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Reading markets politically: on the transformativity and relevance of peasant markets

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ABSTRACT
This paper discusses how newly constructed peasant markets are increasingly extending beyond the boundaries (and limits) of the local. This brings their new potentials in relevance and transformativity. The paper includes a comprehensive definition of peasant markets. It is also meant as a reply to those who argue that capitalism cannot be fought by using one of its main mechanisms: 'the market'. By presenting three case studies that describe different peasant markets, the paper argues that while markets are increasingly governed by large imperial networks, peasant markets are emerging as major vehicles of, and for, transformative struggles.

KEYWORDS
Peasant markets; nested markets; transformativity; relevance

How to read markets: an introduction

This article introduces a set of questions that help to unravel and understand markets as complex, and highly diverse, socio-material constructions that not only channel flows of commodities but which also strongly influence both their production and consumption. It goes on to discuss the considerable transformative capacity and relevance of constructing new markets, which we illustrate with three case studies.

With the notable exception of economic anthropology, social sciences has, until recently, paid little attention to the empirical diversity of markets. Markets were taken for granted, and hardly considered to be interesting or relevant objects of research (Van Huylenbroeck, Vuylsteke, and Verbeke 2009, 176; Aldridge 2005, 7; Fafchamps 2004, 12–13). Economists, naturally, have studied 'the market', but in doing so they have conceptualized it as an abstract system that governs both production and consumption and, within which, volumes and prices are set so as to establish the required equilibrium (Lie 1997; Fourcade 2007). This view is highly abstract and pays little attention (if any at all) to concrete marketplaces where concrete transactions take place between concrete people (Shanin 1973, 73). In general terms economists have paid scant regard to the specificities of time, place and the actors and products involved. The market is essentially seen as a self-regulating mechanism that functions regardless of its location in time and space, the people acting in it and/or the products or services that they trade (Roth 2018). In economic thought it is the market that imposes its 'logic' on people, products, services and activities and definitely not the other way around.

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In this article we argue that markets should be read more carefully and with more attention to detail. This raises different sets of questions regarding (a) the specificity of the *products*, (b) their particular *flow* through time and space, (c) the particular *actors* involved, (d) the *rules* that govern the making, circulation and use of the product, and (e) the position of each market in the broader context.

The first two questions address the nature of the products that are marketed. Each product comes with a *brand* (no matter whether this brand is made explicit or remains implicit) and each brand represents a normative framework (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986). A brand contains messages that specify how, where, when, and by whom, the product has been made (or is supposed to have been be made). Even the absence of such messages represents a clear signal: that the origin, history and the nature of the product do not matter at all. Taken together, these messages generate a normative framework (condensed in, and as, a brand) that synthesizes the *making* of the product. When, for instance, animals (or animal products) are marketed, considerations regarding animal welfare might play a role (this role is historically variable and will differ from place to place). But when it is, say, cars that are being marketed, other normative frameworks (regarding safety, the reputation of the manufacturer, etc.) will apply. And when it comes to second-hand cars, the norms and mutual expectations are again different (Akerlof 1970). The same frameworks also regulate inclusion and exclusion (they specify who is allowed to produce it and who cannot), just as they carry (or at least, promise to bring) trust – that the product is indeed as good, cheap, or sustainable (or whatever) as suggested.

Apart from carrying a brand, products also come with a *manual* (which again is sometimes made explicit, whilst it may also remain more or less implicit). Each specific product contains a series of requirements regarding the *use* of the product. The manual specifies these requirements: it prescribes how to use the acquired product in a correct way. In the case of meat, it is assumed that the consumers know how to store, prepare and consume it. In the case of the car, it is assumed not only that the user is able to drive but also that roads, gasoline, repair facilities, etc., are available. The manual is not just external, it is partly built into the product. It can, and should, only be used in the correct way.[1] All products come with a manual. In the case of meat it is mostly not made explicit. It is assumed that consumers know (possibly because their mother taught them) or that they consult a cookery book (or whatever). In the case of the car the manual is partly exemplified in written material (a true 'manual') for the user of the car, whilst another part is contained in the specific instructions for repair and maintenance.

