

Sustainable Development and Agency of the Citizen-Consumer: Between Systemic Reflexivity and Common Good

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Abstract

Starting from a critical interpretation of the concepts of sustainable development and green economy, this contribution explores the theoretical and empirical requirements of the agency of the citizen-consumer, in order to highlight the useful elements to inform public and private policies relating to sustainability. In particular, attention is paid to the dialectic between systemic and relational dimensions of political consumerism, trying to show how current policies in support of sustainable consumption tend to emphasize only the individual role of the consumer (in terms of transparency and awareness). The author argues that this interpretation is too restrictive, because it proposes a sort of updated version of the dominant utilitarian paradigm, with no regard to relationship dynamics about "alternative" consumer circuits (also called "collaborative consumption"). These kinds of social experiments help to support sustainable innovation, rethinking the local development model as a way to establish the "common good".

Keywords: sustainable development, green economy, reflexivity, consumer agency, common goods.

Introduction

The current is an era of great change. Maybe it is not that far from the truth to say that we are going through the last great revolution of modernity (in a chronological sense). Not surprisingly, some authoritative scholars speak of a "second modernity" or "radicalised

modernity" (Beck, Giddens, Lash 1994) to characterize recent social developments related, basically, to the process of globalization. The term "radicalised modernity" refers to a finding that the conditions of a linear progress based on the domain of science, technology and rationalization processes, have been pushed to such a level as to trigger adverse reactions of such a wide range as to question the goodness of the model itself. As a result, that "radicalization" of the modernization triggers a deep "reflexive" process in societies that are more exposed to "risks" and it is exactly this process which would project them to a "second modernity" (or, to be precise, "reflexive modernity").

Despite a "risk society" (Beck 1992) maybe having relatively limited ("localized"), risks, risks tend to be perceived, instead, as having global reach¹, therefore the reflective process becomes somewhat "obliged" (Beck speaks about "forced Enlightenment"). In other words, the process of reflexivity tends to present itself as a proportional response of late modern societies to their self-perception and structure as at-risk societies. The growing importance of the issue of sustainability in public debate and in the policies of Governments (national and international) may be considered, upon closer examination, the most immediate and obvious aspect of the process of reflexivity triggered by rising global risks. What we want to highlight is how the trend to reduce the issue of sustainability of the development model at the principle of the so-called "green economy", risks failing to appreciate sufficiently the potential of civil society in terms of collaborative action aimed at the common good. Starting from these considerations, and through a theoretical frame concerning possible declinations of the concept of reflexivity, this work aims to outline the possibilities of the *agency* of the citizen-consumers regarding to opportunities of a sustainable

¹ Namely, if the definition of a risk society depends primarily on the risk perception on the part of a collectivity, where a fundamental role is played by mass media dramatization of the same, the unexpected consequences of the industrial modernisation, like food or environmental risks, have a global reach and affect potentially anyone similarly, according to the classic *butterfly effect*.

development model. The risk is to emphasize only one “systemic” agency so to merely repropose different conditions of the current paradigm of development.

Sustainability and green economy: consumption role and consumer agency

The concept of sustainability has deep roots. The main reference is the famous “Limits to Growth” report commissioned by the Club of Rome in 1972 and the next Brundtland report in 1987, which defined sustainable development as a “development that meets the present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”². That report has historically represented a sort of manifesto of modern environmentalism, focusing mainly on "material" assumptions of economic development and showing, for the first time with scientific rigour, the unsustainability of the senseless exploitation of ecosystem resources over the long term. The concept of sustainable development has been considered for a long time to be “a political strategy of global environment and resource management, of ecological modernization and – at least at the beginning – an attempt to reconcile environmental problems with those of development” (2012 Brand, p. 28).

More recently, public policies have declined these objectives in the concept of *Green economy*³. A concept comparable only in part with that of sustainable development, as it is focused more on the economic aspects of development, technological innovation and investment needs (public and private) in the name of a "*Green New Deal*" (UNEP 2011). The global financial crisis has in fact favoured the accumulation of large amounts of capital,

² The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), headed by the UN, was asked to assess the impact of industrial development on the ecosystem and its possible limits. The final report of the Commission, significantly entitled "Our Common Future", was written in 1987 with the name "Brundtland Report" from the name of Gro Harlem Brundtland, the Coordinator, who in that year was WCED president and commissioned the report. A hypertext version of the report is available online at the following address: <http://www.un-documents.net/wced-ocf.htm> (5/5/2016)

³ The “Rio+20” agenda has adopted the “green economy” as a key theme in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication (UNEP 2011).

which need to find new forms of investment. Redirecting these investments towards sustainable innovation has thus become the main objective of the policies underlying the green economy: restart economic growth and employment, with less impact on the environment.

