

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<sup>1</sup> On the history of the supermarkets' rise (in United States) see Strasser: 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Consider, for example, how the introduction of shopping carts (together with the dislocation of supermarket outside the city centres where parking is easier) resolved the problem of allowing consumers to buy more than what they can carry in their hands (Grandclément and Cochoy: 2006).

<sup>3</sup> On money as a universal mediator see Luhmann and De Giorgi: 2000.

<sup>4</sup> To be sure, such match is not always convenient for the parties: producers are often forced to undersell their stock and consumers are often compelled to buy at a price they can afford or at a quality they do not desire.

that the first will never limit the second and vice-versa). Before supermarkets, distribution was a residual function: people turned to markets to sell or buy the few things they were not able to consume or produce themselves. With supermarkets, distribution becomes an economic sector in itself and its management is developed to perfection. The very reasons behind the success of modern retail chains (namely scale economies, logistic perfectionism and price competition) lock the relation between production and consumption in a cycle of mutual escalation. Because supermarkets need large quantities to maximize their efficiency, producers and consumers are actively pushed to trade more and more.

And that's not all: not only supermarkets made growth possible, but they also made it thinkable. All over the world, retail chains are among the biggest advertising spenders and most of these expenses are invested in nurturing the ideology of growth, broadcasting the idea that "more is always better". Think about it: supermarkets' advertising is substantially different from the promotion of specific agro-food brands. Brands generally use advertising to persuade consumers that their products are worth buying because of specific qualities (they are testier, healthier, happier...) and despite of their prices. Supermarkets use advertising to persuade consumers that their products are worth buying because of their price and despite of their quality<sup>5</sup>. Even more than advertising, the very practice of shelf-comparing trained consumers and producers in using price and quantity as baseline variables for individual and collective choices. To be sure, this does not mean that price is the only purchasing criterion, nor that consumers are only interested in maximizing quantity<sup>6</sup>. Still, as they have no chance for tasting or getting informed on production, consumers are inevitably led to rely on price, disposition and packaging to navigate inside supermarket<sup>7</sup>. And, inside supermarkets, everything is carefully arranged to boost consumption: from the display of products to the interior design, from the light effects to the sound ambiance, everything is carefully calculated to invite clients to buy more and more<sup>8</sup>.

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Still, the very logic of modern distribution systems guarantees that there will always be room for more production and for more consumption.

<sup>5</sup> How many time have you seen a retail chain advertising on the quality of its products? And how many time on the price? Despite all its technical subtleties, supermarkets' advertising is still largely based on a "take more, pay less" philosophy.

<sup>6</sup> To discover how complex and multi-layered consumers' behavior can get in supermarket, see Dubuisson-Quellier: 2006.

<sup>7</sup> For a sociological analysis of the tools used by supermarkets to guide consumers' navigation see Barrey: 2007 and Cochoy: 2007.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed explanation of how retailer can use the so-called 'merchandising' to guide consumer navigation through supermarkets, see Dioux and Dupuis: 2005 (pp. 305-340 and 343-364). Let me quote some few lines from this book (which is meant as a textbook for distribution manager) to show how subtle and sophisticated 'merchandising' techniques can get: "Among the numerous grouping criteria, we can mention the impulsive purchasing; the planned purchasing; the confessional or ethnic products; the complementarity of use; the originality; the fashion; the visibility in the store; the alphabetical order; the packaging type (box, bag, pack...); the display style (flat, hanging, face view, side view, loose, in box, in tray); the selling modalities (in self or assisted service)" (p. 333, our translation).

