To Eat an Idea

On the transformative potential of engaging with local cereal in a mountain territory

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Abstract

This study investigates the values expressed and implemented through local cereal and cereal-related products such as bread and flour in the alpine region of Valle d'Aosta (north-west Italy), contributing to the existing body of literature on food values. It is based on anthropological fieldwork among people engaging with cereal both professionally and non-professionally (such as bakers, farmers, agronomists and other categories of people involved in the cereal sector) and on theories drawn from food and economic anthropology, anthropological theories of value and literature on social movements. This research aims at understanding the values that inform cereal-related practices in Valle d'Aosta and that precede the relationships its inhabitants generate around cereal. Such values are intended as moral standpoints from which people engaging with cereal organise their action and conceptualise their own understanding of their practices. Values of tradition, community and individual place identity, health, environmental and socio-economic values serve as spectacles through which to grasp the vision that people engaging with cereal in Valle d'Aosta have of society, of the role of the economy, of the relationship between the community and the individual. Ultimately, cereal-related practices, based on a particular conception of the economy which puts into question the neoliberal system, are represented as tools bridging past, present and future, as the past serves as a source of inspiration to bring about a better future and to materialise it into the present, through a deeply moral endeavour.

Keywords: Valle d'Aosta, values, cereal, bread, political economy, sustainability, past-present-future.

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Notes on the Senses

These photographs represent aspects of cereal-related activities in Valle d'Aosta linked to the traditional practice of *pan ner* bakes, reconstructing some of the steps in the process of production of bread from field to baked loaf. Through this collection of pictures and their captions, I aim at providing readers with bite-sized pieces of information, which are unrelated to the main argumentation I develop in the thesis, but which could inspire the readers' visualisation of the field.

Unfortunately, people engaging with cereal professionally are under-represented in this collection of pictures. I also preferred not to show people's faces for questions of privacy, thus missing the opportunity of showing the inherently social character of *pan ner* baking gatherings.

In order to create a multisensorial representation of the field, it was my intention to complement the opposition of this thesis with tastings of bread baked from cereal grown in Valle d'Aosta. Unfortunately, due to Covid-19 this has not been possible and I leave it to the readers' imagination to guess the surprising taste of this cereal.

TO EAT AN IDEA

The American Standard translation orders men to triumph over sin, and you can call sin ignorance. The King James translation makes a promise in 'Thou shalt,' meaning that men will surely triumph over sin. But the Hebrew word, the word timshel—'Thou mayest'—that gives a choice. It might be the most important word in the world. That says the way is open. That throws it right back on a man. For if 'Thou mayest'—it is also true that 'Thou mayest not.'

John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*

We should return to laws of this kind. Then there must be more care for the individual, his life, his health, his education (which is, moreover, a profitable investment), his family, and their future. There must be more good faith, more sensitivity, more generosity in contracts dealing with the hiring of services, the letting of houses, the sale of vital foodstuffs.

Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*

Rye field in Vetan, Saint-Pierre (1800 m a.m.s.l.)

Rye, a resistant cereal which can grow at high altitudes, has a privileged place in the imaginary of Valle d'Aosta.
Courtesy of Gianfranco Perrotta

In the title page:
Wheat field in Bonne, Valgrisence (1800 m a.m.s.l.)

Many non-professional growers cultivate small patches of land for the pleasure of doing it and to procure flour for their families. Some of these growers still harvest grains by hand, even though traditional sickles have largely been replaced by mechanical harvesters.
Courtesy of Mario Béthaz

Introduction

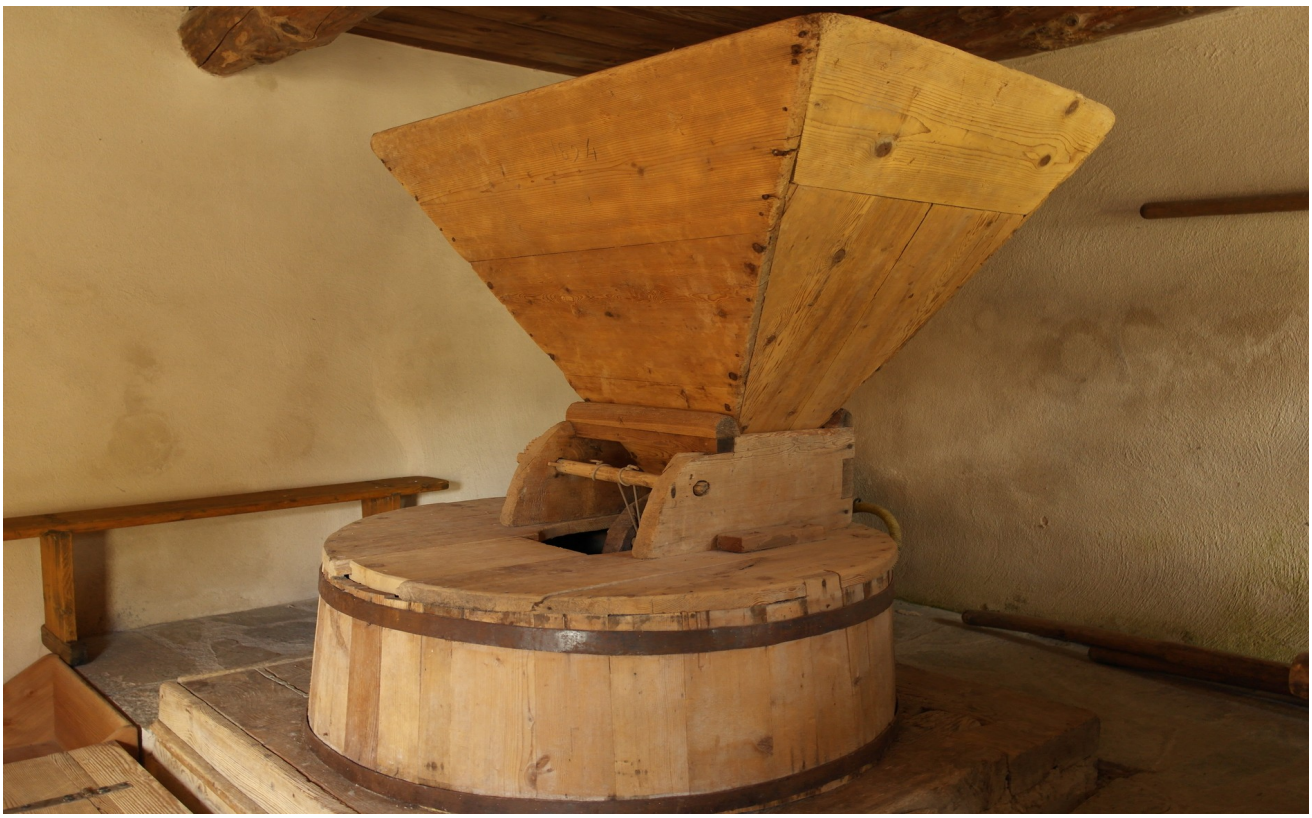
Food is life. But food is not just a biological necessity: it plays an important role in our sense of identity, in our way of reflecting about our communities, on making bonds with other people. Food also goes hand in hand with politics, and it has been used as a tool for social control, but also for social liberation. Social movements and individuals all over the world are now starting to claim food as a privileged site for political action, and as a tool to work toward change on many different fronts, from climate justice to health concerns, from struggles for food sovereignty to decolonisation battles, from social inclusion to animal and nature's rights. In the West, bread is conceived as the food par excellence. It has been a staple food for centuries in Europe, and it carries a high symbolic value, which also acquires spiritual and religious connotations. Bread is what brings people together, it is the stuff of life. And bread can also be seen as a lens through which to address broader problems, concerns that affect both the food sector and society as a whole.

The purpose of this study, which aims at contributing to the existing body of literature on food values (c.f. Counihan and Siniscalchi 2013; Grasseni 2014; Siniscalchi and Harper 2019), is to explore bread and cereal as sites for the expression and implementation of deep values, and as spectacles through which to address broader questions such as the role of the individual and of the economy towards society. I will base my discussion on material collected during anthropological fieldwork among people who revolve around the world of locally grown cereal in Valle d'Aosta (Italian Alps), working at the intersection between food (Mintz and Du Bois 2002) and economic anthropology (Graeber 2001; Pratt and Luetchford 2013) and focusing on the experiences of professional and non-professional producers. Although these experiences are not organised in a movement, I will also draw on literature on activism (Shukaitis and Graeber 2007; Graeber 2009; Krøijer 2015), as I find that these projects can be interpreted as attempts at reshaping the world in a way that can remind the aims and methods of social movements.

My research question can be subdivided in two main parts. First, starting from the assumption that any economic activity is always the outcome of the combination of a set of values, economic value and search for profit being only one possible value among others, I set out to

the field with the intention of identifying and understanding the values that inform people's choice of engaging with local cereal in this region. Second, basing my research primarily on anthropological theories of value (mainly, Graeber 2001), I considered the significance that cereal values have in relation to the broader society, interpreting them both as the outcome of social change and as a tool to work toward further change. In this thesis I will thus explore some of the values linked to cereal-related projects in Valle d'Aosta and their relation to society, starting from people's actions and words around the theme of cereal to attempt an understanding of my interlocutors' moral and political stance in relation to the economy and to the role of the individual in society.

This thesis will be so structured. In the first chapter, I will set the bases to understand the discussion that will follow in the main body of the text, outlining a background, discussing methods, and presenting the main theories on which I will build my argumentation in later chapters. In chapters two through four, I will combine the two aspects of my research question, discussing particular values alongside a consideration on how they relate to society. Thus, the second chapter will focus on the meaning that growing and baking local cereal in Valle d'Aosta has in relation to the past, and how this relates to the present. Values of individual and community place identity, collective memory, and the role of humans in the ecology of the Valley will serve as examples for this discussion. The third chapter will move from a focus on the past to a focus on the future, analysing how these forms of engagement with cereal can be seen as a comment on social structures. Values of care for human heath and for the environment will substantiate my hypothesis that these practices can be seen as a critique of society stemming from a shift in values, and can thus be considered at the same time as a way to work towards and as an outcome of social change. In the fourth chapter, socio-economic values will be the starting point for a discussion on the political and moral implications of these practices. I will suggest that these activities are based on a particular conception of the economy, and on an imagined model of society which my informants aim at materialising and communicating to their communities. Finally, the fifth chapter is an attempt at suggesting some implications that reflecting on cereal-related practices in Valle d'Aosta may have for anthropological theory and for our understanding of the economy and of productive processes writ large, discussing some of the consequences that my interlocutors' conception of these processes may have on the way we conceive of and represent the economy beyond this particular context.



Water-mill in Planaval, Arvier

Traditionally, in Valle d'Aosta grains were turned into flour in water-mills. Like ovens, often water-mills were communal resources, collectively owned and maintained by the members of a community.
Courtesy of Gildo Vuillen and Remo Béthaz

I

Preliminary Information

Background, methods and theory

The aim of this chapter is to introduce my research, providing necessary information to understand the argumentation that I will build along the next chapters. First, I will outline the background of my field, sketching some notions about the geography, history and politics of Valle d'Aosta, with particular attention to the cereal sector. Second, I will discuss the methods I adopted during fieldwork and comment on my position as a researcher. Last, I will present the main theories that inform my discussion, which will serve as a base to analyse and represent the experiences of the people I engaged with in the field.

Background[1]

I conducted fieldwork between November 2019 and January 2020 in Valle d'Aosta (also referred to as "the Valley"), in the North-West section of the Italian Alps. Politically, Valle d'Aosta is an autonomous region with a special statute and legislative power. The Valle d'Aosta Autonomous Region is an administrative as well as a political body, benefitting from a certain degree of independence from the Italian state. The territory of the Valley is mainly mountainous and of high altitude, and its fields are small, steep and hardly mechanisable: this geographical conformation does not make of Valle d'Aosta a particularly well-suited place for agriculture, and especially not for intensive, industrial monoculture.

Until the beginning of the twentieth century the region's economy was based on subsistence agriculture. Wealthier families owned bigger extensions of land, but on average even poorer families were independent and lived off the work of their land, which was either private or collectively-owned. Thus, people used to have some degree of autonomy, and autonomy and self-determination are values that are still significant today. Animal husbandry has been a

1 Information on the politics and geography of the Valley can be found on the Valle d'Aosta Autonomous Region's website (www.regione.vda.it), while I received data on the extension of crops throughout the years from one of my informants, a technician at the Region's Agriculture Department. The historical background summarised here can be found in the work of Careggio (2004), and has been narrated to me several times with very few variations by different informants.

fundamental aspect of Valdôtain identity for centuries and it remains the leading sector in agriculture, but cultivation was significant too. The relationship between cereal and Valdôtains goes a long way back in time, and there is archaeological evidence that cereal was grown in this territory at least as far as 2500 BC (Rubinetto et al. 2014:928). Cereals, and in particular rye but also wheat, maize and barley, were a staple crop, covering about 8000 hectares in 1900. Rye was preferred because it grows at high altitudes, is resistant to cold temperatures, doesn't need to be watered and has low maintenance requirements. Indeed, after having prepared the soil and sowed the grains in autumn, the cereal is left alone until the harvest, in the late summer-early autumn of the next year, with no need of human intervention during the whole life-cycle of the plant. Harvesting is a heavy and time-consuming job, but labour force used to be abundant and cooperation between families allowed harvests to happen on time.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, with the improvement of the socio-economic conditions of the population due to the opening of new job opportunities in emerging sectors such as industry, tourism and public administration, coupled with growing emigration rates and the introduction of cheaper imported flour, the cultivation of cereals was gradually abandoned, until when, some twenty years ago, interest in local cereals started to grow again. A project led by technicians from the Region's Agriculture Department[2] and by technicians and agronomists from the *Institut Agricole Régional* (IAR, Regional Agriculture Institute[3]) saved several local varieties of wheat, rye, maize and barley. European and Regional funds were allocated to recover traditional collective wood-fired ovens and water mills (while many ovens were actually put back into function, unfortunately most mills were refurbished for historical purposes only, and cannot be used). The *Bureau Régional Ethnographique et Linguistique* (BREL, Regional Office for Ethnography and Linguistics) organised a region-wide event which is held each year in October to promote the tradition of the autumn bake of *pan ner* (literally "black bread", a traditional bread made from low-hydration, low-fermented rye and wheat in varying proportions, baked in collective wood-fired ovens), which has always been an important social event, gathering whole villages to bake and spend a moment of conviviality.

2 Their task is mainly to provide farmers with technical support and and to supervise the conditions of the sector.

3 IAR conducts applied research in fields such as agronomy and economy in Valle d'Aosta, to improve the conditions of the agriculture sector. Beside its research activity, IAR is also a school offering agriculture courses for teenagers and adults.

Interest grew among farmers as well, and the area cultivated with cereals increased from about 5.5 hectares in 2009, to 22 ha in 2014, to 31 ha in 2018, divided among about 90 small-scale farms. It is significant to note that these data only refer to registered surfaces, cultivated by professionals: to these the technician I spoke to estimates it would be appropriate to add another 6 ha cultivated by 150-160 non-professional growers owning about 200-300 m² each. Animal husbandry remains the main agricultural activity in Valle d'Aosta, but the cultivation of crops is also present and my informants hope that this growing interest in cereals will become an opportunity to diversify revenues and expand the agriculture sector in a sustainable way.

