

## Lektioita

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# The Visible Hands

## An Ethnographic Inquiry into the Emergence of Food Collectives as a Social Practice for Exchange

**Lectio Praecursoria**

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### The roots

When I was a little girl, I would spend hours of time at my grandmothers' allotment garden collecting parsley, cilantro and dill, picking up berries and harvesting carrots, among other crops and vegetables. The next day, we would travel to a local marketplace on three different buses to sell what we'd collected during the previous day. I would praise the taste of our herbs, berries and vegetables to people approaching our tiny little stand, learn to bargain, count the change and walk around to compare our produce with that of others' who all seemed like grandmothers to me. In the end of the day, I would come to my grandmother's home exhausted, but happy to count the money and not so happy about knowing that I will have the unsold harvest on my dinner plate again in the evening.

This was right before the Soviet Union collapsed and not so long before Finland joined the EU. The allotment garden was called *dacha*, and the elderly women selling their produce at the local marketplace were called *babushki*.

Some 25 years later, I traveled to a totally different city in Russia and, as part of a research project I was engaged in, I visited a local marketplace. Instead of finding *babushki* selling *their produce*, I found men and women selling *someone else's produce*. We soon discovered that many people felt, that not only when buying food from a grocery store, but also when going to the local marketplace, one did no longer know where the food came from or how it had been produced. Above all, people did not trust the quality and the safety of food.

What struck me most, was that in two decades a relatively self-sufficient regional food system, in which local produce was sold in local shops and marketplaces, had disappeared and was replaced by supermarkets with supplies heavily relying on imports. Now, *I am not saying* that a regulated closed economy is better than a globally open market economy, but what *I am saying* is that the concerns that people had in Russia due to these changes were not unique but, in fact, an increasing number of people in different countries all over the world shared similar kinds

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of concerns about losing control over the food they ate (Holt Giménez and Shattuck, 2011; Pollan, 2010).

Upon starting my research, I was driven by several paradoxes related to food. We lived – and still live – at a time when there is an unprecedented abundance of food and yet, millions of people are starving daily; the shelves of the supermarkets are filled with thousands of items and yet, many people feel that they have only bad choices; the price of food always seems too high for the consumer and yet, it is oftentimes so low that farmers can barely earn a living; packaging informs us about famous brand names and countries of origin and yet, we barely know anything about the people who produce our food, or the animals we eat.

Surrounded by these paradoxes, and troubled by the concerns about our food system – that also people here in Finland shared – I found myself asking: how do people address these issues collectively?

What I found was that people organize. Or, I could also say re-organize.

## Organization around food

From the beginning of our time, people have organized around food. Hunter-gatherers moved to more fertile areas in the search of food, learning over time to tame both plants and animals. This enabled people to settle down and organize their growing communities around agriculture and farming. Over time, the production, processing, distribution and consumption of food have undergone a radical transformation and become what we now call the conventional food system (Friedmann, 1982; 1993).

Today, this system is contested on many fronts. People are more aware of the environmental and ethical problems caused by industrial food production but similarly, food scandals and the accumulated power of big corporations have made the reliability of the food industry and the expert systems that govern market transaction suspect. This has given rise to alternative ways of organizing emerging alongside the conventional food system (See e.g. Allen and Wilson, 2008; Goodman et al., 2012). Examples are farmer's markets, community supported agriculture, food co-ops, community gardens and initiatives alike. Food collectives that I studied for my doctoral dissertation provide one such example of re-organizing the way exchange of food happens.

I came across food collectives at the beginning of the year 2010. A food collective, in Finnish *ruokapiiri*, refers to a group of people who procure organic and local food directly from various farmers and distribute it among the participating households. Food collectives are operated entirely on a volunteer and non-for-profit basis, and they engage several people in buying and selling food without formal organizations or contracts. This all made me curious about how these groups managed to create and sustain something that did not appear to be an obvious approach to the exchange of food. Ultimately, a question that was continuously brought up on various occasions throughout my journey would not leave me alone: why on earth would you take so much trouble to get food, when you can just go to the supermarket for everything you need?

Now, I am going to spoil a bit the excitement, and give you the answer right away. The answer is, actually, quite simple. Because you can't. People participating in food collectives don't believe they can get everything they need in the supermarket because food collectives, as I later discovered, are not merely about *food*, but also, and equally, about *a collective*. Let me come back to this at the end of my lectio.