Products make up a concrete nexus between production and consumption and these are ordered through, and reflected in, the brand and manual that come with the product.[2] Brand and manual are parts of wider conventions that direct the performance of a product (Hodgson 2006). In this sense markets are shaped by institutions (Beckert 2009; Callon

[1]That is, the manual is built into the product – at least partly. Nitrogen sensitive potato seedlings, for instance, assume that high amounts of N-fertilizer will be used to make the potatoes grow. See for an extensive discussion Ploeg (1993), Scott (1998) (especially chapter 8, 301–304) and Wynne (1998). A contemporary example (regarding different maize varieties used in Kenya) is given by Kimanthi 2019. The same applies for potatoes destined for consumption. Some are better for making chips, others for boiling, sautéing, etc.

[2]A new product, that comes with a new brand and manual, might be considered as a novelty as defined in transition studies: it carries the potential to bring changes – not only in marketing, but also in production and consumption (Rip and Kemp 1998).

1998, 2017; Zelizer 1978). Consequently, a market transaction is far more than the simple exchange of a commodity for money. The transaction assumes and activates a normative framework that describes how the product was made, just as it communicates a series of instructions to be followed when the product is used. Thus, the products that circulate in markets are socio-material constructs: besides their physical, chemical and/or biological properties they also contain a range of messages that reproduce (and sometimes modify) large parts of the social and natural worlds (see Figure 1 for a graphic summary). In this respect, products are *actants*: non-human actors (Latour 2005; DeLanda 2006; Long 2016) that interact with other actors and actants to co-order both the social and the natural worlds. They are actants because each artefact is wrapped in a double set of messages (the brand and the manual) that concern the production and consumption of the product. Such messages travel in, and through, the market. They travel to, from, and between the different actors involved, just as they may pass from one actant to the other (as is the case in processes of assemblage).

Figure 1 refers to the 'social life of things' (Appadurai 1986) that are exchanged in market places. Social life is not outside the world of things; it is not separated from the movement of things. On the contrary: a considerable part of social life occurs through the movement of things. That is precisely the reason why 'reading markets' is important.

Alongside material negotiations (that centre on *exchange value*), market transactions also and simultaneously include symbolic negotiations: The brand reflects the productive practices, just as the manual specifies the consumptive practices (Kopytoff 1986, 67). But it is as much the other way around: the brand tries to invoke a modality of consumption that is thought to be promising, whilst the manual regards the requirements built into the product by the producer. Through changes in the manual (even minor ones), producers are able to modify the behaviour, expectations and practices of consumers – and by modifying their preferences vis-a-vis different brands, consumers are able to impact upon productive practices. These complex and two-way patterns of communication all regard the *use-value* of the negotiated goods and services. In our societies, they mostly are non-verbal and located outside the domain of the disputable. The exception is encountered

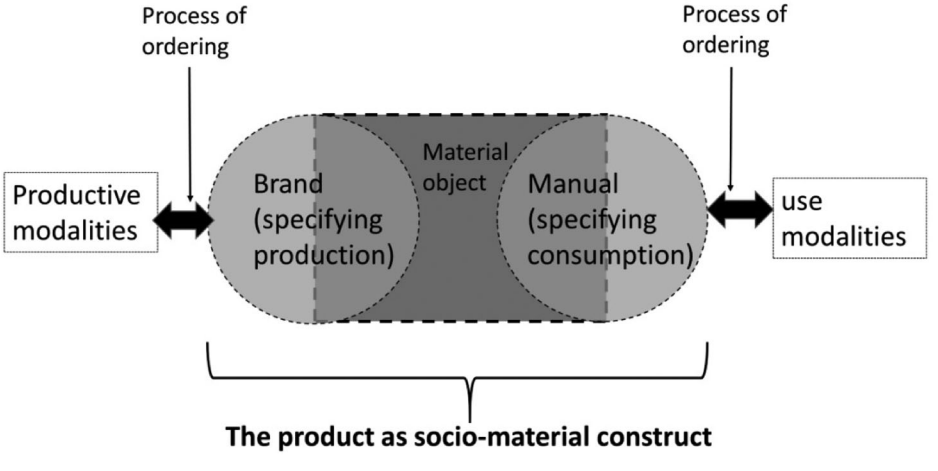

Figure 1. Understanding marketed products as actants.

in market places that are grounded on short circuits and which imply direct, face-to-face meetings of buyers and sellers (Meulen 2000; Dessein 2006; Black 2005, 2012; Viteri 2010; Hanser 2016; Chikulo, Hebinck, and Kinsey 2020).