Growing cereals is not a particularly labour-intensive and time-consuming activity, and it does not require high investments at the beginning. Recovering the traditional system of biennial crop rotation (potato-wheat/rye or maize-wheat/rye), farmers can minimise the use of chemicals: wheat or rye feed on the residual fertilisers left from the previous crop, while rotating botanical families reduces the presence of weeds and pests. However, due to the geological and climatic conditions of the region, yields are low. Most of the fields that were once used for cereals are not easily accessible and are hard to mechanise. Additionally, the absence of a registered public flour mill in the region makes it necessary for those producers who do not own a mill to move out of the Valley to have their grains milled. All these factors drastically increase the production costs of flour. However, even though cereal will never be a cash crop in this region, interest in cultivating and using local grains is growing nonetheless, not for necessity as it was in the past, but for other reasons, which I set out to investigate.

Discussion on methods and their efficacy

The people

With this background in mind, I decided to get in touch with people from different categories. I engaged with: owners and employees from two bread bakeries, in one of which bakers are also growing and milling their own grains; people from one family business which combines a bakery specialised on biscuits with a farm producing mainly maize; one beer brewer; one chef; three professional farmers; one technician for the Region's Agriculture Department; several technicians and researchers for the IAR; one independent agronomist; four amateur growers and their families; the organiser of the *Lo Pan Ner* transnational baking event for one

local municipality; and one administrator at the BREL. Engaging with such a variety of people allowed me not only to gather different perspectives, but also to better understand each of these categories thanks to information provided by the others. The people I spoke to were mainly middle aged men, all of them were Italian and the vast majority had Valdôtain origins. I noted some variations in gender and age, as a few of my informants were women and I spoke with both retired people and younger people in their twenties to thirties, although these are aspects that I will not investigate further in my thesis.

The cereal sector in Valle d'Aosta is a marginal economic activity which does not involve many people, in a region which is itself a rather small geographic and social reality. People often know about one another and in such a setting anonymity is literally impossible. Anyone being fairly acquainted with this sector would immediately understand who I am referring to when talking about "one professional baker who also grows his own cereal", or "one family business combining the cultivation of maize and the production of biscuits". Thus, keeping their names covered may seem pointless. However, for ethical reasons (ASA 2011), I prefer to avoid both the use of the real name of individuals and private businesses, and the use of pseudonyms. I will limit myself to generic formulations like "my informant", "one farmer", "a baker" etc., mainly to protect my interlocutors' identity in case this study be used for purposes that I did not foresee. Furthermore, while naming my interlocutors would be a way of giving them full credit for their efforts, I would like to avoid confusion on possible conflicts of interests between my interlocutors and myself, of which there are none: I am not aiming at promoting these projects, but only at representing their experiences, and the only benefit I will get from this research is, hopefully, earning my master's degree. An exception will be made for public institutions and the initiatives they promote, which I will name due to their importance in the reality of Valle d'Aosta, although I will not disclose the names of the individuals I engaged with inside these institutions.

Anthropological tools

My fieldwork consisted mainly of interviews, but I also consulted documents (especially to collect data on the general situation in the region's agriculture sector) and I did participant observation in two bakeries and at three baking days at traditional ovens, twice with a non-professional grower and once with the IAR. I preferred short-term engagement with a larger number of informants, rather than long-term engagement with fewer informants. This was not planned, but it became evident during the very first week of fieldwork that, because of the

inclination of the people I spoke to, as well as for the necessities of my research question and for my own character, I would have to adapt anthropological methods to a field composed mainly of sparse and brief encounters. First of all, I met the majority of my informants during their working hours, and I didn't want to become a burden and take too much time out of already busy people. Not insisting in coming back without new questions to ask was a way of paying respect to my informants and showing that I understand their needs (AAA 2012:Point 4). Second, people started to feel uneasy after a while, because they felt as if they didn't have anything else to show or to say. I felt that insisting in wanting to build a relationship beyond the interview could have been perceived as inappropriate, and I did not want to cross a boundary. I know that anthropology's aim is to get beyond this stage and start to notice how people do what they do independently from how they describe their activities. Furthermore, as knowledge in anthropology is built in the encounter between anthropologist and informants, deepening this relationship may help to achieve a better understanding of the informants' perspectives (Aull Davies 2008:Chapter 1). However, I did and do not intend to understand my interlocutors' ways of life holistically, but only their stance on a very specific subject, their relationship to cereal, and I felt that what was more significant to answer my research question was exactly how my research participants describe themselves, not limiting myself to what is actually said, but also interpreting their attitudes, their ways of saying, and paying attention to the mood of the interview.

Baking with my research participants did provide me with some insights, for example on the essentially social nature of traditional baking gatherings, which are occasions to share a moment with friends and family while at the same time producing bread. However, as I mentioned I got most of my material from semi-structured interviews, during which I left my interlocutors free to talk about what they deemed more important (Aull Davies 2008:106). After having explained briefly what my research consisted of, I asked my informants to talk about their activity, whatever it might be, and what brought them to enter the world of cereal. I usually did not ask many other questions, but I tried to show that I understood what my interlocutor meant, asked for clarifications, and tried to direct the discussion on more specific questions, where need be (for example, I always asked how other people judged these activities). Generally my research participants answered similarly, but each person expressed their motivations in a very personal and specific manner, which makes me think that not many of them were answering mechanically, repeating a well-tested discourse, but that my questions really made them reflect about their activity. A few cases are exceptions: for

example one baker and one promoter of a development programme led by a local municipality were clearly used to talk about their experiences and aims, and I had the impression that they saw the possibility of appearing in my thesis as a further opportunity of making their respective projects known to a wider public.

As I was inquiring on food, sensory methods (Pink 2009) got included spontaneously and without much planning. While many people mentioned flavour among the motivations that push them to engage with local cereals, reflections on taste were particularly important with food professionals: for instance, I went for lunch at a restaurant and reflected with the chef on a local variety of rye, keeping in mind the tastes she created. She also offered an extra rye ice-cream tasting, as she thought that this kind of unusual coupling represents at best what characterises her cuisine. My aim is not to write a sensory ethnography and I will not follow on this discussion, but I believe it important to share with the reader that the senses were a precious tool that helped me to make sense of the field.

Participant observation was very helpful in building trust and creating a contact with my informants. I felt that people respected me more after they noticed I knew how to handle dough and asked the right questions, which comes mainly from my experience as both a professional and home baker and from my ongoing personal interest in the fields of baking and cereal. However, knowing how to behave socially was also crucial in making me accepted by research participants: As I spent only a limited amount of time with each informant, I believe that doing fieldwork at home (Coleman and Collins 2006) and being well acquainted with the way people here behave and with how they usually think was fundamental to get to the core without having to spend an acclimatisation period in which to obtain people's trust and learn how to interpret their beliefs. This may seem arrogant, but I had the impression that my research was well received and that most people felt understood. My interlocutors were very welcoming, and I almost never left a meeting empty-handed, receiving breads or other homemade goods as a present. When I had interviews in a café or bar, I was always offered the drink, even though I insisted in being the one to pay the bill.

The role of the researcher

Despite my informants and I have different backgrounds, I had the impression that many of them still considered me as somewhat familiar, as we all come from the same place and culture. My surname was also very useful, and offered many opportunities of small talk to strengthen the connection with my informants through general questions about my family and

place of origin. Unfortunately I do not speak the local dialect anymore, but showing that I understand everything, and that I can appreciate a slice of homemade sausage or a glass of wine or two helped me to blend in, and I had the impression that my presence at baking gatherings was not perceived as excessively strange or out of place. Of course, my name and origin were not enough to get people's confidence and approval. I think that what counted most in my being accepted was how I presented my research: showing that I see value in these people's activities beyond economic gain made for a good start, to which people usually nodded with approval.

My upbringing and personal motivations also determined the results of my research (Aull Davies 2008): I set out to the field wanting to find signals of positive trends in my own society, and so I did. Had I started with a more pessimistic set of mind, I would have given more weight to the issues my informants pointed out, such as the general lack of initiative in building consortia and putting resources together to make everyone's situation better, or the ambiguous position of public administration on the intention of promoting the sector of local cereal. My sense of belonging to Valle d'Aosta will also affect how this text is written, in many ways. The most evident will perhaps be my choice of personal pronouns: because I did fieldwork at home and because I share many (although not all) of the values and perspectives of informants, I will use the personal pronoun "we" to refer to subjects involving the whole of the Valdôtain population, or to other contexts from which I do not feel separate, but a part of. This may seem odd for readers, as this "we" will not always include them. However, I think that choosing this form is a matter of honesty, both towards the people I engaged with in the field, to whom I feel related on a level that exceeds the relationship between researcher and research participant, and towards the readers themselves, as I do not intend to conceal my personal involvement with what I am writing, but to show my emotional attachment to my field of inquiry.

I am generally satisfied with the data I gathered during fieldwork and I think that the methods I used, both planned and unplanned, were well suited to give me the kind of information I was looking for. However, using interviews as my main tool also had some drawbacks: for example, I did not get enough confidence to talk about politics, which would certainly have been relevant for my research. It is also difficult for me to state how the values that I could infer from conversation are played out in practice, in my informants' everyday lives. I can imagine how this might be, as many of these interviews were quite dynamic: I visited sheds,

looked at flour mills and combine harvesters, admired the incredible private bakery of one of my informants as well as the stone mill he is trying to refurbish for the association he is a part of, tasted breads and biscuits, looked at different kinds of maize kernels, I was even shown some rye affected by ergot fungus. I would not go as far as naming this kind of encounters "participant observation", as they consisted mainly in people showing me their spaces and materials. However, they are definitely interviews with added value, and, while in most cases I didn't spend time working with my informants, at least I had a glance at their fields and tools and I can try to imagine how their work might be a little better than if they had just told me about what they do. In a way, looking at their silent tools and sleeping fields was indeed a way of participating in the agricultural activity of this time of the year.

Theoretical background

The literature I consulted to make sense of the situation in the field is varied, and while in this section I will focus mainly on economic anthropology and on anthropological theories of value, the sources of inspiration that enabled me to make sense of my field are numberless. Academic texts had of course a high impact on how I will formulate my argumentation, but other types of documents such as activist reports, video-recorded testimonies of bakers, breeders, and activists fighting for different causes, literary fiction, comics and music are all instruments that helped me to organise my thought and represent my field in a way that I find meaningful[4]. Although it would be difficult to give credit to all these sources in a reference list, I find it important to mention that non-academic writings have had as strong an impact on this text as academic studies.

Starting from Marx (Marx and Engels 1867[1990]), there has been an extensive critique of capitalism and of the social relations of inequality that it implies. In more recent years, authors such as David Harvey (2005) engaged in a deep questioning of neoliberalism, and studies about the relation between market and society (e.g. De Neve et al. 2008; Hann and Hart 2009), inspired by the work of Polanyi, point out the influences of the current economic

4 For instance, I found inspiring the video-recording of the 2019 grAINZ Festival (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_x9-W8vG0mY). The comic series *Promethea* by Alan Moore, J.H. Williams III and Mick Gray was fundamental in linking my field to processes of the imagination, and music by authors and groups such as Fabrizio De Andrè, Giorgio Gaber, Caparezza or Iubal helped me to broaden my understanding of the political.

system on broader social processes. Academic studies are dedicated, for example, to the cultural and social dimensions of the 2008 economic crisis (Castells, Caraça, and Cardoso 2012), or to the transformation of the concept of responsibility and accountability in the context of neoliberalism (Wedel 2014). Food supply chains are at the centre of other inquiries, focusing, for instance, on the social inequalities generated by the current mainstream industrial food provisioning system (Patel 2007), discussing the toll that it takes on the environment (Sage 2012), or putting agriculture at the centre of one of the biggest challenges that humanity will face during the twenty-first century, both at an environmental and social level (Parmentier 2009). Studies considering consumers' perspectives (e.g. Seyfang 2009; Carrier and Luetchford 2012) discuss the role of consumption in reproducing the structures of inequality of the current mainstream system, and highlight the pitfalls and possibilities that so-called ethical or sustainable consumption presents. This is only a short list of the studies that have been carried out in the last decades about the damages that the current global economic system is causing, which has also been given much attention by authors writing texts for a broader audience, such as Naomi Klein (e.g. 2000) or Noam Chomsky (e.g. 1999).

Taking the awareness about the inequalities caused by the current world economic system, with a particular attention to the food sector, as my point of departure, I would like to focus instead on people that reacted to a reality they perceive as unjust. I aim at highlighting the social creativity inherent in their practices, to show how they are putting into question the mainstream food provisioning system and how they are challenging these structures of power from the bottom, in their everyday engagement with food. In the next paragraphs, I will outline the main theories on which such a discussion will be based. I will discuss first the importance of acknowledging the multiple values on which any economic process relies (Siniscalchi and Harper 2019). I will then continue with a commentary on the Aristotelian conception of the economy, outlining the concept of *oikonomia* (Dierksmeier and Pirson 2009). After a discussion on the role of value related to social creativity (Graeber 2001) and on the political potential of engaging with food (Grasseni 2014; Krøijer 2015), I will end raising questions about inequalities that may arise when pairing concerns for good food and good society (Bobrow-Strain 2012).

Values and the economy

The term “value” has multiple definitions. For our purposes, it is relevant to consider that it can express the meaning that a person or society gives to different aspects of life, as well as the measure of the economic importance of an object or service. These apparently very different meanings of the word “value” are in reality strictly interconnected and dependent on each other, and it is almost impossible to define one of them with some degree of precision without referring to the other (Graeber 2001:1–2). The economic sector (conceived as encompassing processes of production and consumption in addition to exchange, Appadurai 1986) always relies on a set of values that intersect and interact among each other, and the strict dependence of even the most alienated capitalist relations on values that lie outside of the logic of the market (Tsing 2013) makes it impossible to consider economic value as an entity isolated from other forms of value.

Valeria Siniscalchi and Krista Harper focus on this interplay between market and non-market values in *Food Values in Europe* (2019). This collection of essays shows the importance of “consider[ing] simultaneously two forms of value – on the one hand, economic or market value measured by price and, on the other, moral, political and social values established by human actions and beliefs” (Counihan 2019:x). These two forms of value, which are often thought of as antithetic (cf. Graeber 2001:257), are not mutually exclusive, but they complement each other and are constantly renegotiated and compared by the actors (e.g. Harper and Afonso 2019). Thus, it would be reductive both to dismiss economic thinking completely and try to explain an economic phenomenon only in terms of social, cultural, moral or political values, and to consider economic value as the only element at play in any given situation: all of them need to be taken into account to achieve a meaningful representation of any economic phenomenon.

However, while it is certainly important to consider “moral, political and social values” alongside economic value, drawing such a clear distinction between them may be problematic, in the same way as separating drastically capitalistic and non-capitalistic relations can be. Dividing values in two broad categories, economic on one side, and all others on the opposite side, might reinforce this divide, while many examples show that these sets of values influence each other constantly and cannot be completely disentangled, at least in contexts of food production (cf. Pratt and Luetchford 2013; Tsing 2013). In the same way, stating that capitalist systems feed on non-capitalist values does not imply that there exist, within the capitalist system, enclaves in which capitalist values have no influence whatsoever

(Tsing 2015). It is important, with Polanyi (cf. Pratt and Luetchford 2013:8), not to conflate the market and society. However, it is also important to keep in mind that, at least in contemporary Western societies, these two systems are heavily dependent on each other, and it is difficult and perhaps counterproductive to draw precise boundaries between them.