## Social practice approach to emergent economic organization

At the time I started my study, food collectives were a relatively unknown phenomenon and only emerging as a form of organizing the exchange of food. Therefore, there were practically no archival data available. Hence, in my dissertation, ethnography has been the guiding principle for doing qualitative research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; Van Maanen, 1979). In practice, in order to familiarize myself with the functioning of food collectives, this has

meant participating in the daily activities of food collectives for extended periods of time, observing and asking questions regarding people's everyday lives *as they participate* in food collectives, reflecting on experiences and happenings, and collecting multiple types of data occurring relevant at the time and in the process of the research. Altogether, I studied over 20 food collectives around the country.

Theoretically, in order to better understand the everyday aspects and be able to *theorize from within the practices of food collectives*, I adopted a social practice approach.

With social practice approach, I refer to a conceptual framework that places practices in the center of both empirical and theoretical analysis (Gherardi, 2012; Orlikowski, 2010). Since the turn of the millennium, practice theory has re-emerged as a salient framework for understanding organizational phenomena (Miettinen et al., 2009; Schatzki et al., 2001). While the turn to practice in the field of organization and management studies is rather recent, practice theories have long roots that can be traced to traditions of philosophy, anthropology and sociology with reference to the writings of, for instance, Wittgenstein and Heidegger, Ortner and Mauss, Giddens and Bourdieu.

While there is no uniform practice theory, the basic assumption underlying social practice approach is that *the social* is situated in practices rather than in cognition, or structures (Schatzki, 2001; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011). In other words, social practice approach directs one to focus on action, on how something is done in practice. What makes the task of studying practices difficult though, is that there exists no uniform definition of a practice. In research, scholars with differing research tasks and interests tend to operationalize the concept and theories of practice in very different ways (see e.g. Gherardi, 2000; Kemmis, 2009; Reckwitz, 2002) and it is not unusual for scholars to empirically study practices without necessarily defining what they mean by a practice.

If articulated in layman's terms, the notion practice may refer to (i) exercising a profession, like that of a doctor or a lawyer. Practice may further refer to (ii) an activity or a method by which something is learned or skills are obtained through repetition. Finally, as the central concept of a social practice approach, practice refers broadly speaking to – and I quote here Silvia Gherardi (2016: 686) – (iii)“collective knowledgeable doing”. Let's unpack Gherardi's wording.

First, it suggests that practices are collective. This means that practices are somehow shared; they are not merely actions of an individual performed in isolation. Rather, they are more widely recognized patterns of action. Cooking, cycling or teaching are examples of such practices that we all know of and collectively recognize despite the level of our personal engagement in these practices. This brings us to the second part of Gherardi's quote, knowledgeable doing. This means that it is not enough to know of, or to recognize a practice, but participating in a practice requires doing something and doing that something in a knowledgeable way, like being able to prepare a vegetarian meal, ride a bike in Amsterdam, or teach a class full of management students.

Now, unpacking practice as “collective knowledgeable doing” brings one to conclude that we as participants in practices, become subject to certain *collectively recognized ways of knowing and doing*.

Social practice approach emphasizes that such ways of knowing and doing are embodied, materially mediated and contextual (Gherardi, 2001; Nicolini, 2012). For example, during a class a teacher uses her body, tools and the space when standing or sitting behind a teacher's desk, or when showing distinct types of organizational structures from PowerPoint-slides. But how and why things happen, and people act and react in certain ways is not at all random.

Like why the teacher is showing organizational structures on a PowerPoint rather than performing them by dancing, or why the students are sitting in their chairs opposing the teacher and listening, instead of lying on the floor or presenting their own PowerPoint slides? To a certain extent, these actions and reactions are prescribed. In other words, practices consist of certain rationales, a set of assumptions and elements, that assign roles, provide a script for how things are done around here, and ultimately produce what is considered as good, or as bad (MacIntyre, 2008; Gherardi, 2009; 2011).

While previous researches studying practices have primarily focused on well-established practices (Gomez and Bouty, 2011; Miettinen et al., 2012), I found myself in the midst of an emergent practice. There were barely any codes of conduct or script to follow, assigned roles or best practices to benchmark. Due to the nature of this phenomenon, the aim of my research has been primarily to conceptualize and to describe food collectives.