Theoretically, market transactions are to ensure coherence between productive and consumptive practices. This occurs not only through assessing the right price, but as much by bringing brand and manual in line (the latter probably is a precondition for the former). However, such coherence is not always effectively established in a sustainable and mutually acceptable way (Büntzel and Marí 2016). There is no *a-priori* answer as to what contributes to, or detracts from, such coherence.

Probing into the brands and manuals of the things that circulate in the market is a crucial part of reading markets. Do these brands and manuals coincide with the interests and expectations of producers and consumers? Or do they run counter to their interests and expectations? Who (or what) formulated the brand and manual and influenced its development and wording? Interfering with the genesis or evolution of brands and manuals allows, through the circulation of the associated commodities, for control over large parts of the social and natural worlds. Through acquiring specific commodities (and neglecting others) consumers participate (unwillingly or willingly; consciously or unconsciously) in the design and reproduction of particular modalities in the sphere of production. And, by selling particular commodities, producers strongly influence the sphere of consumption. Control over the market thus gives enormous power. Hence, the market is an important arena where conflicting social interests interact, struggle, negotiate and fight for hegemony Who and/or what controls the market, becomes a strategic question. In a beautiful, yet unpublished essay Louis Thiemann writes: 'Capital functions – and therefore *is* – only when and where it succeeds in making labour depend on it. It must create […] a web of dependency relations that makes workers and consumers participate in its designs'. It is, we argue, markets that play an influential role in determining how such webs of dependency are constructed (through the construction of brands and manuals). It is also, as we will demonstrate, *in the markets* that such webs of dependency are contested and, in varying degrees, replaced by 'economies of opposition' (Pahnke 2015) that lean heavily on newly-constructed nested markets (from which emerge contrasting brands, manuals and products).

A second set of questions regards the channels through which products flow. Are there distinctively different channels for making particular products travel through space and between people? How many different channels are discernible? And for each channel: how does a specific product travel from its place of origin to the place of final consumption? How many different stages need to be traversed? How many different actors are involved in making the passage operative? Which, and how many, technical means are required to allow the products pass through the different stages? How many places of production are involved in delivering the product (or its ingredients) to its destination? Are these places interchangeable? Whilst travelling and traversing the different stages, how many, and what kind, of changes does the product undergo? Do the different stages and product changes create a particular 'architecture' (Fligstein 2001; Gereffi, Humphrey, and Sturgeon 2005) that is distinctively different from other patterns of provisioning? And, how is the total value added distributed along the chain and how does this relate to the effective labour time invested in each step? The importance of such questions is highlighted in an analysis by Marc Wegerif (2014) of 'urban food provisioning'

in Dar es Salaam. He identifies 6 channels for eggs that clearly differ in terms of the involved actors, the means of transport, distances, prices, the distribution of value added and the contribution to the regional economy. Eggs do not flow at random, they are routed in specific, socially constructed and mutually contrasting ways. Thus, even apparently simple products, such as eggs, acquire particular and distinguishable brands and manuals. Similar patterns apply elsewhere, for other food products.

A third set of questions centres on the actors involved and their interrelations. How many people/organisations are involved in the flow (and processing) of the product? What is their specific role (e.g. wholesaler, retailer, transporter, etc.)? And, how do they relate to each other? Do they operate on their own account or are they part of larger networks? Who is in charge? And how is control effectuated? Is there just one centre of command or several? What is the nature of the interrelations (hierarchical, complementary, competitive, striving to take over the others)? Are there discernible differences in power? Are power relations associated with a specific distribution of value added? Do consumers fall into specific categories, with shared status, income levels and/or value orientations? Are there (implicit) class dimensions? In the case of eggs, quoted above, the involved actors range from small shop owners and street vendors to supermarkets, from bicycle drivers to truck drivers, from local peasants to large agricultural entrepreneurs and even foreign producers and there is also a clear socio-economic and class differentiation among the consumers. The different channels tie the different actors together in coherent, but mutually contrasting, patterns.

The fourth set of questions regards the rules. How are responsibilities delineated? What formal rules apply? How are they complemented (or undermined) by informal ones? Which institutions play a central role (Ostrom 2010)? What is the role of the state? How and to what degree is the implementation of rules controlled? And by whom? More specifically: is there any degree of self-regulation?

The fifth and final set of questions focuses on the position of each specific channel within the market as a whole. It also regards the position of the market within the wider societal context. More specifically, how do different channels relate to each other? Are they complementary or aiming for substitution? Do they involve relations of hegemony/subordination, or, are there complementary relationships that take precedence over competition? What is the market share of each channel and how are these shares developing?