For these reasons, in this thesis I will try not to single out economic value, but I will consider it alongside other values such as identity, tradition or attention to the environment, representing it as just another value that is no much and no less worthy of consideration than others. While the point of departure for my reflection and the way I introduced my research to my interlocutors in the field express a clear divide between economic and other types of value, this was done in order to make clear from the beginning that I do not agree with the view that a business's first and foremost aim is making profit, and that I recognise that other values play an important role too. There continues to be a tension between how ideally we should represent society, how it is actually perceived by people in the field, and how they perceive other people perceiving it. My attempt at considering all the main values expressed by my interlocutors as being equally worthy of attention (although not equally important, as different individuals will give more or less weight to any one of them at different times) is thus a conscious decision through which I hope to be contributing to make the readers reflect on how they think about economic processes.

Oikonomia *and* Chrematistike

The idea that, while engaging in the economy, people only need to be concerned with economic value, while other values are dismissed as irrelevant or even damaging to a business-oriented mindset, and that a business's first aim is making profit is at the basis of the neoliberal conception of the economy. However, during fieldwork, I found that many of my interlocutors organise their own understanding of the economy in a way that does not align completely with such a neoliberal conception of the role of businesses in society. I found that going back to ancient Greek philosophers and particularly to Aristotle's thinking may give us the tools to understand my informants' position better. Aristotle's conception of the economy is deeply moral (Dierksmeier and Pirson 2009). It divides what today goes under the term of "economy" in two different activities: *oikonomia* and *chrematistike*. Today's mainstream conception of the economy seems to be more akin to the concept of *chrematistike*, this is, the process of sheer money-making (p.418). *Oikonomia*, on the other hand, is much broader in scope and it constitutes the morally adequate management of "the household", be it private or

public (*ibid.*). *Oikonomia* is the management of resources, money being only one resource among others. Dealing with money is one fundamental aspect of *oikonomia,* however, the management of the household cannot be limited at maximising wealth, as such an approach would disregard other aspects that may be more important (p.422). Hence, individuals and institutions need to base their economic choices on a moral judgement of what is the most adequate choice at any given time, taking in consideration the good of the community as well as the needs of individuals (p.421). Contrary to the present-day perspective for which States and public institutions should not interfere with the market, which is a self-regulating and self-regulated system, Aristotle maintains that the management of a community should necessarily integrate economic, social and political concerns, with the aim of achieving the common good (pp.420-421). Thus, the people in a community should develop a common understanding of what constitutes the common good and of what constitutes virtue, and they should base their own individual choices on this common moral standard (p.420). Such a conception does not aim at erasing differences between individuals, but at bridging across them, recognising that different people have different needs, and that they should all be acknowledged by the community in a "politics of unity in diversity" (p.421).

The concept of *oikonomia* may remind the reader of the notion of "moral economy", often raised in social and human sciences (Carrier 2018). However, while reasoning in terms of "moral economy" allows researchers to investigate the measure on which an economic activity relies on ties of mutual obligation emerging from repetition of transactions without considering the specific values motivating these obligations, I am more interested in the motivations that precede and inform the transactions themselves, which I found can be best understood through the notion of *oikonomia*. In short, while "moral economy" seeks at observing relationships that already do exist, *oikonomia* is rather an imagined space, providing the moral basis on which to build future relationships.

The creative potential of values

It would be an anachronism to state that a reflection on *value* is important in Aristotle's thinking (Robbins and Sommerschuh 2016). However, this philosophy does imply that choices concerning the economy should be based on moral principles (that is, on notions of what is good) and should take in consideration several aspects of life in the community, without aiming at maximising wealth as an end *per se*. In present-day terms, we could say that to engage in an "oikonomic" activity, a person needs to take into account *values* that go

beyond making profit, acknowledging that one's choices also have an impact on a broader community; people should work towards making this impact a positive one. Values can thus be understood as a bridge between individual conscience and society. Indeed, as the essays in Siniscalchi's and Harper's collection (2019) exemplify, values, be they economic, moral, social or political, are defined by the social relations in which they are embedded (Graeber 2001). When these social relations become crystallised and form patterns of behaviour, we start to talk about social structures.

The understanding of social structures in anthropology has been highly influenced by Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, for which experience (which he calls "practice") provides people with the material to decide how to behave in the future. In this way, individuals are constantly and unconsciously reproducing social structures, which tend to remain unchanged over time. Bourdieu conceives of the *habitus* as of "a present past that tends to perpetuate itself into the future by reactivation in similarly structured practices" (1990:54). Although this conception of social structures and of their mechanisms of reproduction has had a great influence in anthropology, in my research I chose to focus on elements of transformation rather than reproduction, and I believe that theories focusing on social creativity and change, such as David Graeber's theory of value (2001), are more useful to understand the experiences of the people I met in the field.

Graeber sees society as a dynamic process which is constantly being reproduced, but also shaped anew by human action. Values, in this optics, would be the meaning that people give to their actions, which are contributing to the making up of society (p.230). As values, seen in this way, express an ideal about how society should be like, independently from how it actually is, then social structures are something that is at least partially conscious and intentional, and that emerges from the interactions among individuals, situated in the broader context of society (*ibid.*). Hence people's actions, when based on values that are in contradiction with the values on which a given society is based, can be seen as conscious attempts at reshaping social structures. Values thus have a creative potential, as, through them, people can harness the power of redefining social structures (p.249).

Food as a political weapon

Food, for both its physical and symbolical significance, is being used as a privileged arena in which to attempt such a redefinition of social structures (Counihan and Siniscalchi 2013). As discussed, in Graeber's perspective the values that people ascribe to their engagement with

food express the meaning they give to their actions in relation to the broader society, and they are a statement on how these people think society should be organised. Cristina Grasseni (2014), discussing the GAS network (*Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale*, Solidarity Purchase Groups) in Italy, shows how these projects portray themselves as democratic endeavours to redistribute wealth and claim back control on the food provisioning system, starting from a direct collaboration between producers and consumers. In Grasseni's view, participating in a GAS and buying seasonal produce from a local farmer is not only a way to provide tastier and healthier food for one's family: it is a "commentary" on the relationships between economy and society (Carrier 2012:3), and it does not only entail taking a stance against the current mainstream food provisioning system, but also actively working to bring about an alternative.

As projects such as the GAS base their actions on a strongly felt set of values and consciously try to reshape a system which they find oppressing, I would suggest that they are engaging in direct action (Graeber 2009; Krøijer 2015). Insofar as people set their own moral standards and behave according to them, materialising their ideal through their actions without recurring to the mediation of other actors in a position of power, they are engaging in direct action. Here, means and ends fuse into one single act, as the way of acting is itself a representation and an example of how things should be in the ideal vision of the direct actionist. Engaging in direct action, people materialise into the present a little part of the new society they want to bring about, they are "build[ing] a new society in the shell of the old" (Graeber 2009:203). Even though in anarchic settings direct action is perceived as operating at the margins of legality, as anarchic direct actionists aim at "proceed[ing] as if the state does not exist" (*ibid*.), illegality is not a fundamental aspect of direct action (Krøijer 2015:87). Anarchists aim at overthrowing a status quo which is mainly represented by the state and by corporations, but people with different ideals may adopt an anarchic method for objectives that are not themselves anarchic.

Questions of inequality

The consciousness about the power that food can have in influencing social structures is not new and there is abundant historical documentation on the link between bread and power going back to centuries BCE. Ancient Rome's motto "*panem et circenses*" is only the most famous of them. To move to more recent times, Aaron Bobrow-Strain, in *White Bread, A Social History of the Store-Bought Loaf* (2012), tells the history of social battles in the US

through the history of industrial bread during the twentieth century. Bobrow-Strain compellingly shows how in multiple occasions there has been the desire to change America changing how Americans ate, and industrial bread came to embody values that were, yes, about food, but that resonated with society at large. For example, issues of food hygiene went hand in hand with concerns about social purity and fear of the immigrants who were producing "contaminated" food (Chapter 2). The industrialisation of food production processes was thus presented as a solution to control the purity of food, but it did not solve the problem at the root of the issue: it did not address the reasons why immigrants were producing food in unhygienic conditions, that is, social inequalities and poverty. If anything, industrialisation reinforced that problem by reducing job opportunities and expanding the social cleavage.

The case of food contamination illustrates well how the most interesting point the author makes is not on the potential of good food campaigns of revolutionising social structures, but, on the contrary, on how these campaigns often ended up reinforcing social inequalities. "When we define what counts as 'good bread,' we are talking about a lot more than food. Dreams of 'good bread' are statements about the nature of 'good society'. Such dreams come with unspoken elaborations of who counts as a responsible citizen and how society should be organized" (p.7). Notions of "good bread" also imply notions of "bad bread", and building an image of ideal society also implies the exclusion from the picture of who does not count as a good citizen. Thus, throughout the book the author warns us against the dangers of campaigning for revolutionising the food system without at the same time addressing social inequalities and structures of power.

This issue is also relevant for contemporary food movements. Food activism, defined as "efforts by people to change the food system across the globe by modifying the way they produce, distribute, and/or consume food" (Counihan and Siniscalchi 2013:3), does not only propose visions of a "better world" to move towards, separating drastically the current food supply chain, portrayed as evil, and a more inclusive and localised model based on personal relationships and ethics of care. In the process, it also draws a line between who can and who cannot participate and be included in this future "better society". Jeff Pratt and Peter Luetchford (2013), among others, discuss how issues of class are deeply entangled with battles for good food, as the cheap prices offered by the big distribution chains make it impossible for small producers to compete on that ground. For disadvantaged or lower income groups, local, organic or so called "ethical" choices are simply not an option.

The aim of my research is not to focus on problems of inequality, inclusion, exclusion and class differences. However, it is important to keep in mind that discourses on choice (such as the choice of which food to eat, but also of which techniques or raw materials a farmer or baker can use to make a product falling in a price range that could be accepted by customers) will always necessarily imply issues about accessibility and privilege.

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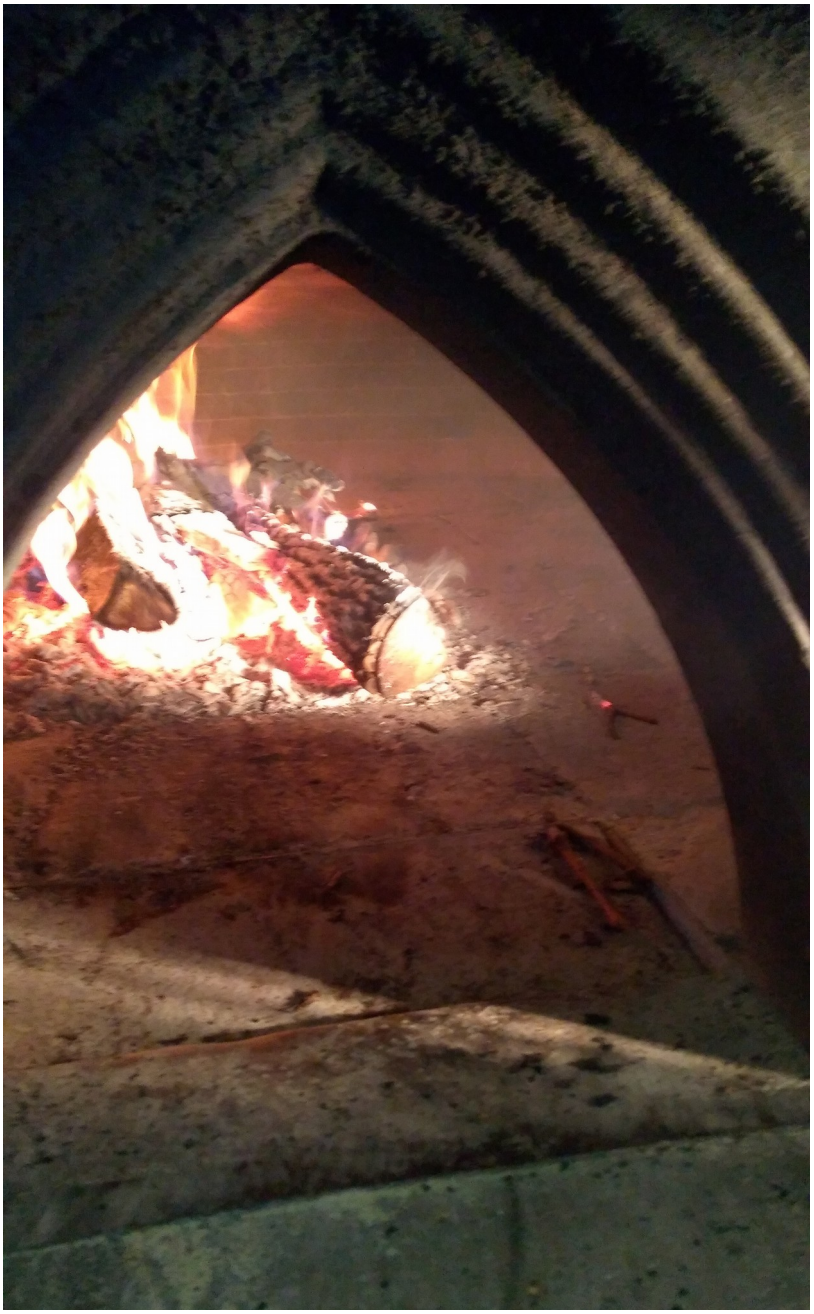
The scene is set. In this chapter, I presented some brief facts about the socio-economic context of Valle d'Aosta, I disclosed my methods and discussed theories through which I organised my understanding of the field. The reader should now have enough elements to follow me on this journey to the world of Valdôtain cereal. Be careful not to slip, the pavement is icy. The December air is crisp and cold, but the oven has already been lit up, and the sound and smell of fire fill the air. The atmosphere is jolly, even though the morning has been busy. Take a sip at your glass of white wine, and wait: it will not be long until the aroma of bread and the cracking sound of the loaves of *pan ner* will let you know that a long day of work is over.



Wood-Fired Oven in Vieux, Rhêmes-Saint-Georges

Traditional ovens need to be fired up the evening before baking, in order to ensure that they are properly preheated. The temperature was once judged by empirical methods such as observing changes in the colour of the stones, while today many ovens are equipped with thermometers. At the moment of baking, the oven is emptied of the embers and the pavement is cleaned with a wet cloth. When the loaves have been loaded, the oven is sealed and it is not opened until the baking time is over.

II

Values of Tradition and Identity

Moving forward looking backwards

Engaging with cereals in Valle d'Aosta inhabits a special place in time, as questions of identity and agency linked to these practices connect past, present and future and collapse them into the same moment. In this region, cereal had almost been abandoned in the twentieth century, and starting to grow and eat local cereal again can be seen as a step back in time. In a bucolic conception of agriculture, these forms of engagement could be interpreted as the nostalgic quest for a not so distant past, portrayed as a lost golden age. References to the past are common among the people I engaged with, however, I don't think that representing their experiences in this romantic light makes them justice. Consciousness about one's roots is an important source of inspiration and it contributes to the identity of both individuals and communities, but these forms of engagement with cereal, far from being a dull celebration of the past, are instead deeply grounded into the present, and reaching out to the future. Theories on historicity and temporality suggest how a linear conception of time is limited and necessarily partial (Hirsch and Stewart 2005). Time does not flow uniformly, and past events and concerns for the future can be enacted in the present moment (Knight and Stewart 2016). Indeed, cereal-related activities in Valle d'Aosta have a strong relevance today as they play a role in shaping the identity of individuals and communities, they are occasions to strengthen the cohesion of the community, and they are an assertion of the role of humans in society and in the wider ecology of the valley. These aspects are at the same time deeply grounded in the past, and projecting values into the future.