For these and other reasons we have not time to discuss, supermarkets have steadily occupied the center of modern collective life. They do not simply mirror, support or symbolize economic growth: they *are* growth in its purest manifestation. This is why de-growth movements have long tried to replace supermarkets with alternative distribution forms. Farmer markets<sup>9</sup>, community-supported agriculture<sup>10</sup>, consumers' purchasing groups<sup>11</sup>, self-production<sup>12</sup> and other experiments in disintermediation and re-localization developing precisely to provide such alternatives<sup>13</sup>. All these remarkable and appealing initiatives build on the idea that the agro-food sector can be renovated only by shortcutting modern distribution and recreating a direct connection between farmers and citizens. Establishing and occupying a gap between producers and consumers, supermarkets hinder de-growth efforts both practically and ideologically. On a practical level, modern retail chains have often proved to be economically and organizationally unable to handle smaller and more sustainable trades<sup>14</sup>. Supermarkets mechanisms have been painstakingly developed to manage industrialized production and mass consumption and are therefore hard to conciliate with the logic of reduction and specialization proclaimed by de-growth movement. On an ideological level, the interface of modern distribution contribute to hide each side of the agro-food sector most of the perverse consequences of growth<sup>15</sup>, thereby contributing to conceal the crisis of modern industrial agriculture. This is why the disintermediating efforts we mentioned are so important. Though scattered and ephemeral, these initiatives go in the right direction, restoring a richer sense to the link between the two ends of the food market. In the long run, it is to be hoped that they will be able to integrate and give birth to a system of local distribution networks alternative to supermarkets.

The legitimate criticism toward modern distribution and the commitment toward future alternatives, however, should not impede a realistic assessment of the current situation. Although noteworthy, disintermediating efforts seem still unable to compete against the power of modern distribution networks. At least in the short period, farmer markets, community-supported agriculture, consumers purchasing groups have few chances to deviate the mainstream of agro-food sector. Like it or not, supermarkets occupy a central position in modern collective life and (at least in the short period) there's no doubt that they will keep the lion's share<sup>16</sup>. According to Euromonitor statistics, in

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<sup>9</sup> On farmers markets phenomenon see Corum, Rosenzweig and Gibson: 2001.

<sup>10</sup> On the philosophy and organization of a farmers market, see Henderson, Van En: 1999

<sup>11</sup> On the history on consumers' purchasing groups in Italy, see Valera: 2005.

<sup>12</sup> On the self-production philosophy, see the example of the yogurt jar in the *Manifesto della Decrescita Felice* ([www.decrescitafelice.it](http://www.decrescitafelice.it)).

<sup>13</sup> For a wide-ranging review of the alternatives to modern distribution systems see Steffen, 2006 (in particular pp. 51-57).

<sup>14</sup> For a modern supermarket, handling the transportation of frozen fish from the other side of the world is simpler than dealing with a small fishing cooperative unable to guarantee daily deliveries.

<sup>15</sup> When they purchase a beef steak, for example, consumers have no clue of the dramatic impact of industrial breeding on water, fuel and soil, as they have no perception of the inhuman life conditions of industrial livestock. Similarly, when they spray their crops with all sorts of pesticides, many farmers are not fully aware of the consequences that they may have on consumers' health.

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of the concentration trends in European food retailing see Dobson, Waterson and Davies (2003).

2007, hypermarkets supermarkets and discounters accounted for more than an half of global grocery sales (59.49%)<sup>17</sup>. In modern collective life, supermarkets are simply too important to be overlooked or just blamed. If degrowth movement do not want to be relegated to marginality, it will have to deal with supermarkets and find ways to turn them from enemies to allies. But, is this possible? Is it possible to detach modern distribution networks from their deep-rooted association with growth culture and enroll them, or part of them, in de-growth movement?

Most readers will probably find the idea of mixing supermarkets and de-growth startling, if not blasphemous. Nonetheless, some interesting experimentation is being carried out in this direction. About one year ago, Slow Food, the celebrated movement for the safeguard of traditional food communities, announced that it was going to support the foundation of a new global, large-scale supermarkets chain. Such announcement, obviously, raised a harsh debate within Slow Food and among its partners. To understand why this debate was so animated, readers should consider that Slow Food is currently one of the most active international movement in promoting de-growth and re-localization in agro-food sector. Few lines from the homepage of Slow Food official website will suffice to illustrate the position of this association in the growth/degrowth controversy<sup>18</sup>:

“Slow Food is a non-profit, eco-gastronomic member-supported organization that was founded in 1989 to counteract fast food and fast life, the disappearance of local food traditions and people’s dwindling interest in the food they eat, where it comes from, how it tastes and how our food choices affect the rest of the world” (www.slowfood.com).