Underlying dimensions and a definition of peasant markets

In earlier work we (Ploeg, Ye, and Schneider 2012) raised questions such as those discussed above to a series of long-existing and newly constructed peasant markets. We showed *inter alia* that these peasant markets might be theoretically defined using the variables underlying the questions discussed above. George Dalton (1974) was right, of course, when he signalled the enormous diversity of peasant markets. They do hugely differ according to time, space, location, town-countryside relations, local history, involved actors (other than peasant producers and consumers), the role of the state and their social significance (e.g. Mintz 1960). Nonetheless, a comparative analysis can highlight the clear commonalities of peasant markets: (1) Peasant markets centre on the transaction of food produced in peasant agriculture; the produce supplied carries

the *brand* of peasant agriculture and consumers are aware of, and appreciate, this brand and are familiar with the manual supplied. (2) The transactions take place in and through *short channels* (in geographical and/or social terms). (3) *Members of peasant households* play the predominant role in the production, packaging, transport and exchange of the food products and also in the associated flows of information (*i.e.* they communicate the story of the food and the best way to use it to the consumers). (4) The operation of these markets is *nested in mutual understandings* of, and between, producers and consumers and/or nested in the territory; they are, as argued by peasant movements, 'territorial markets'. (5) Peasant markets are *not directly controlled by capital* – nor are they oriented at obtaining the highest possible return on investment; currently they are also perceived and operated as alternatives to global and/or capital-controlled markets: they represent opposition[3] (Brasil 2019; Grivins and Tisenkopfs 2018).

Our 2012 analysis of peasant markets (or 'nested markets' as the article called them)[4] generated three dimensions that underlie, and help to explain, the strength of peasant markets vis-a-vis the global food markets in which they are nested.

Firstly there is *specificity*. This may reside in the product (in its taste, freshness, price, origin, and/or in the way it has been produced, processed and delivered to the market), but it may also reside in the market place being different, attracting different suppliers and consumers who interact in ways that differ from those that reign in the conventional markets. Specificity might also be rooted in the social definition of quality shared by the different actors involved and/or in the way the marketplace is perceived by the actors involved (Winter et al. 2010). A second dimension used in outlining the strength of both longstanding and newly emerging peasant markets is *connectedness*. This concept relates to the relations that link these markets, the farms that supply them, the processing units and the consumer groups connected to them into what Wegerif (2017) describes as a 'symbiotic whole'. Whilst the first dimension, specificity, reflects the single differences (in products, actors, places, etc.), this second dimension, connectedness, reflects the consistency between the single differences. Thirdly, there is *rootedness*. This dimension refers to the materiality of things, such as natural resources that impose their own rhythm and calendar, products whose processing cannot be industrialized, the skills and knowledge that are inherent parts of artisanal production and socio-material infrastructures that characterize peasant markets.

Since 2012 a range of new studies has been published,[5] each exploring a range of new (or longstanding) nested markets and thus contributing to the documentation of an impressive and continuously unfolding heterogeneity. Simultaneously some mainstream institutions (such as INRA and FAO) and social movements (as *La Via Campesina*) are paying increasing attention to nested markets as a lever for social change – an issue

[3]Peasant markets counter the expansion of long-distance trade as well as the ongoing artificialization of food - two of the main strategies of current food empires. Thus, peasant markets help to 'circumvent, disrupt, and deconsolidate mainstream supply chains' (iPES Food 2017, 12).

[4]The concept of nested market is applicable to all kinds of different markets (see e.g. Beckmann and McPherson 1970; Esparza and Krmenec 1996; Garcia Pozo 2009; Kinsella 1995; Duch-Brown and Fonfría 2014; Van Huylenbroeck, Vuylsteke, and Verbeke 2009). Peasant markets are nested markets located ('nested' in) the wider food markets.