### Conceptualizing exchange as a social practice

Adopting a social practice approach led me to conceptualize food collectives as a social practice for exchange. This way, exchange, became one of the central concepts in my study. In simple terms, economic exchange refers to actions, interactions and transactions enabling giving something and receiving something in return (Bell, 1991; Biggart and Delbridge, 2004). Within the current market economy, the medium of exchange and the measurement for value is money (Graeber, 2011). However, anthropological and economic sociological research that I mobilized, provide a more complex understanding of exchange at the core of which appear reproduction of social and material relationships, and formation of different types of interactional orders (Graeber, 2001; Mauss, 1954; Weber et al., 2008; Zelizer, 2000).

In my empirical essays I have studied these issues. As a whole, my dissertation tells a story of how do practices, exchange practices in particular, emerge and become organized over time. The first essay looks into the founding of new food collective organizations, the creation of relationships between the farmers and the households, and the formation of different practices in food collectives. While the first essay focuses on the process of emergence, the other two essays look more closely into interactional orders.

The second essay focuses on the temporal ordering effects of social practices, and examines rhythmicity in the organization of food collectives. In food collectives, rhythms are very different compared to the conventional supermarket exchange. When moving away from long distribution chains towards direct and locally embedded exchange relations, people have to, for instance, learn that the supply of produce is always uncertain and that local produce is not available 24/7, all year round, and during every season.

The third essay, in turn, helps us understand the formation of value and what people hold as good. For instance, it demonstrates how, in food collectives, dirty carrots become pure carrots and how, only one choice becomes the best choice. Thus, what the mainstream food practices sustain as rational, convenient and good, in the context of food collectives, become irrational, inconvenient and unwanted.

Together, the empirical studies suggest that food collectives, as a social practice for exchange, emerged *primarily through doing* and not so much through framing the meaning of what was being done. People discovered and managed their practices as they unfolded in everyday interactions, rather than strategically planned beforehand.

### Concluding words

So, what can I say based on my research? I want to come back to what I brought up in the beginning of this lectio, namely *the collective* in food collectives. I wish to leave you with three thoughts to consider and take-away with you.

First, food collectives as *a collective form of exchange* not only enable people to buy and sell organic and local food, but essentially create relationships among people. There exist various reasons for why people participate in food collectives, but relationships are one of them. Numerous people told me that getting to know one's neighbors as well as farmers, connecting with other parents in the area, or being able to share recipes and other information about food appeared to them as significant drivers in food collectives.

Second, as a social practice for exchange, *food collectives create a space* in which abnormal and alternative becomes normal and conventional. I want to quote here one of the leaders of food collectives who, in the middle of describing the practicalities of their food collective, found herself explaining to me:

*“Why is it, that it is organic that is different? Somehow people think that those who want to buy and eat organically produced local food are either these peace and love guys or some rich people. But why don’t we turn this all the other way around? That organic wouldn’t be some special way of farming but the normal way of producing food. Why do we need to separately justify what is being done [more] in the organic farming like that it requires a lot of manual work, and doesn’t include putting chemicals into animals or into the land? Maybe, we need to start explaining and justifying that what is being done to the food and to the animals in the intensive farming?”* (Founder-coordinator)

Finally, as opposed to demanding the individual be responsible, like expecting consumers to make conscious and informed choices through their purchases, *food collectives as a social practice bring forth a collective type of responsibility*. The idea of food collectives is that we should hold the exchange practice responsible rather than expecting the individual to be responsible for choosing out of good and bad options.

In the midst of a world, where our societies rely on economic growth, reproduction of capitalism and organizing for profits, food collectives have given me hope of a more just and ecologically viable way of organizing. But can food collectives, or any other exchange practice alike, survive within such powerful system? I wish I knew the answer to this question.

As I stand here before you, many food collectives have ceased to exist, some new ones have been founded and alternatives to food collectives have been born. Sustaining alternative exchange practices such as food collectives are is not an easy task. Not everyone wants to know their neighbours, spend one’s free time distributing food, or trying to figure out what to cook from a limited selection of root vegetables in the middle of the winter. People want to eat bananas too.

What I can say is that despite all the struggles, new practices can be created and that old ones are not forever stable. Some practices live longer, some die faster, some change their form and transform others. We, as humans, are conditioned by our everyday practices and the material environment, time and space we live in. But, as my dissertation has shown we, as humans, have also the power to create new practices that allow for new meanings and actions – *a new kind of collective knowledgeable doing* – to emerge. This may be hard, but it is not impossible.

If we can’t shake the invisible hand of the markets, we can at least try to shake the hands that feed us.

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