That is why many were shocked to hear that Slow Food, a movement that had always fought for sustainable production and conscious consumption, had decided to support some supermarket enterprise<sup>19</sup>. And still, in January 2007, Slow Food blessed the foundation of a new retail chain named Eataly, accepting to stand as its consultant and guarantor. Had Slow Food sold its soul to the devil? Or, to use some more academic terms, is it possible to defend traditional gastronomy and compromise with modern distribution? To support small-scale, local productions and mess with global, large-scale retail chains? To tackle these questions let’s take a closer look at Slow Food - Eataly alliance.

The first thing we notice when considering Eataly project, is that Eataly is certainly a modern distribution chain, but not a mainstream one. As all distributions chains, Eataly operates on a large scale. The first supermarket, opened in Turin about one year ago, occupies an area of 11,000 square meters and hires more than a hundred of employees. During the first year, the sale volume of this first superstore exceeded 30 millions of euros and plans have been made to open new shops in Milan,

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<sup>17</sup> In particular, hypermarkets accounted for 19.09%, supermarkets for 32.83% and discounters for 7.57%.

<sup>18</sup> In the web-page dedicate to the ‘philosophy’ of the movement, the commitment of Slow Food is made even clearer “We believe that everyone has a fundamental right to pleasure and consequently the responsibility to protect the heritage of food, tradition and culture that make this pleasure possible. Our movement is founded upon this concept of eco-gastronomy – a recognition of the strong connections between plate and planet... We consider ourselves co-producers, not consumers, because by being informed about how our food is produced and actively supporting those who produce it, we become a part of and a partner in the production process”.

<sup>19</sup> Let’s put it this way: Slow Food inaugurating a supermarket chain is as shocking as Green Peace launching a whaler!

Bologna, Naples, New York and Tokyo in the next few years. Yes, Eataly is certainly a large-scale distribution chain.

At the same time, though, Eataly has made a number of choices that clearly distinguish its project from that of mainstream supermarkets. First of all, Eataly decided to strictly abide by Slow Food principles. No food is sold on Eataly shelves that is not compliant with Slow Food mantra of “buono, pulito e giusto” (good, clean and fair), which means: “that the food we eat should taste good; that it should be produced in a clean way that does not harm the environment, animal welfare or our health; and that food producers should receive fair compensation for their work” (www.slowfood.com)<sup>20</sup>. Secondly, Eataly tries to reduce transport costs by offering a range of products that is as local as possible. This means that all fresh products and most preserved products are produced within a reasonable distance from supermarkets. Thirdly, Eataly decided not to distribute national or global food brands and to favor traditional, little-scale, craft-made productions. Ignored by mainstream distribution, these productions have survived at the margin of modern food sector and enjoy today a new vogue, due to the mounting discontent with industrial low-quality. On the one side, consumers searching for quality, sustainability or equity are more and more fascinated by traditional productions. On the other side, traditional communities have demonstrated to be unexpectedly resistant to modernization processes. Disregarded by mainstream retail chains, these demand and offer for traditional productions need new distribution channels to meet and Eataly intends to provide them.

After all we said, can we still define Eataly as a modern distribution chain? What is most interesting about Eataly is that you are tempted to give a different answer whether you look at the philosophy of the project or at its practices.