[5]See especially Hebinck, Schneider, and van der Ploeg (2015); Milone, Ventura, and Ye (2015); Civil Society Mechanism [CSM] (2016); Loconto, Poisot, and Santacoloma (2016); Heinisch (2017) (especially tome 2); Wegerif (2017); Milone et al. (2018); Balk Brandao et al. (2019); Milone and Ventura (2019); Chikulo, Hebinck, and Kinsey (2020); Schneider and Cassol (2020).

critically contested by some scholars (and discussed later in this paper). Together, the many new experiences, the empirical studies that document them and the ongoing debates on their socio-political role, allow for an additional theoretical elaboration. This article aims to condense and summarize the newly-obtained insights into two additional dimensions that align with, but simultaneously, stretch the reach of, the previously developed dimensions. These two complementary dimensions are *relevance* and *transformativity*. These concepts are not limited to the internal nature, structure and dynamics of nested markets, but point to their *wider impact on society*.

Relevance refers to the outcomes rendered by a particular market and how these differ from the ones generated by other markets. Nested markets perform in ways that markedly differ from global markets and might, therefore, produce outcomes that are not only different but also relevant to many people (Chaparro Africano and Collado 2017, 218). Relevance might reside in:

(1) improved incomes and/or increased employment levels for producers;
(2) increased accessibility of good, fresh (and sometimes high-quality) food for enlarged groups of consumers;
(3) inclusion of otherwise excluded producers that allows for production that would otherwise not occur.

Transformativity (i.e. the capacity to actively contribute to processes that transform wider society) is another important dimension that helps us to understand peasant markets and their significance in the wider context. Beyond the direct contributions of single peasant markets, the unfolding whole of interlinked peasant markets potentially carries considerable transformativity (or 'transformational power') – especially when well-coordinated and integrated in wider social movements. Peasant markets are 'transformative spaces' (Pereira et al. 2018), they are able to 'catalyze change' throughout the wider politico-economic systems (Westley et al. 2013).

We will discuss relevance and transformativity with the help of three case studies: *O Circuito* in Brazil, the *Chao Zhuang Shi Chang* of Sanggang village in China and *Landwinkels* from the Netherlands. These cases have been selected because they represent different ways to go beyond the local (a critical issue in the political debate about peasant markets; see e.g. Dupuis and Goodman 2005). In the Brazilian case this occurs through actively *interlinking* local peasant markets that are separated by considerable geographical distances. The Chinese case describes an ingenious and newly constructed market-channel that links a Beijing suburb to a remote peasant village. The Dutch case is basically about local, but cooperating, farm shops that together make up an archipelago of interrelated peasant markets that cover large segments of the country. What the three cases have in common is that (1) they are well documented; (2) all well-known to the authors of this paper; (3) well-established and evolving; and (4) well-known points of reference in the three countries. However, there are also differences in terms of the channels (each case is extending in a different way), actors (all cases are governed by cooperative associations but the social division of labour in the process of marketing differs) and rules (*O Circuito* puts ecological rules centre stage; in the Chinese case poverty alleviation is central; and the Dutch case centres on remunerative prices for producers).

'O Circuito' [The Circuit]

The novel feature of The Circuit' ('*O Circuito*' in Portuguese) resides in the *interlinking* of a range of distant peasant markets. The circuit is part of the ECOVIDA network that links some 5400 small scale producers in the south of Brazil with 165 local markets (*feiras*), a regional supermarket and local and regional institutions that prepare and supply school meals. The full name is 'The Southern Circuit for the Commercialization of the ECOVIDA Network for Agroecology' (*Circuito Sul de Comercializaçao da Rede Ecovida de Agroecologia*), but in everyday life people refer to it as The Circuit (Oliveira, Grisa, and Niederle 2020). The Circuit is responsible for moving food products from one *feira* to other *feiras*. The Circuit enables the ECOVIDA network to transcend the local. It was created in 2006 with the delivery of 1000 kg of different food products from a local *feira* in Rio Grande do Sul to another one in Curitiba (the capital of the Paraná State) and since then has experienced more or less ongoing growth. In 2012 the Circuit also started to supply food to the School Feeding Programme. In Brazil it is mandatory for every municipality to acquire at least 30% of food ingredients for school meals from family farms. This led to sales jumping to a level of 60 metric tonnes per week. From 2016 onwards the sales increase further until reaching a record of almost 150 metric tonnes of food every week in 2019. This growth was partly due to a new partnership with similar networks[6] and one of the consequences of this was the construction of a warehouse in the city of São Paulo (the '*Estação São Paulo*') that serves wholesalers, retailers and public bodies in the biggest city of South Latin America.

Since its establishment *O Circuito* has adopted six guiding principles.