A private dialogue with one's roots

Questions about personal identity

When talking about the past, a deep sense of respect fills up the air. The effort of men and women to make a living in a hostile environment, with few resources available and challenging climatic conditions, inspires admiration. There is a sense of pride for our people's

roots, and our ancestors are often portrayed as hard-working, creative, resilient. The fact that many of us do not depend on the work of the land anymore and that, for most, growing one's vegetables or even cereal does not come out of necessity, only increases the respect for the hard life that our predecessors lived. However, many conservationist initiatives promoted by regional authorities celebrate and portray Valdôtain identity in a rather stereotyped way, which does not make justice to the complexity of people's lives in Valle d'Aosta. Such initiatives conceive tradition as static rather than fluid and evolving (Lavie, Narayan, and Rosaldo 1993:5; Sutton 2014:5), and this representation misses out on subtler nuances that give meaning to people's lives. Many Valdôtains would not recognise themselves in those images. In spite of this, tradition and respect for the past actually are an important part of many people's identity.

One technician I spoke to, who collaborated to a project of recovery of ancient local seeds, talks about how, for him, engaging in this type of research is a way of paying respect to those generations who, through their work, brought us these seeds and a livable soil. Letting these cereal varieties get lost would be an insult to the effort of our predecessors, and stealth from future generations. However, in this case as in many others, looking at the past is not a form of idealisation. Indeed, it is through his *work* that this man feels connected to his ancestors, and not through an empty flow of words, or through a lifeless reconstruction of things past. In a way, the distance between past and present is erased altogether, as the consciousness of past events is fundamental in determining today's behaviour (Knight and Stewart 2016:6).

Another of my informants, a non-professional grower, expressed particularly well this feeling of connectedness with the past, and the role that cereal plays in his sense of identity. His family is one of the few who has never stopped growing cereal, planting the same variety of rye year after year. Here, rye becomes a strong link that ties this man to the land, and a tool to bring back to the present the history of his people, which is also his own history. Growing cereal is a way of reminding himself about his identity. It is a way of feeling history running in his veins, and the blood of past generations strengthening his muscles during his work (Knight 2014:190). It is a way of filling his body with a sense of purpose and of reasserting his own place in a wider picture.

The role of humans in the ecology of the Valley

Cultivating cereal, people are not only expressing their identity in relation to past generations: they are also asserting the role of humans in a wider ecology. The connection between

humans and the environment is well exemplified by the general dread about leaving the fields go fallow. One farmer explicitly told me that, through the sale of his flour, he barely covers the costs of production, but he still grows cereal not to let the land go wild. Keeping a tidy and tended landscape, in a region whose primary source of income is tourism, has a strong economic significance (Bassignana, Barrel, et al. 2015:6). As previous studies have pointed out (e.g. Zerilli and Pitzalis 2019) and as we shall see in chapter four, farmers cannot be reduced to the role of producers of food, because the work they do for the community in taking care of the landscape (among others) exceeds their role of food producers.

However, the urge to keep the fields from going wild is not only linked to practical aspects such as landscape management, but it is also tied to deep motivations. In the past, land was a precious resource, and letting a field go fallow was either a way to restore soil fertility in crop rotation, or a massive waste. Today necessity is not pushing farmers to grow every tiny bit of land anymore, however, if they can, many of them do it. One baker-farmer wonders at how better the landscape looks when the fields are tidy and well-kept, how beautiful the hills are when rye is mature, and how satisfied he is of having sown it, regardless of the quality of the flour he will get from it. This is not just a celebration of beauty: the urge to cultivate the fields reflects a consciousness that humans, in Valle d'Aosta, are and feel as a part of nature, even if they probably wouldn't express it in these terms. In many Valdôtains' perception, the "natural" state of the Valley is not a "wild" land, but a territory of which humans take care. The landscape of Valle d'Aosta is not "natural", it has been shaped over the centuries by human activity. Water channels were dug, the sides of mountains were terraced, fields were cleared and trees prevented from growing back into them. High-mountain barns were built to shed cattle and herders during the summer season (which is nowadays still spent in the higher pastures). This organisation of the territory certainly has an impact on the landscape, but it also has an impact on wildlife of both plants and animals. Today, because of land abandoning woodlands are growing back into the fields, which could threaten biodiversity (Niedrist et al. 2009). Bringing cereals back to certain areas is also contributing to bring back animal species that have dramatically declined in number over the past decades, as one of my informants explained[5]. Humans are starting to restore an equilibrium, taking on their role towards the environment that surrounds them.

5 However, the relationship with wildlife is ambivalent, as animals (especially birds and wild boars) can cause great damage to cultures.

Pan ner

A common imaginary of the past…

Cereal does not only play a role in individuals' identities and their relationship to the environment, but it is rooted deep down into the collective imagery of the place and it constitutes a part of the community identity of Valle d'Aosta (Letey 2019). The great success of the celebration *Lo Pan Ner,* which I will discuss below, is an example of this, and of how cereals still have a place in many people's sense of identity and of community, even though they might not engage personally in a cereal-related activity. *Pan ner*, "balck bread" in the local dialect, is the traditional bread made from low-fermented wholemeal rye and wheat, baked in collective wood-fired ovens. In the past, almost every village had a community oven (or a private oven which was made available to the community). In November or December, after having finished harvesting and prepared the fields for the next season, it was time for bread. Baking took several days: the ovens were lit up, and every family, at a turn, could bake bread for the whole year, which was later dried on specific racks and kept until the next autumn. Today, breads made in this way are not preserved anymore for the full year, but they are rather offered as special treats and gifts to family members and friends, which reinforces once more the inherently social character of this activity. As I could experience during participant observation, baking was and remains an occasion to strengthen community ties and to spend time with one's family and neighbours, in an atmosphere of conviviality and feast.

Baking together was also due to practical reasons. For instance, firing up the ovens requires large amounts of wood, and the oven needs to be preheated one day before baking. Baking at the same time as other families, thus, was also a way to optimise resources. In addition to that, this bread was traditionally leavened by a sourdough starter, which was dried each year after the baking period had finished and reactivated by the family who was going to bake first. This family then passed a portion of their dough on to the next family, to be used as a stater, and so on until the whole village had had a chance to bake its yearly supply of bread[6]. The levain, as well as the oven, was thus a common resource, which further contributes to make of this activity a community rather than a private event.

6 However, my grand-mother, laughing, remembered that leavening bread with this method can lead to very inconsistent results and that sometimes families had to eat dense bread "hard as a brick" for the whole year, when fermentation didn't turn out quite well. This is the main reason why today *pan ner* is commonly leavened by baker's yeast.

This is a well-known story, which is perceived as a very particular aspect of our culture. However, in many local municipalities, including my own, the actual practice of baking got gradually lost. In some other areas of the Valley it is still very lively and every year many families participate in these gatherings. Some places also have specific kinds of sweet breads which are usually baked after the *pan ner*, after the oven has cooled down a little. While there is not much variation in the quality and taste of *pan ner*, these sweet variants, baked according to family recipes which are passed on from one generation to the next, are very different from one another and are strictly linked to the identity of the place. Thus, baking bread is not only a means to assert the identity of a larger community (the community of "*pan ner* bakers and eaters"), but it is also a way to highlight differences, usually linked to place, inside that broader community, which are symbolised by the different sorts of sweet bread (Mintz and Du Bois 2002:109).

… *a celebration of the present*

Public funding has been allocated to promote the practices I described above. Many traditional collective wood-fired ovens and water mills were recovered thanks to European and Regional funding. In 2014, the BREL secured European funds to promote a wider bread celebration, which was named *Lo Pan Ner—I pani delle Alpi* ("Black Bread—The breads of the Alps"). The celebration was not targeted to an audience of tourists, but to the local communities themselves and 52 municipalities out of 74 adhered to the initiative. Success was huge. A BREL administrator told me how they were surprised and extremely pleased at the response of the public, which pushed them to continue the manifestation the following years, this time with regional funding, and to expand it to other Alpine regions both in Italy and abroad. The administrator I spoke to suggested that this event was so successful because this practice is not a mere reconstruction of the past, but it is a rite which is still very alive and felt by the population. It does have a relevance in the present. Indeed, this celebration seems to have revitalised a practice that, although it got lost in many areas, was still present in the common imaginary of Valdôtains and which still has a significance in terms of strengthening community ties, facilitating inter-generational transfer of knowledge and asserting individual and community place identity.

For these reasons, both the practices related to growing cereal and to baking bread during community gatherings cannot be considered as simple reenactments of the past. The past

serves as a source of inspiration and the memory of the social history of the place is perceived as a valuable resource that needs to be acknowledged and protected, but these practices are all “new”, for the simple reason that they are carried out in a context that has undergone radical socio-economic change. Growing cereal and baking bread in common ovens are not necessities today, and engaging in such practices opens up spaces for reflection and becomes a site for the expression of values that are both old and new: for instance, baking gatherings seem to always have been a social activity strengthening community ties, while the feeling that one needs to perpetuate ancient practices to avoid losing a cultural patrimony is a recent concern (cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983).

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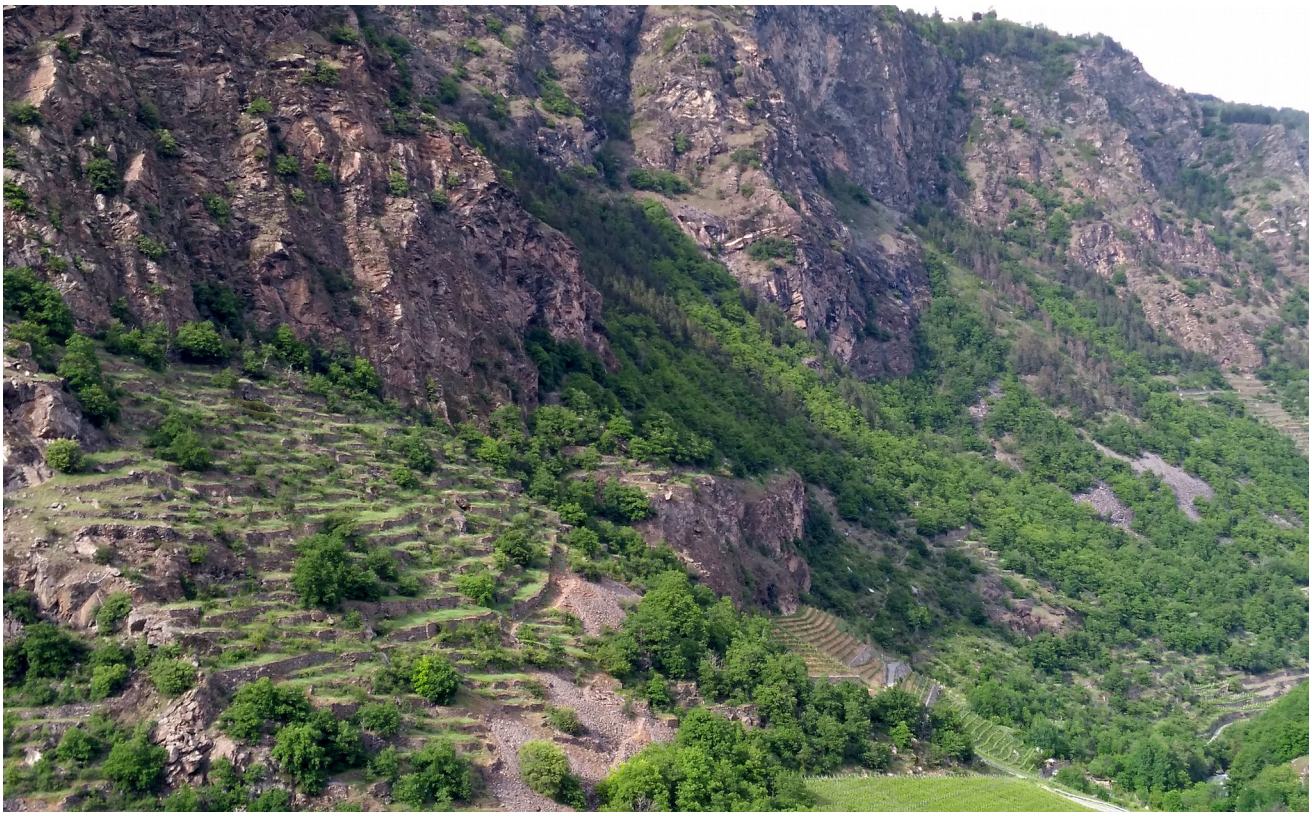
Cereal-related activities in Valle d’Aosta, inspired by the past and having a significance in the present, also reach out to the future. Indeed, we have seen how cereal plays an important role in community and individual place identity, and that tradition is valued as a precious resource. However, looking at the past, as one of my informants put it, is not an aim *per se*. The aim is always looking, and going, forward, but in the process we don’t have to forget what good has already been done. Looking at the past is a way of acknowledging that things can be done differently, and getting to know ancient practices can be a source of inspiration to move forward and do things better in the future. Focusing on this tension to the future, in the next chapter I will suggest that engaging in a cereal-related activity can become a form of social critique, and I will analyse these practices as an outcome of social change as well as a tool to work towards further change.



Terraces near Arvier

The landscape of Valle d'Aosta has been shaped by human activity over the centuries, through techniques such as terracing. In this photograph we can observe both rather modern terraces (centre-right section of the lower part of the picture) cultivated with vineyards, and older, uncultivated terraces made of dry stone walls (left section of the photograph), which were also probably destined to vine cultivation. As fields are abandoned, trees grow back into them and woodlands take over areas that once were cleared. This kind of fields are not easily accessible and are hard to mechanise.

III

Values of Care for Health and the Environment

Cereal and its relation to social change: a critique of social structures

People engaging with cereal in Valle d'Aosta have a strong character and a deep sense of purpose – at least, this is the impression they gave me during fieldwork. Their choices are made keeping in mind the larger picture, and their values do not only reflect a concern for one's own quality of life, but also speak to larger issues, ultimately putting into question social structures of which they are aware, and which they perceive as unjust. While the previous chapter discussed how cereal-related activities in Valle d'Aosta bridge the gap between past and present, this chapter will focus instead on how these practices relate to the future. The future is in many of my interlocutors' minds and words, and it is not perceived as a distant and uncertain entity, but as something that will very concretely be affected by our own actions, whether we are aware of this or not. Certainly, the outcome of our actions cannot be foreseen fully, but many of my informants stressed that recognising that how we behave today will have an impact on the future is a matter of honesty towards ourselves, towards our contemporaries and towards future generations. This awareness can also turn into a tool for materialising an imagined better future into the present (Narotzky and Besnier 2014:S11).

With such a focus on the future as a background and taking Graeber's theory of value (2001), outlined earlier, as a point of departure, the aim of this chapter is to investigate the creative potential of values in the cereal sector of Valle d'Aosta, interpreting cereal-related practices both as a tool to work towards and as an outcome of social change. First, I will suggest that these cereal-related practices embody values which can be seen as a comment on existing social structures and as attempts at redefining them. Food, here, is not only an aspect of life like any other, but it becomes a catalyst for expressing concerns about the broader society, and a tool to contribute to reshaping structures that are perceived as unjust. In the first section, I will illustrate these points with examples on the value of health. Second, I will suggest that these practices have recently been charged with new meanings, even if they remain linked to the past. Just a couple of decades ago most of these cereal-related projects

did not exist. The surfaces cultivated to cereal increased sixfold in ten years and more and more categories of people are starting to get interested in this local produce. This can be a sign that something has changed in how people think and in how they relate to what they eat, to what they buy and to what they work for, and it is why I will consider this new form of engagement with cereal as the outcome of a shift in values that has already started to happen, basing my discussion on a reflection on environmental values.