In fact, the Green economy concept is based on the possibility of reconciling the current economic model with a reduced environmental impact. The goal is an economy that comes to terms with the limited resources (or the lengthy regeneration thereof) and that has to find new ways (renewable) of doing “what it did before”. This objective is synthesized by a “decoupling” concept, which is the ability to invert the connection polarity between economic growth and environmental impact, mainly through more efficient systems of productive processes. Therefore, the fundamental assumption of economic growth would guarantee the opportunity of social equality because the “greening of economies is not generally a drag on growth but rather a new engine of growth; that it is a net generator of decent jobs, and that it is also a vital strategy for the elimination of persistent poverty” (UNEP 2011, p. 3).

The three pillars of sustainability would be guaranteed: economic, environmental and social, with particular emphasis on adequate institutional policy framework, able of directing market mechanisms towards the goals of a Green economy (or “Green growth”). This approach, however, has been criticized on many levels. Some authors had already criticized the concept of sustainable development as an oxymoron, identifying its own development with economic growth (Sachs 1999; Latouche 2001). In the same way, Ulrich Brand (2012) appears sceptical about the concept of a green economy, which risks, he says, being only the “next oxymoron”. According to the Economist Tim Jackson (2009), while admitting the possibility of “relative decoupling” (specific and localized), he has questioned the opportunity of an “absolute decoupling” (global and generalized), stressing the need to

rethink “prosperity”, that is, to consider a social-economic model that looks beyond the mere production of material well-being.

Brand, in fact, argues that the global crisis and growth of international competitiveness are driving a growing national selfishness, thus reinforcing authoritarian policies (rather than transnational), unable to give substance to the prospect of a Green New Deal. Moreover, relying on the paradigm of economic growth, global neo-liberalism endorses benefiting the old and new global elites’ increasing inequalities, while promoting cultural models that encourage an excessive consumerism (Ritzer 1999). In fact consumption, however, becomes a key feature of sustainable development, at least for three good reasons: 1) in Western societies, it is in fact consumption (not production) that supports economic growth (and for this it is constantly stimulated); 2) economic growth in emerging countries (based on low-cost exports) may be sustained and consolidated only by stimulating domestic consumption (China is an example) but this leads to a considerable increase in the need for resources, so accelerating the need for sustainable consumption, and; 3) the loss of sovereignty of National-States and sub-political roles of transnational economic players determines a shift of power relations in favour of the market, within which the consumers’ reflexive role could prevail.

In fact, as highlighted in the first paragraph, the increasing risk perception underlying the unsustainable development model activates reflexive mechanisms which involve not only institutions but (and even before) each of us directly in our own daily lives, including, therefore, the scope of consumption. Accomplice is a certain maturity of the most demanding consumer, socialized to consumption, more demanding, informed and knowledgeable (Fabris 2010), hence more sustainable forms of consumption are becoming increasingly popular in today's Western societies (besides the first type of risk society). Research on green consumption shows how "selfish" factors (mainly risks related to one’s own health and

safety) tend to be reconciled with "altruistic" and "collective" aspects, related to the environment and to a common well-being, the latter is understood no longer in purely materialistic terms. By virtue of this evidence, consumption is beginning to be understood in merely private or hedonistic terms, but (increasingly) "political" or as action directly related to power relationships within (global) society and involving repertoires, more or less explicitly addressed to the common interest.

Political consumerism: in other words, reflexive agency of the contemporary consumer:

The political role conferred to consumers has found its synthesis within the concept of "political consumerism" (Micheletti *et al.* 2004; Micheletti 2006), which usually indicates a certain number of activities and politically oriented actions that, by consumption (or its abstention)⁴, are directed to business entities, causing them to change their policies or logic of production. It is the passing of a certain vision of political action, usually subordinated and directed at State institutions, which are bypassed by referring directly to market institution. The slave/master logic that in early modernity underlay production/work relations, extends, with the second modernity, more deeply into production/consumption relations, with some benefits in favour of the second term.