(1) To facilitate access to agroecological products (or, as later explained, 'we wanted to democratize the consumption of agroecological products').[7]
(2) To shorten the distances between production and consumption.
(3) To valorize social and environmental services.
(4) To create an equitable division of benefits.
(5) Cooperation.
(6) To promote the inclusion of peasant farmers and consumers in this market.

The *specificity* of The Circuit resides in several elements (see Perez 2012 and Radomsky, Niederle, and Schneider 2015 for an extensive description of these). Firstly, it rests in the nature of the products that are commercialized. These are agroecological products, certified by the ECOVIDA network (through participatory certification), that are sold for prices that are equal to, or less than, those found in supermarkets. That is, one obtains *agroecological* products in the *feiras* for prices that people pay for *conventional* (non-organic) produce in the supermarkets.[8] The Circuit has put together a wide assortment of 95 different products, that includes fruits, vegetables, grains, tubers, processed

[6]More information about the cooperation and expansion of agroecological networks in Brazil can be found in Almeida et al. (2021).

[7]This point of view was, and is, in its turn, also a critique on, as well as a step beyond, the skewed distribution of organic products that mostly are too expensive for poor people.

[8]In this respect there is a strong resemblance with the mercati contadini in Italy. These sell fresh local food products for prices that are systematically 25%–30% below supermarket prices. This is called prezzo amico. Thus, the value/price ratio of peasant markets differs significantly from the one of large retailers. This contributes to specificity.

products, eggs, dairy products, meat and drinks. Together the qualities of the products (agroecological, fresh, mostly local origin and produced on family farms), the price levels and the assortment (local supply supplemented with products from elsewhere)[9] create a specificity that strongly contributes to the attractiveness of the interlinked markets.

The Circuit links different *feiras* to each other in a way that makes for a distinctive *connectedness*. These connections are based around a range of 'main stations' (*estações-núcleos*) and 'substations' (*subestações*), with each local *feira* being a station or substation in the wider network. The metaphor is telling[10]: it consists of places where, as in railway stations, products are packed, loaded and send to specific destinations (either stations or substations). The main stations can also re-route products coming from other stations to stations elsewhere in the network. All the stations and substations are connected through well-defined main routes (called *rotas*) and secondary routes (see Figure 2). In April 2019 products circulated through nine long routes (more than 300 KM long), 11 medium routes (between 50 and 300 KM) and 24 short routes (less than 30 KM). The stations and substations cover a total of 73 municipalities. Transport is mainly done with lorries and vans that belong to the members of the circuit, a strategy that enables the retention of more added value within The Circuit.

Together the *rotas*, *estações-núcleos* and *subestações* make for a particular socio-material infrastructure that is schematized in Figure 3. It is a de-centralized pattern that links all the *feiras* to each other in manifold ways. There is no single centre of command, no hub centralizing the different flows of merchandise (as in the case of markets shaped and controlled by food empires shown in Figure 4).

Every *feira* belonging to the Circuit is supplied by local producers, whilst the consumer base is also basically local. At the same time though, some of the local produce might go to other markets whilst additional products may be delivered by other areas (through the connected stations and substations). This brings two immediate advantages: it enlarges both the 'market' and the assortment. Local products are not only sold in the local market but also in other, interlinked markets, whilst in every single local market both local produce and produce from elsewhere can be obtained. These exchanges between markets also increase ecological complementarity.

The difference with imperial markets

This pattern substantially differs from the one that now dominates the main food markets (see Figure 4). Imperial markets are typically shaped like an hourglass. There are multitudes of producers and multitudes of consumers. However, there are no direct relations between them. In between there are food industries, trading companies and/or large retail organizations (or *food empires*) that function as obligatory passage points. Products can only travel from the places of production to the final consumers by passing through channels that are predefined, and governed, by different food empires. Thus, an 'architecture' (Gereffi, Humphrey, and Sturgeon 2005) is developed that materializes as a 'web of

[9]This resembles, in a way, the Dutch case of the landwinkels (country shops) that will be discussed later in this article. Each landwinkel (to be equated here with a 'local feira') also sells the products of other landwinkels.

[10]In a way it is reminiscent of 'The Underground Railroad' (Whitehead 2017) that helped escaped slaves move towards freedom in the north of the USA.

Figure 2. Routes, stations and substations of the Circuit.

