Solidarity in the age of Covid-19: A Neapolitan tradition, the ‘caffè sospeso’, has provided the inspiration for a new form of community-spirited solidarity: anonymous mutual assistance

By Gregorio Fuschillo, Assistant professor in marketing at KEDGE and Bernard Cova, Senior professor in marketing at KEDGE

The Italian ‘caffè sospeso’ or ‘suspended coffee’ is a community spirited tradition from the Naples area. It involves paying for two coffees, one for yourself and the second for another customer at the bar who may possibly not have enough money to buy one. A Neapolitan tradition, the suspended coffee is a coffee you offer to humankind to share your own joy and good fortune. With the current lockdown restrictions, this tradition has assumed a whole new dimension with the emergence of ‘spesa sospesa’ (suspended shopping) a humanitarian gesture to help those who have lost their source of income. Gregorio Fuschillo and Bernard Cova see this altruistic anonymous gift as a wish to give meaning to one’s day-to-day life.

The economic problems brought about by Covid-19 for some individuals and families under lockdown have seen the suspended coffee tradition transformed into ‘spesa sospesa’ (suspended shopping). You will see ‘chi ha lascia, chi non ha prende’ displayed in many Italian shops (donated by those who can afford it to those who cannot). In this way, citizens can leave some of their shopping for strangers in need. A concept which resembles what the Food Bank does but in an institutionalised manner. This practice is part of a wider phenomenon of mutual assistance among complete strangers.

The anthropological basis for mutual assistance

Mutual assistance is a social practice that seeks to bring about the success or the creation of something benefiting another person first and foremost. Life in pre-modern societies was characterised above all by local solidarity and mutual assistance which took place within a person’s inner circle, taking the form of services which were tangible and material (donating money or tools, etc.) or intangible (offering help, exchanging information, etc.). These forms of mutual assistance forge social bonds within the community. They are the very basis of family ties, in which family members pool and share their belongings rather than selling or buying them.

However, the influence of the individualistic mindset and the crucial role of consumption in today’s societies have seen the emergence of new forms of mutual assistance. We are seeing the appearance of anonymous solidarity, a form of mutual assistance performed in favour of people inhabiting the local area. Anonymous solidarity does not necessarily seek to establish a direct, dependence-based relationship with another person, as demonstrated by the spesa sospesa. It is often the case that the person receiving the gift is unable to thank the person giving it. This calls into question the traditional “gift-giving circle” - giving, receiving, giving back - which is central to all forms of assistance, mutual aid and solidarity, and which seeks to forge a link between individuals based on a relationship of dependency. On the contrary, the spesa sospesa is an example of a gift giving made to no one in particular and therefore to humanity as a whole.

Mutual assistance to reaffirm a sense of citizenship, something which is under significant strain in the current context

In his latest book Extensions du domaine du don, Alain Caillé reminds us that gift giving is part of our day-to-day consumption. The spesa sospesa enables consumers to maintain a feeling of togetherness and community-spiritedness at a time when the possibilities for contact and social links have been temporarily suspended due to the lockdown caused by Covid-19. Here, the notion of community-spiritedness takes the form of a multicultural construct in which taking care
of others and working to improve social life is a very important aspect. Our societies include many small gestures such as holding the door open for someone, helping a passer-by who needs a hand, leaving food for the charities involved in feeding the homeless or passing on your valid parking, metro or bus ticket to a stranger. All of these gestures make it possible to maintain at least a minimal degree of community-spiritedness. Consumer goods become channels for giving and humanity, which help individuals to recreate the feeling of proximity through solidarity and mutual support, particularly in the anonymity of urban environments.

Our life in lockdown is one involving virtual relationships. In fact, we are not only seeking relationships with and recognition from others. We are also looking for ‘resonance’ in the sense of the term used by Hartmut Rosa in his eponymous book. And at a time when Covid-19 confines and alienates us, trapping us in contactless relationships, practices such as the spesa sospesa help us escape this alienation, bringing us into resonance with humanity. By partaking in this activity, we achieve moments of grace, resonating with all fellow humans experiencing lockdown. The spesa sospesa creates a space of resonance in this world in lockdown.

Gregorio Fuschillo and Bernard Cova are at your disposal should you have any requests for an interview or coverage of this topical subject.

About Gregorio Fuschillo:
Gregorio Fuschillo is an Assistant Professor of marketing at KEDGE Business School. He has also been a visiting researcher at Nanyang Technological University, in Singapore, at the SDU (Syddansk Universitet), in Denmark and at RMIT, Melbourne, Australia. His research topics focus on consumer culture, consumer identity, and fandom and religious studies. He is the author of academic articles published in journals such as the Journal of Consumer Culture, the Journal of Consumer Behaviour, La Revue Française de Gestion, La Revue du MAUSS, Micro & Macro Marketing.

About Bernard Cova:
Bernard Cova is a senior professor in marketing at KEDGE Business School and a pioneer in the field of collective consumption since the early 1990s. His influential international research has opened the way to approaches focusing on brand communities. His work on this subject has been published in the International Journal of Research in Marketing, the European Journal of Marketing, Marketing Theory and the Journal of Business Research. He is also known for his innovative research into B2B marketing, particularly in the field of marketing solutions. His work on this subject has been published in the Journal of Marketing Management, the Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing and Industrial Marketing Management.

About KEDGE:
KEDGE Business School is a benchmark French business school with 4 campuses in France (Paris, Bordeaux, Marseilles, and Toulon), 3 overseas (2 in China, in Shanghai and Suzhou, and 1 in Africa in Dakar) and 3 partner campuses (Avignon, Bastia and Bayonne). The KEDGE community is made up of 14,800 students (25% of whom are international students), 192 full-time lecturers (44% of whom are international), 291 international academic partners and 70,000 alumni around the world. KEDGE offers a portfolio of 36 training programmes in management and design for students and industry professionals. It also provides customised educational programmes for businesses at national and international levels. KEDGE is AACSB-, EQUIS- and AMBA-accredited, and is a member of the Conférence des Grandes Ecoles. It is also recognised by the French government, with covered programmes, and has obtained the EESPIG label. KEDGE is ranked 31st by the Financial Times in the European Business School rankings and 39th globally for its Executive MBA.

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