The renewed role of consumption and consumers in the context of imbalances created by neo-liberal globalisation, are highlighted, moreover, by Ulrich Beck himself (2005), who emphasizes that "not even all-powerful global corporations can make their consumers redundant" (p. 7). Consumers, therefore, with their market "sovereignty" can help to turn towards a green economy. Opting for more sustainable products, consumers encourage companies to engage in actions and sustainable production (green marketing, green products and green supply chains). Moreover, the same public administrations are making efforts to

⁴ The main actions fully recognized within the political consumerism are those of "boycott" and "buy-cott".
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support companies, products and sustainable processes by virtue of their being "collective consumers" (through the *green public procurement*)⁵.

Nevertheless, the concept of political consumerism has several problems or outstanding issues. Firstly, the fact of having purchasing power presupposes an income and this is a discriminating factor that, if referring to salary income, returns us to the production/work dimension (with growing imbalance toward the first term). Also, bear in mind that consumption is not always an expression of wishes or choices; sometimes it may represent a "pressing need". In the end, the question of the political sense of granting consumer action arises, since, in most cases, it is an individualized action, which only indirectly or secondarily, has a collective meaning or dimension (Colloca 2007). One of the key concept of political consumerism is, in fact, that of "individualized collective action", a sort of oxymoron used to emphasize the collective dimension behind an action that, normally, occurs individually.

From this point of view, the growth of sustainable consumption can be viewed as a mere aggregation of individual choices, reflexively solicited in systemic terms (as answers to common risks and their perception). As well as recurring food scares having immediate repercussions on the market sectors involved, the generalised loss of trust and the dramatization of risks related to the current model of industrial development (Beck 1992, 2001) can lead consumers (in the medium and long term) to turn to products and production models considered radically "alternative". These actions are not necessarily coordinated, but

5 UE Commission (2008). *Communication from Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the Sustainable Consumption and Production and Sustainable Industrial Policy Action Plan*. Bruxelles, 16 July. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52008DC0397&from=EN> (last visited: 09/05/2016).

UE Commission (2005). *Misleading green claims: Extract of the Guidance for the implementation/application of Directive 2005/29/EC on unfair commercial practices*. http://ec.europa.eu/environment/archives/eussd/pdf/green_claims/en.pdf (last visited: 09/05/2016).

nevertheless instigate market trends towards greater productive sustainability: one example is the on-going success of the market for organic products (Paltrinieri, Spillare 2014, 2015a, 2015b). However, this is not only the way to actualise the reflexivity of the consumers, and their agency does not end necessarily at the time of purchase.

Reflexivity or reflectivity? What policy, for which consumer agency?

In order to understand the different perspectives of consumer *agency* within sustainable development potentialities, it is perhaps important to specify further the concept of reflexivity. An author like Pierpaolo Donati (2011) proposes, for example, a reinterpretation of the concept of reflexivity in the light of a "relational paradigm", separating "reflexivity" itself from that called by Donati "reflectivity", belonging to social systems. According to Donati, systems, although endowed with a unique diagnostic and prognostic form, "do not have and cannot have a conscience as it is that of the human person" (Donati 2011 p. 136). Therefore, reflexivity is a feature belonging to individuals and relationships, not to social systems. It should be understood as the ability of independent thought and as the opportunity "located" in relations between individuals and groups in connection. Such a feature, therefore, does not belong to systems, which have mechanical and limited reflexive ability, only capable of performing "what is expected from the instructions and rules with which the system was built" (Donati 2011, p. 136).

Just like the classic economic paradigm provides that, in case of individual utility maximization, the market system (with its norms and institutions) provides for the optimal allocation of scarce resources, so the "systemic" reflectivity, produced by global risks, would act to condition the perceived utility of individuals, resulting in the promotion of sustainable resources. In Donati's terms, instead, reflexivity in sustainable consumption should be referred to a rather special form of social relationship mediated or incurred by consumption,

as in the so-called "collaborative consumption" (Botsmann, Rogers 2010). In such cases, these groups or social networks, formal or informal, gather around precise consumption practices in order to support, develop and implement alternative economic forms, in which the concept of relationship and the "common good" becomes central.