As for ideology, Eataly makes no concessions to the culture of industrialism and consumerism. The walls of its supermarkets are literally plastered with panels and posters explaining why seasonal food is tastier and healthier; why packaging and other wastes should be reduced to a minimum; why local products are to be preferred; why we should eat less, but better. Every day, tasting and educational activities are organized for kids and adults, inviting consumers to taste and understand before shopping. In addition, selling personnel is specifically trained to know and explain the organoleptic features and the productive history of all the commercialized products. Unlike traditional supermarkets, Eataly make significant efforts to draw clients’ attention to the whole productive chain of agro-food products<sup>21</sup>. Even classic advertising is used to promote the values of eco-gastronomy. As these few examples illustrate, Eataly is not afraid of challenging mainstream supermarkets on ideological ground. To industrialist and consumerist culture, Eataly opposes Slow Food philosophy: a diametrically opposed utopia and yet capable of raising the same enthusiasm and of mobilizing the same energies. On the level of ideology, the gap couldn’t be wider; the clash could not be harsher.

On the other hand, when it comes to practice, Eataly turns out to be much more pragmatic. Recognizing the overwhelming influence of supermarket in modern societies, Eataly refuses to limit to niche distribution channels (such as farmers’ markets or consumers purchasing groups) and is firmly intentioned to challenge mainstream supermarkets on their own ground. Far from addressing to

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<sup>20</sup> On the good, clean and fair mantra see also the homonymous book by Carlo Petrini (2005), founder and president of Slow Food International.

<sup>21</sup> The entrance of the Turin superstore is dominated by a huge poster with the famous Wendell Berry’s saying “eating is an agricultural act”.

a handful of happy few, Eataly is meant to build a real network of mass distribution, competitive in offer and prices. Instead of refusing the entire repertoire of modern distribution techniques, Eataly builds on the idea that some of these techniques may be diverted, hijacked, separated from the ideology of growth and bent to a different logic.

To be sure, we are not saying that supermarkets are neutral tools, impartial instruments that can be used for whatever end. Modern distribution systems developed in symbiosis with growth society and they can be separated from it only through a radical renovation of their organization. There are several components of mass retail that, being impossible to conciliate with eco-gastronomic principles, must be dumped and with no regrets. For example, Eataly will not be able to warrant the same array of products always and everywhere; it will not be able to offer a shelf range as rich as that of mainstream supermarket; it will not be able to compete on discount prices and it will have to renounce to some those products that have no traditional equivalent (precooked or frozen food, snacks...). At the same time, compromises will be necessary on the eco-gastronomy side too. Eataly will not be able to distribute ultra-small and ultra-traditional production such as those who are safeguarded by the Slow Food Presidia<sup>22</sup>. There is a scale below which the organization of supermarkets cannot arrive and that's why alternative distribution mechanisms should be developed as soon as possible. The fact that Slow Food endorse Eataly project, for example, does not mean that the movement do not maintain its commitment in promoting farmer's markets<sup>23</sup>, purchasing groups<sup>24</sup> and self production<sup>25</sup>. In fall 2007, Eataly itself organized and hosted several farmer markets to give consumers the possibility to buy fruits and vegetable directly from their producers<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> The presidia were created in 2000 by Slow Food to safeguard excellent traditional productions, help traditional food community, stabilize and enhance their productive techniques and guarantee them a viable future. Presidia are "small-scale projects protect traditional production methods by supporting producers *in situ* and helping them find markets for traditional foods" ([www.slowfood.com](http://www.slowfood.com)). Currently, Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity is supporting more than 270 projects all over the world.

<sup>23</sup> Slow Food has recently initiated a new project called "Mercati della Terra" (earth markets) meant to organize more than twenty farmers markets in 2008. Besides, all main Slow Food events ("Salone del Gusto", "Cheese", "Slow Fish") involve the presence of small quality producers selling their products directly to consumers.

<sup>24</sup> Many Slow Food Convivia (the local branches of the international movement) are currently organizing little purchasing groups to open a direct trade channel between traditional food communities and modern consumers.