Engaging with cereal as a critique of social relations

The choice of engaging in a cereal-related activity often stems from a deep form of dissatisfaction. The people I spoke to are heavily criticising several dynamics that are going on in their society, from health, environmental and socio-economic points of view. Social critique is implemented both at an abstract and at a practical level, through conversation and material work respectively, as thought- and discussed-upon values do inform practical engagement with cereal. To illustrate how social critique is expressed through bread, the example of health values is telling.

The people I met in the field are not satisfied with the bread available on the market. After having offered me a cup of coffee at his kitchen table, one non-professional farmer and baker complained about how the bread sold in the average Italian artisan bakery (not to mention industrial packaged loaves) is tasteless. It has a low shelf-life. On top of that, it has very little nutritional power, and it is full of chemicals, as several bakers pointed out. Human health is the first source of concern for the majority of my interlocutors, and health problems such as severe allergies or serious bowel disease are among the reasons that pushed some of them to change how they eat. There is a popular assumption that bread is bad for your health, as it is perceived as a fattening food. However, my interlocutors do not stop at a bare account of calories, and they have a deeper knowledge of the reasons making commercial bread unhealthy. Actually, bread *can* be good for you, and its effects on health depend on the ingredients from which it is baked as well as on how it is produced. For this reason, many of the people I spoke to, professionals and non-professionals alike in every field, criticise both the raw materials used throughout the production chain of commercial bread, from seed to baked loaf, and handling practices during the same processes. Many of the problems they highlighted actually come from the lack of one very important ingredient: time.

Time is fundamental at every stage of the bread-production process[7]. Because the aim of the industrial food provisioning system is to make profit, and because "time is money", over the last two centuries many adjustments have been made to the bread-making process, from seed to loaf, in order to shorten the times of production and maximise profit (Bobrow-Strain 2012). However, this also determined a general decrease in the content of nutritional values and an increase in the presence of potentially toxic chemicals in bread. Time has been sacrificed from the very first stage: agriculture. In order to maximise profit, agriculture has been transformed into a system geared towards making the highest possible yields with the lowest possible amount of work – that is, time. Plants have been bred prioritising characteristics of high productivity and uniformity (making for a product fit for a wider market) over diversity, flavour and nutritional value (Jones and Econopouly 2018). The necessity of "finding the right cereal for the right soil", in a baker's words, has been completely disregarded (cf. Pascoe 2014), and to compensate for sowing grains in a soil that does not have the right conditions for that variety, large amounts of fertilisers have to be added. The need to spray pesticides and herbicides is the result of having abandoned the system of crop rotation or other natural ways to control pests and weeds. These chemicals, some of which have been proven to be toxic to humans (Mesnage et al. 2014), may leave traces in the flour (Randhawa, Ahmed, and Javed 2014).

Moving one stage further in the production process, milling has also been affected by the urge of cutting time and costs. Industrial roller milling, a method invented in the nineteenth century which largely replaced stone milling, is very efficient in producing large amounts of uniform and relatively stable flour. However, one baker explained how this method, which separates the different parts of the grain before recombining them, also depletes the flour of many of its nutrients. On the contrary, stone milling is less efficient and it produces flour with a lower shelf-life (stone-ground flour is more subject to rancidity as stone-milling does not separate the oily parts of the seed, bran and germ), but it preserves nutritional and organoleptic values better (Cappelli, Oliva, and Cini 2020).

Time has a huge impact on the baking process itself. It is fundamental to ensure an adequate dough development and leavening, and to compensate for reductions in time bakers first of

7 The following discussion combines comments that my informants made during our interactions and previous knowledge that I gained throughout the years thanks to my interest in bread and baking. Many of the remarks I heard in the field have been studied by scholars and reported by activists, and I find Andrew Whitley's *Bread Matters* (2009) an interesting starting point for the investigation of such issues. The references I will cite in this section do not directly refer to my field, but they stand as a proof that my informants' opinions on farming and baking have also been confirmed by scientific research.

all speed up fermentation by increasing the amount of yeast, which can lead to digestive problems, but they also add chemicals to mimic other effects of time on dough. For example, a baker explained that long fermentation times reduce the rate of staling of bread (Denkova et al. 2014). To extend bread's shelf-life and keep it soft for a longer time, chemical additives such as enzymes (which could potentially lead to allergy problems and whose effects on human health are not completely known) are mixed into the dough (Gioia, Ganancio, and Steel 2017). Long fermentation times also improve the digestibility of nutrients in bread, which means that chemical reactions allow the nutrients present in the flour to be absorbed better by our bodies (Leenhardt et al. 2005).

These are only a few examples of the effects of a politics of profit maximisation and time cuts on bread. After roller milling has stripped many of the nutrients away from grains which were already poor in nutrients (due to selective breeding) and full of pesticides, and after that flour has been baked in a rush adding plenty of yeast and a cocktail of enzymes, what we are left with is "plastic bread" (Bobrow-Strain 2012:168). And while I focused on the effects of this politics on human health, I could very well have talked about environmental issues, for example referring to the enormous toll that industrial agriculture takes on the environment (Sage 2012), or about socio-economic problems, considering for instance the depopulation of Valdôtain mountain villages due to the loss of job opportunities and the need to move elsewhere to make a living (Bartaletti 2010:8). My interlocutors are aware that taking time back in the process of food production, prioritising it over the quest for profit, is key to improve the quality of bread from a nutritional point of view, but also at an environmental and social level. As their choice of baking bread differently is a conscious decision, informed by knowledge about the reasons that give commercial bread today such a poor quality, engaging in these practices also implies engaging in a critique of those same logics (cf. Graeber 2001). This critique is thus not only carried out at the level of discourse, but also in practice: as I will discuss more extensively in the fourth chapter, engaging with cereal in Valle d'Aosta becomes a way of proposing an alternative and of materialising some of that imagined better future into the present (Krøijer 2015).

Engaging with cereal as an outcome of social change

Following Graeber I suggested that, because they are motivated by strong values which contradict the values of the mainstream industrial food provisioning system, cereal-related

practices in Valle d'Aosta contribute to a critique of the social dynamics underlying the production of bread and cereal. We shall see in more detail in the next chapter how these practices aim at bringing about change. However, this new forms of engagement are also a sign that a shift in society has already happened. As mentioned in the previous chapter, after having abandoned subsistence agriculture, in this region cereal-related practices have started to acquire values and meanings they did not have in the past, opening up spaces for reflection and turning, from the necessity they once were, into an opportunity. The second chapter focused on values of identity and tradition, while the previous section discussed concerns about health; the awareness of the impact of our consumption choices on the environment is another important value expressed through cereal, to which we will now turn.

Previous studies (e.g. Seyfang 2009; Carrier and Luetchford 2012) analysed how, in the last decades, people are emphasising more and more the importance of getting aware of the impact of their lifestyle on wider phenomena and of trying to minimise risks (from an environmental, economic, social, health, and even cultural point of view) by adopting more "ethical" consumption patterns in many areas of their lives, from food to clothing, transport and banking, both individually and collectively. Specifically, getting more conscious about the impact of what we eat necessarily sparks up reflections on the current food supply system and on the agricultural model on which it is based. Extensive critique of the industrial agriculture system is carried out by social movements (for example *La Via Campesina* (Anderson 2018) or *Navdanya*, Shiva et al. 2019), who maintain that shifting our approach to agriculture and to the whole food provisioning system has the potential of becoming a privileged site for generating change that may have deep effects on a wide range of social dynamics. For instance, social movements highlight the particularly delicate relationship between agriculture and the environment. On the one hand, agriculture's dependence on natural processes and resources makes it vulnerable to alterations in the environmental balance, while, on the other hand, industrial agriculture is also one of the economic sectors that are the most damaging for the environment worldwide (Sage 2012)[8]. While, to my knowledge, my informants are not taking part in any social movement, many of them share similar concerns. This criticism towards industrial agriculture and this tension at behaving in more environmentally sustainable ways stems from a shift that has already started to happen

8 Another important aspect of their critique concerns small-scale farming: while the current agriculture system depends heavily on small-scale farmers (the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) estimates that small-scale farms produce over 80% of the food consumed worldwide, 2014), it also threatens their existence claiming that their methods are obsolete and that they should be replaced by more efficient industrial techniques.

in the way people position themselves in relation to one another, to the broader society and to the environment.

Inside the bakery

Although not all of my interlocutors put an emphasis on this subject, many of them insist on the necessity of getting more conscious about the impact of our choices on the environment. Some of the people I spoke to, in particular at the two bakeries I visited, aim at making their activity as environmentally sustainable as possible, for instance sourcing their ingredients from producers who comply with certain criteria regarding soil exploitation and the use of chemicals. They are also concerned about the sustainability of their energy supply, for example they installed solar panels, took extra care with the isolation of their bakeries and, for deliveries, one bakery uses electric vehicles.

Being environmentally conscious is a deep value for these bakers, but it also resonates with potential customers. One person in particular told me that many of his customers are attracted to his products because of the bakery's endeavour towards the environment. A service of package-free goods with a long shelf-life such as pasta, rice and beans is available in the bakery. Customers are invited to reuse the same bread bags, and discounts are offered to those people getting their bread on a bike. All these arrangements, coupled with an advertising of the high energetic efficiency of the bakery and of the choice of responsibly sourced ingredients, are appealing to customers. These simple steps may not have a strong impact on the environment, but they carry a message expressing the ideological identity of the bakery, urging customers to ask questions and reflect. There is openness from some customers to listen to these themes. Similarly, another baker told me how, when his bakery opened in the '90s, it was not easy to talk about their choices to customers, while, as the years went by, more and more people started to look specifically for their bread, because they share the bakers' idea of what a bread worth being eaten is.

These examples show that these bakeries are not isolated projects, but they are inserted in a broader trend in society, which they aim at amplifying through their personal effort. It reflects a shift in mentality, both among consumers, as customers that could potentially be interested in these bakeries' products already do exist, and among food professionals. For instance, instead of delegating the choice of ingredients to big suppliers, bakers are conceiving of the selection of raw materials as a fundamental part of their job, and they are willing to spend time and money to research flours with good nutritional values and which are grown with

techniques having a lower impact on the environment. The owners of a bakery told me how they dedicated one full year of research and training to get the best products possible, before opening their business. They are willing to spend longer times in the bakery and pay extra hours to their employees to produce bread that makes justice to the high-quality ingredients they use. The owners of the second bakery I visited go as far as growing their own grains and milling their own flour. The effort of going through the whole production chain of bread is considerable, but it is satisfying for the bakers and it is rewarded by customers, who are willing to pay a price premium and maybe also to move a little further to buy bread which they find in line with their own moral principles.

In the fields

When talking about the environmental impact of agriculture, it is important to remember that this impact is not just related to the heavy demands of water, the dependence on fossil fuels, or the pollution caused by the use of chemicals: one agronomist insisted on the importance of acknowledging that industrial agriculture affects significantly the biodiversity of both cultivated and wild species (cf. Sage 2012:102). The current international regulations on seeds[9] (seen as repositories of biodiversity), and especially the question of seeds patents, which obstructs farmers in their activity of saving and re-sowing seeds, are seen as prioritising the needs of corporations over the needs of farmers (Radomsky and Leal 2012). As seeds bred for industrial purposes are standardised and are bred for uniformity rather than diversity (Jones and Econopouly 2018), impeding small-scale farmers' role of seeds savers exacerbates the process of loss of biodiversity. Leaving aside the important political and economic implications linked to the seed business, after decades in which the standardisation of crops was perceived as the best option for agricultural development in many areas of the world, including Valle d'Aosta, more recently things have started to change, and both farmers and institutions such as the IAR have begun to acknowledge the importance of preserving the local biodiversity. For instance, an agronomist told how, when she sowed local cereal in the '90s, she was labelled as an idealist and a fool, while today growing cereal in Valle d'Aosta is not perceived as being excessively naive, pointless, or strange.

Not all the farmers I spoke to sow local varieties. Some of them do, some others get their grains from certified breeders who developed varieties that are well suited to mountain

9 Social movements such as the farmers' associations *Rete Semi Rurali* in Italy and *Réseau Sémences Paysannes* in France (Demeulenaere 2014) or the non-governmental organisation *Navdanya* (Shiva et al. 2013) advocate for a redefinition of such regulations, both for environmental and socio-economic reasons.

climates. However, there exist very interesting projects of recovery of ancient varieties, which couple the conservation of a genetic repertoire with an attention to socio-economic dynamics. In the first decade of the years 2000, a project launched by the IAR in collaboration with the Region's Agriculture Department recovered 41 local varieties of rye of which 19 still vital, 21 varieties of wheat of which 19 still vital, 1 variety of barley and 2 varieties of maize (part of this research is exposed in Bassignana, Arlian, et al. 2015). One of the IAR technicians I spoke to pointed out how the existence of such a project reflects a majour change of direction in the institute's philosophy. Attempts at recovering local cereal varieties had already been made during the '80s and '90s, but they had failed. The fact that similar projects have been carried out successfully more recently is a sign that the context in which these research projects were launched has changed. My interlocutor told how in the '80s, when he first started to work for the IAR, one of his tasks was to test the efficacy of different kinds of chemicals to find the ones that were best suited to our territories. More recently there has been a radical shift in direction: The focus is not on increasing yields through chemical input, but on understanding the territory and finding new ways of doing agriculture in an optics of environmental, social and economic sustainability. Attention is given for example to projects aiming at cataloguing and protecting biodiversity (such as the one on cereals), or to the valorisation of the agricultural products of the territory, aiming at guaranteeing livelihoods thanks to the high quality of the products rather than through high yields.

From quantity to quality

These examples concerning both activities in the bakeries and in the fields make light on an important change: the attention seems to have shifted from a focus on quantity and on maximising revenue through maximising yields, to a focus on quality and on maximising revenue throught the valorisation of high-quality products. That this shift is happening both among private citizens such as the bakers and farmers I engaged with and in institutions such as the IAR is an important step forward.

However, we need to bear in mind that, at the moment, this position still seems to be confined to a minority. In Valle d'Aosta, not everyone agrees with the value my informants give to locally grown cereal, and some farmers find it difficult to find buyers and sell their grains. One farmer told how, after having invested quite some money in machinery, her family sowed three hectares of grains (which in Valle d'Aosta is an enormous amount of land,

considering that the whole cereal sector counted about 31 ha in 2018), but they couldn't find a baker who would help them baking bread to be sold in their farm shop. They are now selling flour by the kilo in the shop and using some for cakes and biscuits. They collaborated with the organisation of *Lo Pan Ner* celebration (mentioned in the second chapter), which is the only big sale they could arrange. She showed me their shed in which huge plastic tote bags full of different grains are waiting for someone to request them. They decided to discontinue the production, as there is no point in sowing all of those grains to end up feeding them to the hens (as she does). Cost was only one side of the problem this farmer faced, as (I assume) her lack of profit was mainly due to the fact that she couldn't find a market for her flour. This shows that the shift in mentality I have discussed earlier is a slow process, which has not sunken fully in the collective conception that Valdôtains have on such matters.

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In this chapter I have discussed how these new forms of engagement with cereal are a critique of the society in which they are embedded. This critique itself in turn stems from changes that have already happened among some people, such as a shift in mentality from quantity to quality and towards a more conscious way of conceiving of production and consumption. Choosing to base their project on values that do not align with the values more broadly spread in the region as well as in the mainstream industrial food provisioning system at a global level, people engaging with cereal in Valle d'Aosta are asserting their own opinion on how grains should be cultivated, bread baked and society organised. Doing so, they are also starting to work towards an alternative. In this way, these practices take on a political relevance which also has a moral dimension. In the next chapter, I will consider precisely the interplay between the political and moral implications of these forms of engagement with cereal, reflecting on socio-economic values.