Collaborative consumption as participatory and creative agency

Collaborative consumption refers to the sharing economy concept, a kind of buzzword that brings together a wealth of different experiences often originating in "dis-intermediate" processes in providing services. This process takes place thanks to a cultural and functional trend to move from the possession of the goods to their access and the opportunity, infinitely increased by Internet, of a horizontal communication and peer-to-peer collaboration (Rifkin 2001; Botsman, Rogers 2010). Rainie and Wellman (2014) talk about a "social operating system" based on the paradigm of "networked individualism" thanks to which people can extend their network of relationships, exchanging goods and/or services for free (or however they prefer) within a framework of reciprocity that goes beyond the mere market approach. Examples include bartering, lending, peer-to-peer trading, tool exchanges, Couchsurfing, bike sharing and many more.

Very often, however, the sharing economy is reduced to an advanced form of "platform capitalism", in which the horizontality of exchanges between users corresponds to a verticalization of the receipts by the developers of the same platforms. Users are reduced to "prosumers", which are at the same time consumers – users of services and producers of economic value for third parties (Ritzer, Jurgenson 2010; Degli Esposti 2015). Furthermore, the ethical dimension, namely the reference to collective value of sharing practices, risks being tarnished by the prevalence of a mere mutual interest that is exhausted in the exchange, without developing anything truly "in common" (on-demand economics). For this reason, by the concept of "collaborative consumption" we want to refer to models in which relationships

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take a central role because the processing of an alternative economic and social model achieves centrality.

In light of the growing "organised irresponsibility" due to a "sub-politicization of science" (Beck 2000) increasing importance is placed not only on the ability to provide impossible certainties, but rather the ability to create trusting relationships. For this reason, there is a tendency to switch from one systemic confidence to an "active trust", expressed in a participatory way (Beck 2005) and realized, quite often, in community-based, local economic systems. In these systems, starting from participation, people create bonds of reciprocity and cooperation between consumers, as well as between consumers and producers. It is especially in these collaborative consumption patterns that political consumerism "may be seen as a reservoir of values and attitudes that can generate social cohesion" (Colloca 2007). Examples of these are barter markets, farmer's markets, Alternative Agro-Food Networks (AAFNs), energy communities and, more generally, social economy and third sector networks based on voluntary associations and inspired by values of sustainability (usually explicit). The latter, in particular, are expressions of solidarity and integration.

These types of initiatives shape what Stefano Zamagni defines as the "Civil economy" (Zamagni 1996; Bruni, Zamagni 2007), whose assumptions are completely antithetic to the capitalist model (for-profit model) and are referred to as the optimal management of what is usually considered the "common good". Optimal management does not mean, in this case, achieving the highest possible efficiency, as in the rationalistic paradigm of market capitalism subtended by implication also to the concept of the green economy. Optimal management of the "common good" means rather making sure that the good (or goods) which is the object exchanged (food, water, energy, services, etc.) really represent a collective good. This almost tautological process cannot be taken for granted and represents the ultimate goal of the civil economy (Zamagni 2008). The pursuit of this goal is what gives form and substance to the

necessity of thinking and making models of alternative economy, enabling also the proposal of new models for sustainable development.

Conclusions: appropriate policy to support a participatory agency of consumption

The global context, with its contradictions and its increasing systemic risks, imposes on economically developed societies more and more urgent reflexive forms. The social and environmental crisis connected to the current development model highlights an afterthought of the same towards its sustainability. The concept of sustainable development is practically expressed through the hypothesis of a shift towards a green economy able to support economic growth by decreasing environmental and social impact. Such an opportunity is based mainly on improving the efficiency of production processes and at the same time reducing, for example, climate-impacting emissions (sometimes this effect is itself a function of energy efficiency).

Some authors have expressed scepticism about the real possibilities of implementing the necessary shift towards a green economy, questioning even the real significance of it and stressing the need to consider, for example, the principle of "enough" instead of mere "efficiency". The risk appears to be that the dominant concept of the green economy tends to replay a systemic model focused on economic growth, merely corrected by attempting *decoupling* ("smart growth" model). Within this paradigm, the role and the agency of consumers risks being considered in the same classic economic actor terms, too (*homo economicus*): just a different variation of the classic utilitarianism (Sanne 2002, pp. 275 and 276). Consumer behaviour is expressed, in fact, on individual terms, and only then recomposed – if adequately supported by public policies – in the terms of the collective interest.