<sup>25</sup> Since 2006, Slow is organizing in Italy and other countries the Orti in Condotta (school gardens) initiative. The idea of this project is that of promoting the opening of vegetable garden in elementary and primary schools in order to familiarize children and families with the possibility of self-growing their food.

<sup>26</sup> The farmers' markets were organized every Sunday of September in the square in front of the Turin supermarket, according to the following rules:

- 1) producers had to be local (from Piedmont or Liguria);
- 2) producers had to sold only their own production;
- 3) products had to be fresh and of high quality;
- 4) prices had to be sustainable;
- 5) producers had to be present at the marketplace.

Have no illusions about that: not every supermarket practice can be reoriented to eco-gastronomy and not every eco-gastronomic aim can be reached through supermarkets. Still, Eataly's example suggests that supermarket techniques, once separated from growth ideology, are not incompatible with de-growth objectives. The extraordinary efficiency attained by the logistic organization of modern distribution chain is not unsustainable *per se*, it becomes unsustainable when it is led by growth philosophy. If disconnected from this philosophy and bended to an opposite ideology, supermarket organization can positively contribute to de-growth campaign. Let me just give you a last example. Returning to a more locally-based diet is certainly a desirable objective. There is no real advantage in eating transcontinental vegetables or selling frozen fish at the other side of the world (other than pumping the growth of transportation industry)<sup>27</sup>. Still, some foods exist that, because of their rarity and easy transportability, have always been traded on an international scale: spices and wine for example. Now, what is crazy in wine international market is not that wine continues to be transported on long distances, but that it is transported within bottles. For every 750 grams of wine, we also ship about 600 grams of glass. All over the world, we transport, trash and recycle millions of bottles that we could just reuse an infinite number of times (given the perfect sterility of glass). To contrast this senseless cycle, Eataly bought two excellent traditional wineries in Piedmont and now is selling their wines from cask, asking consumers to bring their own bottles from home. This initiative goes certainly in the de-growth direction, but is it traditional or modern? Once again it is both. It is traditional because it resumes a traditional selling techniques and it concern traditionally produced wines. It is modern because it utilizes modern technologies and modern procedure to produce and distribute wines as efficiently as possible.

To be sure, no one can say today if Eataly experiment will be successful or not. It is still too early to understand whether Eataly will be capable of facing the competition of mainstream supermarkets without deviating from its eco-gastronomic ideology; whether it will be capable to renovate both modern distribution and traditional productions to make them compatible; whether supermarkets will be enrolled in de-growth. In any case, Eataly's experience is interesting because it reveals that, (at least in the retail sector, modern ideology and modern practices are not inseparable<sup>28</sup> and that we can fight the first while compromising with the second. Successful or not, Eataly's lesson is crucial for de-growth movement for it shows the importance of not confusing utopias and techniques, ideologies and practices. The efficacy of de-growth movement depends crucially on the capacity of maintaining such distinction. We cannot oppose practical and reasonable reforms to growth fanaticism<sup>29</sup> and we cannot oppose philosophical principles to growth daily routines. We cannot be pragmatic with ideology and idealistic with practice. Challenging the *momentum* of modern growth society, de-growth movement has committed to a goal that is as worthy as difficult. The only chance to succeed is being as coherent as possible, opposing to growth culture with an opposite utopia capable of the same ideological appeal

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<sup>27</sup> On the growing globalization of food markets and on the transport cost that this globalization entails, see Halweil, 2004 (pp. 23-40).

<sup>28</sup> For a general discussion of the difference between modern culture and modern practices, see the groundbreaking work of Bruno Latour, *We have never been modern* (1991).

<sup>29</sup> This lack of utopian vision is for example what Nordhaus and Shellenberger (2007) reproach environmentalism for: "the problem is not that people don't see the nightmare, but rather that they do not allow themselves to dream" (p. 271). On the same idea, see also Latour 2008.

and making any effort to compromise and reform modern practices turning them from adversaries into allies.

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