Local Variety of Maize

Although it is debatable whether maize can be considered an indigenous species in Valle d'Aosta, as it originated in Central America, this cereal has been grown in Europe for centuries and it is the base for one of the most traditional dishes of Northern Italy, polenta.
Courtesy of Didier Chappoz

IV

Socio-Economic Values

Engaging with cereal in Valle d'Aosta as a moral and political endeavour

Engaging with cereal in Valle d'Aosta is not just a way of making a living, it is a moral project which also has political implications. While providing a comprehensive definition of "politics" is beyond the scope of this thesis, the reflection that will follow in this chapter is based on a broad conception of the political, seen as, with Antonio Gramsci, the realm in which the individual consciousness is brought into contact with the social and natural worlds (cf. Hoare and Nowell-Smith 1971:xxiii). I understand "politics" as encompassing the act managing public life beyond the act of governing a state; not only as the hierarchical process of governing or being governed by others, but also as the endeavour of governing oneself and what is collective starting from one's own individual choices.

As people working with cereal in Valle d'Aosta acknowledge the values behind the food industry and consciously step away from them, critiquing them through their material work as well as through their discourse (as discussed in the previous chapter), they are also starting to propose an alternative way of conceiving of and of doing agriculture, milling, and baking. In this way, consciously or unconsciously these people are actively working to redefine not only the material quality of bread, but also the underlying structural dynamics determining its poor quality. It is in this sense that these projects have a political dimension (cf. Grasseni 2014): cereal becomes a tool to address a larger problem as it speaks about the need of considering what to prioritise in our economy, which is in turn understood as the process of managing resources keeping in mind the needs of both the individual and the community. As this social critique and proposed alternative is carried out starting from one's own individual values concerning the collectivity and it implies a judgement, the political dimension of these projects takes on a moral character.

This chapter aims at exploring how morality and politics are played out by people engaging with cereal in Valle d'Aosta. Discussions on socio-economic values will serve as examples to reflect on my interlocutors' conception of the economy and of the role of the individual

towards the community. I will continue considering these cereal-related activities as a form of direct action, furthering the discussion about the political implications of these practices.

Before starting these reflections, it should be noted that, at the moment, these different cereal-related activities are not organised in one unitary movement, but they are fragmentary experiences, each with its own peculiarities. There is one association bringing together both professional and non-professional growers in the western area of the region, but this is an isolated case. There are individual collaborations between actors, such as between the IAR and some growers, or between one bakery and one grower. However, these different experiences are not organised under a common agenda, and communication and collaboration seemed to be scarce. The people I spoke to also hold different views, and the motivations that push every person, individually, to engage in these projects can be quite different, as different can be their ways of doing. In spite of this patchiness, I could observe a red thread linking these projects, and I will discuss their ethos not as a common and unitary manifesto, but rather as an intention that these different projects share, even though maybe unconsciously.

The economy as collective management of resources

The role of the individual and the production process

Reflecting on the conversations I had in the field, I would suggest that my interlocutors' political endeavour is based on a particular conception of the role of the individual in society and of the whole economic process, from production to exchange to consumption. At the core of this conception of the economy lies the idea that, when engaging in an economic activity, people should not only consider their own individual needs, but they should also acknowledge the needs of a collectivity and take consciousness about the impact that their own behaviour has on others. To say it with James Carrier, my interlocutors' choices are informed by transcendent values, where "[w]hat makes [a] value transcendent is that it is not simply utilitarian but is related to what that person sees as a better world" (2018:22). Against a conception of the individual as a maximiser who is constantly calculating the most advantageous option for themselves (cf. Graeber 2001:5ff.), people engaging with cereal in Valle d'Aosta acknowledge that there are multiple reasons which push them towards these activities, not all of which are necessarily geared toward maximising something (cf. Mauss 1925[2002:98]). Against the idea that the production process generates value in a measure

that equals the amount of profit deriving from the sale of the commodities produced, the schemes of thought that give value to the production process in the cereal sector of Valle d'Aosta are based on a much wider notion of what constitutes a valuable contribution to society. For these reasons, the conception that many of my informants have of the economy differs from neoliberal thought, and I found that going back to Aristotle's philosophy (cf. Dierksmeier and Pirson 2009), and especially to the distinction between *oikonomia* and *chrematistike* (outlined in the first chapter), can provide us with a theoretical framework by which to organise our understanding of my informants' motivations and choices.

I had the impression that many of the people I engaged with do not conceive of themselves as "commodity producers". Their work is not just seen as a necessary task to make a living either, but rather as a way of being in the community, a process through which they give meaning to their life as an individual, contributing positively to the making up of a larger whole[10]. They conceive of their activity as adding value in a measure that exceeds the market value of the commodities they produce. They conceive of their work as a way of providing *at the same time* a product for the person as an individual, a service for the person as a part of a larger whole, and for the community as an entity that exceeds the sum of the individuals of which it is made now, but that encompasses persons that may become a part of it in the future, as well as non-human beings such as cereal plants, the soil, the land. In this way, one could say that they are contributing to the "virtuous management of the public household", in line with Aristotle's concept of *oikonomia*.

Not all the value produced in this process can be defined in terms of price and subjected to the laws of private property. Thus, for instance in the case of the farm-bakery I visited, the owners see themselves as producing not only flour and bread, but for example also keeping a landscape and taking care of the soil. The good thus generated is not intended to benefit one single individual, but rather, for instance, the image of the municipality where the fields are located, or every person passing by the fields even accidentally, or even future generations who, if they wanted to cultivate those fields, will not have to take them back from wilderness, but will find instead a viable and cultivable land thanks to the work that is being done now (cf. Deguillame et al. in press:146). None of these aspects can be considered as someone's property, neither can they be named "commodity" and, for this reason and for lack of a better

10 While I will not delve into my informants' understanding of personal realisation, this point too could be connected to Aristotle and compared to his notion of *eudaimonia*, a form of happiness deriving from one's consciousness of being contributing to one's community and of living in virtuous harmony (Dierksmeier and Pirson 2009:420).

term, from now on I will refer to these contributions as “non-commodified good”. To sum up, with “non-commodified good” I intend that good (for instance, soil fertility or the beauty of a tended landscape) which cannot be measured by price nor considered a commodity and which is generated by a production process aiming at producing some other thing in addition to that good (for example, flour). The value resulting in this non-commodified good gets lost in a neoliberal conception of the economy, but it is fundamental in Aristotle’s *oikonomia*, as it is necessary in order to manage communal resources effectively.

La Vallée du Seigle: *On the interrelatedness of several issues*

The aim of considering at the same time individual and common good in an optics of collaboration implies that people need to take into account many different aspects and weigh them together against their own moral standard to judge what is the best possible choice at any given time. For example, one baker told me how he carefully considers which ingredients to choose or which recipes to adopt, and this process of selection is ongoing as he feels it necessary to always keep questioning himself and evaluate whether better options are available. In turn, this process of questioning also implies that the person needs to consider as inherently interrelated aspects that mainstream businesses usually treat as separated. Thus, the people I engaged with stress the importance of considering health, personal fulfillment, environment, culture and socio-economic conditions as being mutually dependent; they need to be taken into account simultaneously in a holistic approach that refuses to compartmentalise different aspects of life.

“*La Vallée du Seigle”*[11], an initiative promoted by the local municipality of Rhêmes-Saint-Georges in collaboration with the IAR, is an interesting case example showing how my interlocutors conceive of different issues as being interrelated. This project aims at reintroducing the cultivation of a particular variety of rye on the soil of Rhêmes-Saint-Georges, with the objective of creating an economy revolving around this cereal. The aims of this project are at multiple: maintaining biodiversity of both plant and animal life; managing the landscape; this last aspect is also linked to the promotion of a deeper experience for visitors, which would benefit at the same time from a beautiful tended landscape and from the opportunity of enjoying the rye products of the valley; this could also turn into an opportunity of sensitising visitors as well as locals or people living in the nearby town of Aosta on the

11 “The Rye Valley”, French. I will not consider the importance of the linguistic identity of Valle d’Aosta, but it suffices here to note that, although this is an Italian region, French is very important for cultural and historical reasons and it is the Region’s official language alongside Italian.

importance of supporting local products and producers; above all, the promoters of this project hope that it will have a positive impact on the socio-economic conditions of the place, as rye could become a source for integrating revenue, allowing farmers, food professionals and people working in hospitality to make a living on a territory that has been heavily affected by depopulation.

There is no common understanding of this conception of interrelatedness, as different people will emphasise different aspects. For example, some people may insist on the link between tradition and environmental values, while others may speak more about a concept of identity linked to the economic process, and so on. However, most (if not all) of my interlocutors stress the importance of coupling social and economic values. The last point listed in the example on *La Valleé du Seigle*, aiming at reversing the trend of depopulation, shows well how social and economic implications are considered simultaneously, and that the economic aspect is not always prevalent over other values, as a mentality of productivism and maximisation would entail. Similarly, all my research participants agreed on the fact that no-one will ever get rich from local cereal in Valle d'Aosta. However, even though making large profits is not their objective, economic value still has a relevance for most of the people I engaged with, as it is a means to work towards other ends: some people, as in the example above and in other cases, hope that cereal will provide them with enough economic resources to live on their land; some others hope that the presence of their activity in a determined place will have a positive impact on the wider economy of the place, for instance providing job opportunities, as it is the case for the bakeries I visited. In Valle d'Aosta specifically, guaranteeing the economic viability of agricultural activities also implies that people will be able to continue to live on the fields, with all the social and cultural implications that ensue in terms of management of the territory, conservation of biodiversity, maintenance of traditions and of cultural and gastronomic repertoires, and so on (cf. Martínez Álvarez 2019:75).

Non-commodified good and the interplay between individual and community

Choosing to give importance to non-commodified good (defined earlier, pp.48-49), as it is done in the project *La Vallée du Seigle*, people working with cereal are redefining the centrality of the concept of private property in the production process, although they are not aiming at abolishing private property altogether: The owners of the fields and of the bakery are still owning those things, workers are still getting their wage, customers are still buying bread or flour as commodities. It is not a negation of the individual and of their right to

ownership (cf. Dierksmeier and Pirson 2009:421): it is rather a recognition of the fact that persons are not atomised individuals, but they always necessarily exist in relation to other beings (both human and non-human). It reflects a consciousness that one person's productive activity affects a community that goes beyond the actors directly involved in the process of production, exchange and consumption, and this impact can be either positive or negative. What the people I engaged with are aiming at is making their impact as positive as possible, taking in consideration at the same time the needs of individuals, be they their own or their customers' needs (for example, the need of getting nutritious bread, but also the need of feeling fulfilled doing a job that is in line with one's personal values, the need of expressing one's sense of identity, the need of knowing that, as a customer purchasing a loaf of bread, one is supporting a business of which one approves) and the needs of the community (for example, the need of having a tended landscape, the need of keeping the soil fertile, the need of perpetuating a culture).

Thus, private and communal goods are not seen as standing necessarily in opposition, but they can and need to be addressed at once. This position is neither a negation of the person and of their individual needs in order to prioritise a hypothetical common good (as it happened historically in totalitarian regimes), nor a negation of the common good in order to prioritise the individual (as in Margaret Thatcher's famous quote "there's no such thing as society"). The individual and the community are not perceived as antithetic, as if serving the interests of the first necessarily damages the interests of the second and vice-versa. Instead of focusing on the possible competition between these poles, the people I engaged with decided to highlight that there are multiple ways in which, acting for one's own individual good, people are also generating good for the community. The focus is shifted from an optics of competition to an optics of collaboration. As one of my informants said, "there is no need to get jealous if someone starts to do the same thing we're doing, there's enough for everyone". Of course, there are instances where individual and communal interests are incompatible, and people have to prioritise either one or the other, but collaboration is chosen over competition as the main framework through which to organise one's thought (cf. Graeber 2001:29).

As we have seen, even though cereal-related activities in Valle d'Aosta are individual and not communitary projects, the political relevance of these endeavours stems from a conception of individual action as being necessarily related to the existence of a broader community. In Aristotle's thinking (Dierksmeier and Pirson 2009:421) as in many of my informants' perspective, any choice linked to the economic sphere needs to be conceived of as pertaining

to the domain of the political, for the economy is not a totalising and independent system, but an integral part of the public and political sphere. As such, Aristotle asserts that the economy needs to be informed by moral values even before being limited by legislative regulations (p.424). Similarly, my informants' endeavours are moral projects, as they call for the responsibility of individuals towards the community. Having as positive an impact as possible on the community becomes a moral imperative, which calls to people's conscience. As one of my informants highlighted, different people, of course, will have different conceptions of what "common good" means, and what she wishes is not that every person makes her same choices, but that everyone makes a choice which is conscious and informed (as she said, "ignorance is a choice"), weighed according to that person's moral standard. She feels like no personal choice should be condemned, but indifference.

Issues about consensus and lack of shared understanding

In Aristotle's philosophy, to work collectively for the common good, people in a community need to base their choices on a shared system of values, and there needs to be a common understanding of what constitutes the common good (Dierksmeier and Pirson 2009:420). However, the cereal sector in Valle d'Aosta remains a rather fragmented set of experiences, as I have mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. While most of the people I engaged with do inform their actions with strong values aiming at generating some good for the community, there is no shared understanding of what "good for the community" specifically means. Some projects are moving in similar directions, but sometimes people criticise another similar project on the basis of differences that to external observers might seem marginal. For example, one baker criticises the other because he uses baker's yeast, on the basis that bread baked this way is not really natural and that sourdough should be preferred in all instances. Focusing on such differences, people fail to see that they are striving for very similar principles, and that joining forces could be a resource for everyone.

This brings us to one of the issues that many of my interlocutors pointed to: the lack of collaboration between people. With the exception of one association bringing together growers in one specific area of the region, there isn't a real network of cooperation between and among bakers and farmers. One baker lamented that in Valle d'Aosta there isn't a bakers' union. Most of my informants suggested that if people were less stubborn (many of them insisted on this real or imagined characteristic of Valdôtains) they could form a consortium, put resources together and, for example, build a flour mill for everyone's sake. However, the

mentality of joining forces, while it is very well established in other regions of Italy such as Tuscany (Pratt 2013), is rather weak on this territory. While in the past sharing tools and services was necessary and there are still institutions which testimony the existence of commons, today people seem to have lost their habit to share resources, and, in the words of one of my interlocutors, they think “it only leads to problems with one’s neighbours”.

It is also important to note that collaboration and shared understanding of what constitutes the common good should not only involve dialogue among producers, but also between producers and people who are not directly working with cereal. These may be actual or potential customers, people living near the farms and bakeries, or even third parties who are completely detached from the world of Valdôtain cereal. Thus, communicating their motivations and purposes becomes highly important for some of my interlocutors, who aim at amplifying their projects by sharing their experiences with others. In particular, some people at the IAR stress the importance of explaining the reasons why things are done differently, for “if people understand you, if they get to know why rye is so important here, they will support you” (in their words). However, while people working with cereal wish that others understand their position, it seems like people working with cereal themselves are not always sympathetic with the position of other individuals in the community. In some cases I had the impression that people engaging with cereal are very much convinced of their ideas, and they are wishing to communicate their own vision of life rather than entering a dialogue with others. This may be perceived by others as a sign of arrogance and block possibilities of dialogue from the beginning. For example, the owners of one bakery decided to open their shop in a village that is “dying out” (in their words), as all the businesses are closing and the place is turning into a commuter village. Opening their bakery there, the owners hope to bring back some life to the place. However, there doesn’t seem to be a real dialogue between bakers and villagers, as villagers see the bakers’ strong ideological stance with suspicion, while the bakers in turn remain inflexible with their principles and, according to some villagers, are not really trying to integrate in the social life of the place, which is seen with even more suspicion by the villagers. Thus, communication is hard, the bakers do not feel recognised by the villagers, while the villagers feel judged by the bakers.

