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Domenico Secondulfo, Francesca Setiffi

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1. Author's information

Domenico Secondulfo, Department of Philosophy, Education and Psychology, University of Verona, Italy

Francesca Setiffi, Department of Political Science, Law and International Studies, University of Padova, Italy.

2. Contact authors' email addresses

Domenico Secondulfo domenico.secondulfo@univr.it

Francesca Setiffi francesca.setiffi@unipd.it

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Crisis and Consumption in Europe

Domenico Secondulfo*, Francesca Setiffi**

Corresponding author:
Francesca Setiffi
E-mail: francesca.setiffi@unipd.it

1. Introduction

The crisis has been gnawing away at Europe for years now. The various European states, each with their own particular economic, cultural and social characteristics, have responded differently to the challenge, often with reactions that have brought those very differences that distinguish them to the fore. Within the general landscape of these increasing social and economic differences, both between the states and within them - also brought about by the deep crisis suffered by the same middle-class which led the economic and social expansion that came before - it is possible to observe some significant differences in both the reactions and consequences across the various member states. The problem has been approached from many perspectives in economic, political and sociological scholarship, but here we have chosen to examine it through the consumer. The special section “Crisis and Consumption in Europe” represents an attempt to understand the different strategies of reaction adopted by European consumers following the economic and social changes that began in 2008. An initial round table was held at the conference from which this section takes its name, held in Verona in October 2014. The discussion revealed the various faces of the European crisis and the differing rates at which it impacted each country. The monographic section in this issue of *Italian Sociological Review* broadens the international perspective and examines how the Italians, French, Estonians, Norwegians, and the Dutch are dealing with such an economic and social crisis. As is well known, the crisis affects each European country in different

* Department of Philosophy, Education and Psychology, University of Verona, Italy.

** Department of Political Science, Law and International Studies, University of Padova, Italy.

ways and in turn the macro-economic health of each State influences the purchasing power of families to different degrees. The expression “multi-speed Europe” usually refers to the staggered integration process that presumes the initial adherence of a group of member States to a set of community objectives, pointing to a future moment of commitment of other member states to those same community objectives. Likewise, the economic, cultural and social crisis has had a different impact and has provoked different reactions from country to country, a point which our colleagues demonstrate here to be fundamental for discussing the relationship between the crisis and consumption in their countries. Each contribution represents an attempt to understand how the crisis is transforming the strategies, selection processes and the identity construction of consumers. Together they mark an initial phase of reflection on the crisis and highlight the distinctiveness of each European country’s response to the challenges it has brought.

The section opens with Domenico Secondulfo and Luigi Tronca’s article *The Crisis and Italian Families* which discusses the response strategies of Italian families to the crisis. Beginning with a close analysis of data from 2009-2013 collected at the Osservatorio sulle Strategie di Consumo delle Famiglie Italiane (Università di Verona), the authors examine the reaction strategies of consumers and draw some conclusions about the trends and lifestyles of Italian families taking into consideration purchase choices, brand relationships, and distribution channels. The article also investigates the requests for financial assistance made by Italian families, highlighting how primary networks still play a crucial role in Italian society.

From a cultural perspective, consumption represents a type of social tie. To consume is to be a part of a society and to be recognized as a “real member”. Social isolation also occurs through exclusion from the market and from the “standard package” access to which define one’s belonging to social circles. Serge Paugam’s essay *Social Bonds and Coping Strategies of Unemployed People in Europe* investigates the social isolation experienced by people who are excluded from the job market in different European countries: France, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Romania and Ireland. Paugam identifies the reason for the creation of different coping strategies in Northern and Southern Europe in different types of social ties: the lineal bond, the elective participation bond and the citizenship bond.

Triin Vihalemm, Margit Keller and Kristin Pihu’s article *Consumers during the 2008–2011 Economic Crisis in Estonia: Mainstream and Grass Roots Media Discourses* reflects on the evolution of the culture of consumption. Empirically based, the essay provides a detailed reconstruction of how consumption was represented during the crisis in the Estonian-language press, forums and blogs. The authors’ reflections on the public data provide a complete picture

of the consumption practices of the middle-class Estonian. Moreover, Estonia offers a unique case study of the values and behavior models of the family since the culture matrix of consumption there is not only tied to the exhibition of status symbols. Indeed, following Estonian national independence in 1991, consumption has also been symbolic of a “western way of life”.

In the essay, *Consuming the Home. Walking the Thin Line between Welfare and Catastrophe*, Elling Borgeraas, Christian Poppe and Randi Lavik (SIFO-National Centre for Consumer Research) analyze the risks to which Norwegian consumers are subjected in relation to the country’s institutionalization of equity borrowing as a source of welfare. The authors demonstrate how the exponential rise in housing costs is both impeding two-income families from buying houses in central areas and simultaneously exposing many homeowners seeking to make corrective financial adjustments to risky debt scenarios. The article discusses some possible strategies of public and private financial correction and underlines the risk of leaving the regulation of financial consumption choices to the market.

Stefan Wahlen concludes the international panorama with his article *Crisis, Social Inequality and Consumption – a Dutch Perspective*. The article analyzes the behavior of Dutch consumers in three macro-sectors: food, home, and mobility. Wahlen dedicates particular attention to the consumption choices of less affluent families providing a new reading on the theme of social inequality based on consumption. The three areas chosen by the author highlight the changes that occur to the lifestyles of consumers in the short term and over longer periods, giving us a picture of the current situation in the country and its future evolution.

The special section concludes with an essay by Gian Paolo Lazzer, *Consumption Epiphany: from Abstract to Material*. The essay provides an innovative reading of the primary practice theory, material cultural, and science and technology studies (STS) approaches. Lazzer’s pages demonstrate the danger of constructing a theory of consumption that is excessively rooted in symbolism or, inversely, in materiality. Though the theories and approaches discussed by Lazzer originate in different intellectual currents, the author demonstrates how studying them together can provide a fruitful and comparative intellectual reflection on the themes of consumption and materiality.

Happy reading! Domenico Secondulfo, Francesca Setiffi
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