Here, consumer agency is seen in the light of the paradigm of systemic “reflectivity” described in this essay. In this directive, the main public policies relating to the role of sustainable consumption (national and international) tend to also guarantee, in addition to the actual sustainability of products (guarantee of production), their recognisability and transparency towards consumers (certification and labelling). This is as much as possible a “conscious” consumption (supported by awareness-raising and information campaigns), repressing the attempts of *green washing* (misleading communication). As an alternative to this paradigm, there is the recognition that risks and perversions of the economic system, combined with the crisis of legitimacy and sovereignty of National-States, are leading to reconsideration of the taking charge of traditional public goods by local authorities and organized local communities, with a view to participation in the management of the “commons” (Ostron 1990; Zamagni 2008).

In this case, there is a need to reconsider the same assumptions of development, through the progressive elaboration of an “ecological citizenship” (Dobson 2004) which provides for the democratization of the concepts of well-being and social quality (Brand 2011; Jackson 2011). In this sense, consumers' reflexivity results in a collaborative agency able to adapt to the best answers to the economic, social and environmental peculiarities of local contexts (Seyfang 2006; Lockie S. *et al.* 2006; Fonte 2013; Paltrinieri, Spillare 2014, 2015a, 2015b). In public policy, the matter of local contexts for sustainable development is explicit, for example, in the Local Agenda 21 project of the European Union and, with particular reference to sustainable consumption, in the technical report prepared for the European Commission concerning policies to encourage sustainable consumption⁶. This last report takes into account some community-based cooperative movements to produce energy

⁶ BIO Intelligence Service (2012). *Policies to encourage sustainable consumption*. Final report prepared for the European Commission (DG ENV). http://ec.europa.eu/environment/eussd/pdf/report_22082012.pdf (latest visit: 09/05/2016).

as well as the movement of Transition Town. Nevertheless, the supranational policy still struggles to comprehend and aggregate these kinds of approaches, and this is due to the tendency to consider consumer agency within an almost exclusively systemic approach rather than a relational framework.

Nevertheless, even in systemic and functional terms, collaborative consumption and the "economic civiness" forms can be shown to have the important role of resisting an initial inefficiency of certain markets by placing shared values above economic relations aspects. It is the type of support that has probably been made possible by, for example, the current market success of organic food and farming, now fully integrated into global markets, but stimulated, initially, by a small movement of farmers and a few consumer groups resolute in supporting them.

This shows how the prevalence of market logic threatens to flatten public policies in support of organic consumption within the paradigm of systemic reflexivity (a global market based on bureaucratic certifications), without considering the participatory and collaborative reflexivity of consumers and producers in local areas (Spillare 2016). In these contexts, the agency of the consumer extends well beyond the mere purchasing choice to include a civic engagement of citizen-consumers, which allows them to recover their establishing power and carry out new experiments in the field of economic and social development, now based on a renewed Shared Social Responsibility (SSR). In this sense, the concept of shared social responsibility maybe seems more promising as a support for participative and collaborative consumer agency.

Mark Davis (2011) in particular has re-interpreted the meaning of "responsible consumption" as different from a "green consumption" or an "ethical" one. According to Davis, responsible consumption "...represents a belief that there is an urgent need to perceive our actions, our consumer choices, not just individually, but also socially, co-operatively" (p.

85). Thus, responsible consumption goes beyond a systemic and individualistic paradigm, that is, moving to the marketing-oriented level, to explore more social, co-operative and community-based solutions. Responsible consumption is constructed as a collaborative consumption based on the responsibility principle, able to develop “socially responsible consumer networks, to support ‘co-production’ of goods and services that will meet specific local needs” (Davis 2011, p. 87). The final aim is to move “towards a ‘post-consumerist’ future in which we may make use of all our creativity, capabilities and skills and not simply our ability to shop” (Davis 2011, p. 87). As Davis suggests, the first crucial step is “to consider reframing the responsibilities of the individual as those of society, shifting the emphasis to include social structure in explaining the cause of (and solutions to) the issue of sustainability” (2011, p. 90).

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