This last case is particularly telling. For the reasons highlighted in the last paragraphs, I would suggest that this whole conception of the economy, from the notion that the person “must act by taking into account his own interests, and those of society and its subgroups” (Mauss 1925[2002:89]), to the concept that productive activities generate value in a measure

that exceeds the market value of the commodities produced, passing through the concept that the interests of the individual and of the collectivity do not stand in opposition to one another, is not based on an actual reality, on a strong sense of community which is already existing and felt by the whole population of Valle d'Aosta. On the contrary, my interlocutors' moral and political stance stems precisely from the lack of such an understanding of the role of the individual in society. Working with such a strong ideological stance, the people I engaged with are not reproducing a model of society that already exists, but they are rather aiming at bringing about change in a way that conforms to their ideal. As such, people involved with cereal in Valle d'Aosta are engaging in a form of direct action: in Graeber's words, they are proceeding as if "the community" already exists (2009:203).

A form of direct action

Putting their values in practice through their work, my interlocutors are materialising in the present their vision of a better future. Their projects may be seen as a form of direct action: their means and ends become one, as their actions are a model for this imagined better future (Graeber 2009:210). As some people aim explicitly at generating some sort of change, their endeavour may be thought of as an example through which they are showing others that another way of conceiving of food and relating to its process of production is possible (Krøijer 2015). Some of my informants themselves confirm such an hypothesis: as one baker said, quoting Paulo Coelho, "the world is changed by your example, not by your opinion". Apart from warning us that it is necessary to carry out one's social critique through material actions and not through discourse alone, this quote also suggests that "changing the world" is a real possibility. Thus, it could also be seen as an exhortation to take on responsibility and start to make this future happen now, through one's own personal endeavour (also an attribute of direct action, Graeber 2009:203). People engaging with cereal in Valle d'Aosta, both those trying to communicate a strong political vision and those acting more privately, are getting involved personally to work for what they believe in, thus contributing to reshape dynamics which they do not endorse. They are not asking politicians, or workers' unions, or big investors, or the church, or anyone else in a position of power to make change happen, but they are rather embodying Gandhi's predicament "be the change you wish to see in the world", even though they may not be aware of this quote.

While to my knowledge my informants do not identify as anarchists and it would be improper to say that they share anarchic values, it is not necessary to be an anarchist to adopt an ethic of self-determination and autonomy. If one of the principles of direct action is to "plac[e] moral conscience up against the official law" (cited from the anarchist pamphlet *Sans-Titres Bulletin* in Graeber 2009:201), "the official law" does not necessarily have to be the law of the state: it can also be the law of the market, the law of social norms, or the law of habit. Several of my informants complained how "'it has always been done this way, so we will continue to do it this way' is one of the sentences that have done most damage in human history" (their words): at least for some of my interlocutors, there is a status quo, a "law" that one should "stand up against", and that should be changed in order to make society better.

Defining their own idea of what is a bread worth being eaten and baking it, people engaging with cereal in Valle d'Aosta are also working for their own rights. Doing things in a different way, they are reclaiming their right to their livelihood, and their right to express their ideals through their everyday work. As one of my informants reflected, they do not go as far as asking to get back *control* over the economic processes on which they and their communities depend, but they are rather claiming back their right to participate in this economy, to carve out a space for themselves in a system that "grinds you down" (in her words). Through their daily engagement with cereal, they are fighting for their right to creativity, for their right to have a say and to participate actively to defining what is worth eating and how it should be produced, rather than just executing someone else's vision. In this way, they are also addressing questions about power structures, as these people refuse to align with a conception of food, of work, of the market, and ultimately of life, which they do not endorse. They are claiming their own right to have an opinion, and the power of making a bread they like.
This attitude echoes the "Do It Yourself" (DIY) ethics born in the '70s among anti-capitalist movements (Holtzman, Hughes, and Van Meter 2007). It may seem odd to compare a retired man who is growing his own food and a punk teenager who is recording his own music, but, going beyond this first unusual image, the two are actually not that different: both are claiming the right to define what is good for them, and asserting their power of getting it outside of the relations imposed by the mainstream system. My informants may not be overtly anti-capitalist, and their sense of autonomy needs to be contextualised in the

particular political history of Valle d'Aosta (Chanoux 1944; Chabod 1961)[12] and cannot be reduced to an act of protest against the mainstream. However, the message is very similar: "we have a right to be dissatisfied with what the market is offering, and we have a right to produce for ourselves things that are in line with our own ethics". This overthrows a conception of capitalism as all-encompassing and ever-present in directing all our choices as a consumer, and such a realisation can be important in redefining the conception of "the system" that is currently dominating (cf. Ho 2005; Tsing 2013).

It is also important to note that this political intent can be conscious or not. Some of my informants, particularly professionals, have a clear political aim, and critiquing society is a fundamental part of their projects. For this reason they also communicate their ideological stance to others, sensitising their customers to the matters they find significant in a way that may remind the Gramscian conception of political education aiming at redefining the current hegemony (cf. Hobsbawm 1977:209). There are also people, such as non-professional farmers and bakers, whose priority is not necessarily having an impact on society or engaging in social critique, but rather procuring better food for themselves and their own families. I had the impression that their endeavour is private rather than public: they do not aim at making other people change their minds, but they rather wish to conduct a life in line with their own moral principles. However, the fact that they keep their ideology for themselves and that they do not aim at communicating it to others does not mean that their activities are not political. Even if their intent may not be political, their action is (cf. Harper and Afonso 2019; Speck 2019), and the fact that they are doing things in a certain way (growing their own grains and baking their own bread), choosing consciously not to align with what the majority of people do (buying bread), is just another form of critique, which may be less explicit but not less meaningful.

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In this chapter I focused on cereal-related activities in Valle d'Aosta as political projects with a moral base. First, I attempted an interpretation of how a better society may look like from

12 By this I do not intend to say that all my informants necessarily agree with the political conception of autonomy and particularism which shaped the history of Valle d'Aosta over the centuries and particularly immediately after World War II, but it needs to be acknowledged that talking about "autonomy" in this territory is necessarily connected to reflections about the political condition of Valle d'Aosta as an Autonomous Region and feeds onto a significant historical and political baggage.

some of my interlocutors' perspective, discussing a conception of the economy as the collective management of resources aiming at public good. Then, I discussed some of the methods through which they aim at materialising such a vision, with a reflection on direct action and on the right to express one's ideal. So far, along the chapters I have exposed my informants' experiences, trying to understand the meanings they give to their activities. In the next chapter, I will broaden my focus, attempting a discussion on the implications that these experiences can have beyond this particular context. If it is true that, following my interlocutors' line of thought, the value their activities generate exceeds the market value of the commodities they produce, I will try to consider whether we, as readers and spectators of their actions, can somehow partake of this richness, taking their example as a learning opportunity.

Bread Loading

Traditional baking is a collective endeavour, as many pairs of hands are necessary to ensure the good outcome of a bake: some people care for the oven and ensure that it is ready on time, while others make the dough, shape loaves and supervise the proofing of bread. Baking is also a social occasion, bringing people together in a moment of conviviality.

V

Beyond Cereal

A reflection on values, the gift and the concept of productivity

Trying to understand the perspectives of people engaging with cereal in Valle d'Aosta may help us to think differently about aspects of life that we may take for granted, even beyond the boundaries of those particular experiences. The aim of this chapter is to consider some of the ways in which these projects can make us rethink how we conceive of larger issues linked to our understanding of the economy. First, I will come back to the discourse on food values, highlighting the impossibility of disentangling the multiple values informing any economic phenomenon. I will continue suggesting that the exchange of objects embodying the values we have discussed along the chapters takes on qualities that could be ascribed to the gift. Last, I will discuss how, through their particular conception of the economy, these people are questioning the dichotomy consumers-producers and redefining the meaning of productivity.

Different forms of value

Rethinking analytical concepts

As introduced in the theoretical background (chapter I), anthropological studies highlight the importance of considering that food production, exchange and consumption are informed by several values (e.g. Siniscalchi and Harper 2019). As shown along the chapters, the case of cereal-related projects in Valle d'Aosta can be seen as contributing to this body of research, as this is yet another example of the impossibility of reducing an economic activity to one single value: values of tradition and identity, health, environment, personal realisation, socio-economic sustainability, and surely more, all play a role in defining people's thought and behaviour in this context.

One step further, the observation of these experiences shows that there are instances in which it is impossible to trace a sharp line between economic and other values. Indeed, even though it would be tempting say that it is necessary to "consider simultaneously two forms of value – on the one hand, economic or market value measured by price and, on the other, moral,

political and social values established by human actions and beliefs" (Counihan 2019:x), this divide might be misleading. This tension at separating "economic" and "other forms of value" is not only evident in previous literature, but also among my informants themselves, who looked relieved at seeing that I recognise value in their work beyond the profit that may (or may not) come out of it. However, in the case of Valle d'Aosta like in others (e.g. Zerilli and Pitzalis 2019), economic thinking itself takes on values that are not strictly related to the market, as the primary aim of receiving money for one's activity is not making profit as a final goal, but procuring for oneself and one's families the necessary economic resources to live with dignity and ensure the continuation of a livelihood that is valuable for the individual and for the community. Farmers do not aim at getting rich with cereal, but they are asking to be rewarded for their efforts, they are asking that people recognise the multifarious values that agricultural work in this environment generates. As discussed in the previous chapter, farmers cannot be reduced to the role of cereal producers, as the service they provide to the community in tending the land, caring for the landscape, protecting biodiversity and conserving a cultural repertoire is much wider.

Another example: some bakers I engaged with conceive of buying ingredients as a way of supporting like-minded businesses. Here as in the case of farmers above, economic value acquires a meaning that is more akin to the political, social and moral spheres rather than to the economic sphere narrowly defined, and it would be impossible to classify it either on the one side or on the other, as all these elements play an important role in defining these endeavours. As suggested in chapter four, this conception of the role of the economy can be compared to the Aristotelian notion of *oikonomia*: if "economics" are by definition the moral management of the "household", then the tension at separating "economic" and "other forms of value" would be pointless, as those "other values" would be identified as an integral part of economic thinking. Thus, considering the economic sphere as being strictly correlated to the political, social, cultural and even moral or philosophical sphere may lead to a redefinition of our conception of the role of the economy towards individuals and society. Decoupling the quest for profit on which chrematistic thinking is based and the concept of economy could help us to conceive businesses not as profit-making machines getting richer at the expenses of someone else, but as fundamental contributors in the social life of a community, while shifting the locus of economics from the maximisation of money to the management of both private and common resources, as some people engaging with cereal in

Valle d'Aosta seem to be doing, may help us to develop a deeper and more encompassing critique of socio-economic systems.

A consideration on economic sustainability

It is important to note that in Aristotelian thinking making profit is not condemned as long as it has a purpose transcending the sheer desire of accumulating wealth. Wealth is true wealth only when it is put to use (Dierksmeier and Pirson 2009:422). Similarly, my informants highlight the importance of selling and making profit as a means to work towards a better management of a community, and as a way to ensure an increased common well-being. As for Aristotle chrematistic thinking remains a significant aspect of economic activities, in the same way, for my interlocutors economic sustainability remains important, and it (or the lack thereof) is also one of the reasons why some of the people I met decided to quit their idea of growing cereal or using local cereal as an ingredient.

We already met one such person in chapter three, where I wrote about the farmer who couldn't find a market for her grains. The case of the only beer brewer I engaged with is somewhat similar, as excessive production costs led him to abandon his idea of making a 100% Valdôtain beer. This brewery is bigger in scope compared to the average business I met during fieldwork, and, while its aim is to brew for the Valley, it also exports to other regions in Italy and to bordering countries such as France and Switzerland. I was told how their ambition is to become the brewers for the people of Valle d'Aosta, as once was the historic Zimmermann brewery, which produced most of the beer consumed in the Valley for over a century, before being absorbed by a bigger German company in the '70s. This statement did not pass through as an arrogant attempt at monopolising a market, as it may seem at first sight, but I had the impression that this brewer is truly concerned in giving a good product to his own people, and building a relationship of mutual trust and (in his own words) affection between brewer and consumers, between drinkers and beer. The next logical step was to brew beer from Valdôtains for Valdôtains using only Valdôtain ingredients. With his business partner, my interlocutor did many experiments at sourcing local barley, first planting it, then buying it from a local farmer, but, similarly to the case of flour mills, there are no maltsters in the region, and carrying the grains a long way to be malted is a costly process. After a few years of trials, the partners decided to drop the search for local barley, as it is too expensive to source and malt, and, additionally, it is not determinant for developing taste in the final product. Hops have a much higher impact on flavour, and the brewery will now turn to

experiment with locally grown hops instead. A similar process occurred with rye: The brewery offers a rye-based white beer, which for some time was made from local rye. They are now using rye grown elsewhere because the quality of the product did not justify its costs.

On the relational qualities of cereal products in Valle d'Aosta and on the gift

Cultivating relationships

The tension between the flavour of local cereal and its cost, which I just mentioned, is an interesting point. My interlocutor said that the brewery was organising guided tours of the premises to show their brewing process. He told how one visitor once asked what was the difference between local rye and other types of rye. "That's right, what's the difference in the end?", my interlocutor continued. "The only difference is that it has been grown here". What makes cereals grown in Valle d'Aosta different from cereals grown elsewhere resides in the relationships that their cultivation has fostered. Cereals grown in Valle d'Aosta are not "special" for some determined material characteristics, although some non-professional farmers say they really prefer the taste of the flour they make, and one chef prepares her dishes with one particular variety of rye for its organoleptic profile. However, I believe that these are only marginal motivations. The deeper reason why this chef uses this kind of rye is that she believes in the philosophical project behind it. She told me how she believes in the possibility of preparing food that is at the same time nutritious and delicious, that is respectful of the environment and that supports the livelihood of local farmers. The real meaning of these cereals is that they have been grown on a territory on which intensive farming is not possible, in which doing agriculture is hard work, using techniques that are respectful of the environment and contribute to maintain biodiversity. They are special because they have been made by people who, because of the sale of these products, will be able to stay on a territory which is being affected by depopulation, guaranteeing the perpetuation of a livelihood, of a culture and the management of a territory.

It is in this sense that I suggested that these products are grown for the social relationships they generate rather than for the material things that come out of the production process. The relationships that ensue bring together several people, but they are also a link between today's inhabitants of these places and those who will come in the future, as well as between humans and non-humans such as cereal plants, the soil, or even immaterial things such as one's

cultural roots. For what I could understand during fieldwork, engaging with locally grown cereal in Valle d'Aosta is not that much aiming at producing something (as discussed in chapter four), but it is rather a way of being in the world, of participating in the life of a place and of a community, of asserting one's role in a larger whole. It is an act of correspondence in Tim Ingold's terms: "Correspondence, whether with people or with other things, is a labour of love, of giving back what we owe to the human and non-human beings with which and with whom we share our world, for our own existence and formation" (2018:217). As such, I would say that the goods produced in this way, while being exchanged for money in a commodity-type of relation, take on characteristics that might be ascribed to the gift (cf. Mauss 1925[2002]).

Elements of gift exchange in cereal-related practices in Valle d'Aosta

I will not enter the anthropological debate on whether the theoretical categorisation between gift and commodity exchange is meaningful. I am also not in the position to assess whether flour or bread produced from local grains in Valle d'Aosta are a product of alienated labour: they may as well be, as, for instance, different people in each of the bakeries I visited have different motivations, and for some of them baking is "just work". When one good is the outcome of a collective endeavour, and the people contributing to its production process have different views and ways of relating to the work itself, it is misleading to represent that good as the product of one single vision and of one single way of experiencing the process. And as Anna Tsing points out, on top of that it is not always easy or even feasible to distinguish between the "gift-versus-commodity identities" of things (2013:22). However, if we start from an understanding of gift exchange that defines it as a process in which the object exchanged takes on something of the giver (Mauss 1925[2002:15–16]), then the cereal products we are discussing certainly have this quality, as it is precisely the identity of the givers and the fact that they base their choices on moral values that determine the value which other people accord to these products. In the case of non-professionals this parallel with the gift is even more evident, as breads are effectively offered as gifts.

Traditional Valdotain society presents several characteristics of a gift economy: for instance, breads were given to thank people for their help during harvests, thus being the reciprocation of a gift previously received. As discussed above, today cereal-related activities (both commercial and non-commercial) are also incorporating elements of gift economies: as such, they seem to be moving in the direction that Marcel Mauss advocated for at the end of his

essay *The Gift* (1925[2002]), where the author insists that understanding other economic systems must become a source of inspiration to move towards a less alienated and more inclusive economy based on personal relationships (pp.83-107). For "to note the fact is not enough. One must deduce practice from it, and a moral precept" (p.87). My interlocutors may not be aware of the concept of gift economy and of the existence of such models in faraway places and cultures, but they do see something similar in the past of their own society, which becomes a source of inspiration to move towards a better future.

Questions of perspective

As I have mentioned in chapter four as well as earlier in this chapter, it is important to note that not everyone involved with local cereal in Valle d'Aosta shares the same values. For instance, employees may have different motivations compared to business owners, and different people may give more weight to some values rather than others. The employee of a bakery I visited said that when they got local rye, "it was not working as well as the other rye we were using before" (produced elsewhere). Thus, he expressed a judgement, questioning the assumption that the social relations embedded in local rye are worth the extra work needed to compensate for a flour with poorer baking characteristics. Similarly, the brewer we met earlier assessed that the social relations built in local cereals are not worth their cost. "Cost" does not necessarily mean "price", but it can also be related to the quality of the final product (as in the case of the brewer who abandoned the idea of brewing local barley), or to the effort needed to use an ingredient rather than another (as in the case of the baker experimenting with local rye).

This points to the fact that it is always necessary to put things in perspective: when looking for a well-performing and cost-effective product, choices will be done differently than when aiming at generating social relationships through the act of buying. These two extremes are also not mutually exclusive: our beer brewer did try to engage in such relationships, hence we can deduce that he does have an interest in such a possibility. However, after some years of trials he judged that the costs of such an engagement overcame the benefits, and he deemed it better to "be realistic" (his words) and change his strategy. This example shows how it is necessary to recognise that when talking about personal values things are never so clear cut, and that, although social theories representing individuals as constantly weighing out risks and benefits have been critiqued as lacking nuance and being too business-oriented (e.g. Graeber 2001:5ff.), at times people have to balance competing interests and try to find the

middle ground that they think is best in their position. Indeed, not all the values participating to this projects are always compatible with one another, and at times it is necessary for people to choose which ones to prioritise.

Rethinking the roles of producers and consumers and redefining "productivity"

Several implications ensue from the conception that productive activities generate value in a measure that exceeds the market value of the commodities produced (discussed in the fourth chapter). First, such a conception blurs the line between those who are conventionally thought of as "producers" and "consumers", categories of people which are perceived as benefitting in different ways from the productive activity: the consumer benefits from the property of the commodity purchased, the producer benefits from the money received in exchange for the commodity (either directly or indirectly through wage). Second, in the common understanding of productivity, only people involved in a production process professionally are truly seen as being *productive*. Thus, in a neoliberal conception of productive processes, bakers and farmers engaging in their activities in exchange for money are thought of as "producers", and they are seen as benefitting from the profits of the sale of the commodities they produce. However, these people are also a part of the community who benefits from that non-commodified good they produce through their work of tending the land, nurturing the soil, maintaining biodiversity and cultural heritage and so on. In this way, they also benefit from their productive activities from a position conventionally thought of as the role of a "consumer". It seems an absurdity, though, to state that a person "consumes", for instance, the awareness that the soil of their council has been cared for, or that biodiversity is being protected; it would be inappropriate to say that "the community" is "consuming" the good produced by bakers and farmers in this way. This suggests that the dichotomy producer-consumer is not always appropriate to represent people's experiences, as the ways people relate to and benefit from a productive activity may be diverse.

In the case of non-professionals, the problematic nature of distinguishing between producers and consumers is even more striking: as the same person produces and consumes the goods produced, these roles collapse into one another[13]. However, the implication of the existence of these activities goes beyond a questioning of categories. Indeed, even though they do not commercialise their produce, non-professionals are not only working for themselves when

13 Sometimes people engaging in such activities are referred to as "prosumers" (e.g. Kosnik 2018).

producing goods that would be thought of as commodities, were they put on the market: they too are providing the community with those services of landscape management, soil preservation, biodiversity and cultural conservation and so on, generating what we called non-commodified good. This may redefine what “contributing to the community” means, putting into question what is the real nature of a productive activity. It is not necessary to produce commodities to contribute to the community. It is not necessary for an activity to be waged to call it “work”.

This redefinition of the concept of productivity could also have practical implications, for example for policy-making. Most public regulations are based on a definition of productivity that identifies producers with professionals only, and that conceives of the quantity of commodities produced as a chief criterion to determine the value of a productive activity. For example, one important aspect of the European Union’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) are agriculture subsidies, which are allocated according to the hectares of land a farm cultivates. This system has been questioned for several reasons, and especially on the grounds that it disregards the differences between large-scale and small-scale farms, ultimately privileging enterprises owning larger extensions of land over small-scale farmers (Thivet 2019:95–96). To these criticisms, I would add that this policy does not take into account the non-commodified good that professionals and non-professionals alike generate. Acknowledging that these people are working for the community in ways that transcend the production of food could lead to more inclusive policies.

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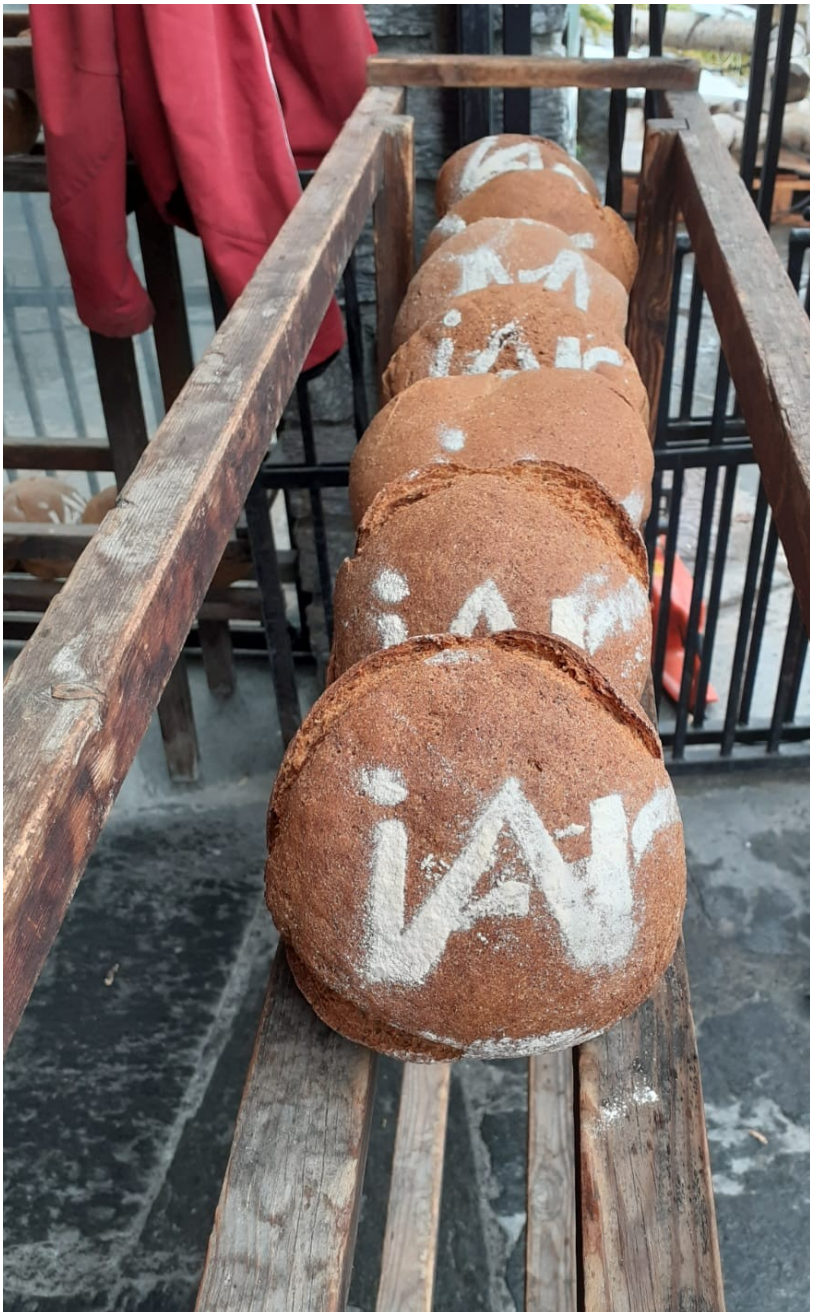
As I have suggested in this chapter, observing cereal-related practices in Valle d’Aosta can become an occasion to reflect on issues that go well beyond these particular experiences. Understanding the points of view of these people may be a valuable tool to get awareness on the fact that the categories through which we think about economic processes, such as what constitutes value in the economy, the distinction between producers and consumers, or the meaning of productivity, are cultural products. Other ways of conceiving of the role of the person in the productive process and in society at large are possible. So far, in Valle d’Aosta the schemes of thought I discussed along the chapters seem to be confined to a minority. Time will tell whether my interlocutors will be able to communicate their values to the broader

society, generating more awareness on the implications of one's food choices and redefining the social structures of Valle d'Aosta, or if these cereal-related projects will slowly die out, as a temporary fad too distant from other Valdôtains' ways of seeing the world to get truly incorporated into the common understanding of the economy in the Valley.



Pan Ner

Pan ner *is traditionally baked in December and, today, it is offered to friends and relatives as a gift around Christmas time. In this photograph, breads baked by staff and students of the IAR, to be offered as Christmas gifts to IAR's employees.*
Courtesy of Diego Arlian

Conclusion

Bread and cereal can be invested with values that go far beyond their being “just food”. The aim of this research was to explore some of those values through anthropological research with people engaging with local cereal in Valle d’Aosta, considering the meaning they give to their activities as a spectacle for understanding their conception of the role of the economy towards society. Along the chapters, I have discussed five such values: values of tradition, values of community and individual place identity, values related to health, environmental and socio-economic values. Through a discussion on temporality (Hirsch and Stewart 2005; Knight and Stewart 2016), chapter II represented cereal as a bridge between past, present and future. Cereal can become a tool through which individuals and communities express their identity in relation to the past and to the territory they live in, but looking at the past is not just an aim *per se*, as it becomes a source of inspiration to acknowledge that things can be done differently and to work towards a better future. Thus, as exposed in chapter III drawing on Graeber’s theory of value (2001), engaging with local cereal people are also critiquing social structures (of which they are aware) underlying the production, exchange and consumption of cereal-related products in the industrial mainstream food provisioning system. This critique itself stems from a shift in values that has already happened, and it is based on a particular conception of the economy, which I tried at understanding in chapter IV. I suggested that these cereal-related projects have moral and political implications as they are based on a vision of businesses as a constituent part of the community, of which individuals must be mindful when defining their business strategies. In line with Aristotle’s concept of *oikonomia* (Dierksmeier and Pirson 2009), the economy is seen as the moral management of resources rather than as a tool for profit maximisation, while productive activities are conceived of as generating value in a measure that exceeds the market value of the commodities produced. Finally, in chapter V I suggested that looking at production processes through my interlocutors’ perspective may influence how we represent and deal with the economic sphere, for example highlighting the impossibility of separating economic value form other values in contexts of food production, or reconsidering what a productive activity is.

During fieldwork I did not achieve a degree of confidence high enough to talk about politics with my informants, and I believe that this is one of the greatest limitations of my research. Thus, my discussion is based on my own understanding of politics, which has been influenced, among others, by the theories I exposed in this thesis and by the interactions I had in the field. I applied my vision of politics to what I understood as being my informants' vision of the economy. However, their own conception of what constitutes both the political and the economic sphere might be different, and they might not conceive of their experiences in such a political light. Further research on the vision that people engaging with cereal in Valle d'Aosta themselves have of politics could add nuance to the representation I attempted in this thesis. Another aspect that might be worth investigating further is the tension between my interlocutors' values and the values of the communities in which they operate, deepening the discussion on imagined or potential values versus embodied and normalised values. Third, while I chose to focus on positive and empowering aspects, inquiring on the ways in which the endeavours of people engaging with cereal are impeded by structural inequalities might be a further direction in which research on the cereal sector of Valle d'Aosta might be developed.

Indeed, representing the power structures by which people are oppressed and denied action is a valuable contribution that anthropology has made in the past and that it should continue to make in the future. However, addressing solely the negative and repressive aspects of the current world system is unlikely to show ways forward, and it risks to make readers and researchers alike drop into a spiral of hopelessness and depression. Focusing on people's creative social agency and showing instances in which individual projects are taking back terrain from current structures of oppression, as I believe people engaging with cereal in Valle d'Aosta are doing, may enable scholars to contribute to the ethical endeavour of anthropology as a form of "moral optimism", that is, an anthropology being able to inspire societal hope in the risk society in which we are living (Murphy and McDonagh 2016:xxiii), thus claiming back for academia some of that inspiring power it seems to have lost after the postmodernist turn (cf. Graeber 2001, 2004).

What we can keep from the people who engage with cereal in Valle d'Aosta is a message of hope, of resistance, and of moral integrity. We will never be able to predict exactly how our actions will influence the future, but this is not an excuse not to take any action. We may not be able to change the world, but we can start to change how we think. We can start to change

how we bake. We can start to change which ingredients we bake with. Who we bake for. Where we bake, and with whom, and why. We can start to ask questions. We can start to be more honest with ourselves and break habits that do not conform to our values. And above all, we can start to imagine that things can be done differently. Many people say they want change, that the environmental situation is reaching a tipping point, that there is not enough social justice. However, not many people have started to consider how this transformed society could actually look like (Graeber 2004). It seems like we are falling short of imagination, at least in the academic world. People engaging with cereal in Valle d'Aosta are doing just that. They are not proposing an abstract and idealistic plan to fix the world, but they are starting to change just one thing, one simple thing: bread. And what is baked in this loaf of bread is not just flour: it is an alternative. It is a way out. An imagined better future. As one person told me, "I don't like to drink Coca-Cola, because I am not drinking a drink, I am drinking a system". Eating bread made from local cereal in Valle d'Aosta is also not just eating bread: it is eating an idea. And, as Giorgo Gaber sings it,

Un'idea, un concetto, un'idea, finché resta un'idea è soltanto un'astrazione.
Se potessi mangiare un'idea, avrei fatto la mia rivoluzione.

An idea, a concept, an idea, until it remains an idea it is only an abstraction.
If I could eat an idea I would have made my revolution.

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