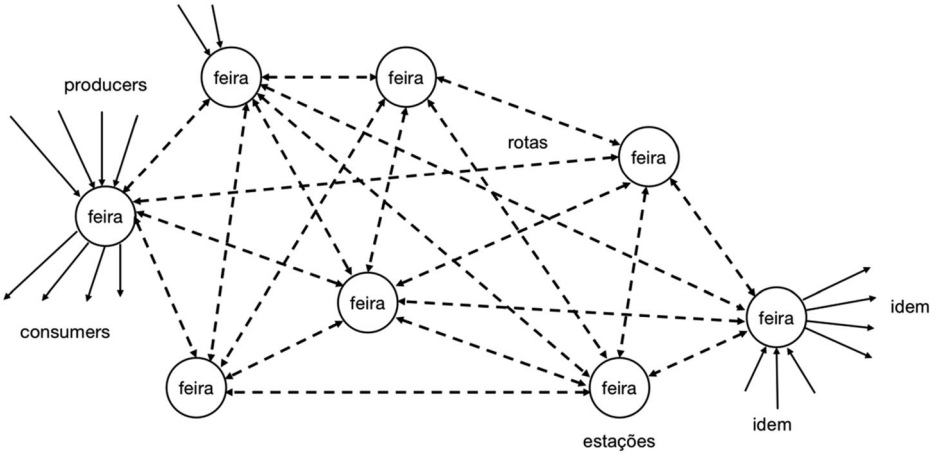

Figure 3. The basic pattern of the Circuit.

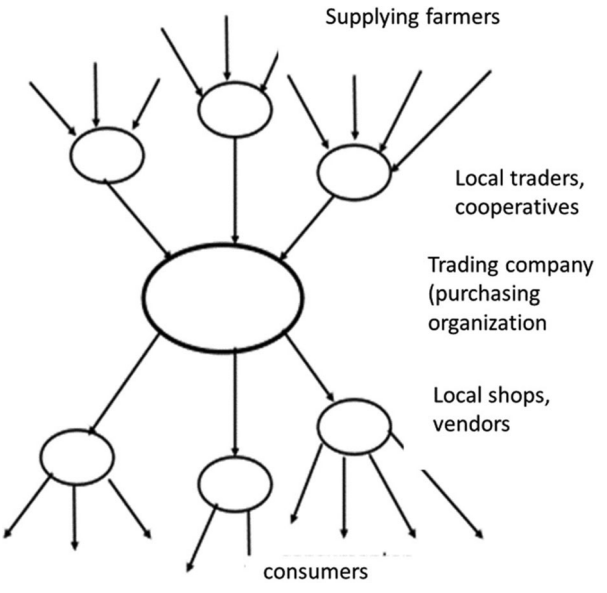

Figure 4. Imperial markets (controlled by food empires).

dependencies' (Thiemann, forthcoming). The Circuit essentially cross cuts this oligopolistic pattern – it builds by-passes that allow producers and consumers to engage in direct and non-capital-controlled exchanges. The same occurs in the Chinese and Dutch cases discussed further on.

Imperial markets are multilevel, hierarchal and have clear centres of command. Peasant markets do not have a hierarchy, but are characterized by horizontal relations with a wider set of interlinked decisional centres. In the case of *O Circuito* this means that each station can decide which products it will send to other stations; it can choose between different stations and opt for different *rotas*. In imperial markets there is an appropriation and centralization of value by and in the centre that controls the different flows. In peasant markets the produced value is shared equitably.

Ecovida organizes the flow of food products *between* the different *feiras*. By doing so it covers large distances (see again Figure 3). These extra-local flows follow precise guidelines (which can be understood as an application of the principles mentioned above). First of all there is ecological compatibility. The local *feiras* sell local products. Only products that cannot be produced locally (because the local ecology does not allow for it) or that are out of season might come from elsewhere. And only that part of the local production that cannot be sold locally is transported and sold elsewhere (in places where the product is not available). Thus, we are not dealing here with a kind of parochialism[11] but with a clever ecological principle that puts locality centre stage whilst simultaneously linking it, in a well-balanced way, with other localities along the extended *rotas* that make up the network. This is the first guideline. Ecological considerations are used to

[11]'Campanilismo' as the Italians say. The 'campanile' is the local church tower and it is a symbol for the kind of narrow mindedness that only accepts things, people and ideas that come from the area within which the church tower is visible.

decide where food products come from and where they go to. This is in stark contrast to food empires where it is price differentials that make the products flow (buying in the cheapest possible place and selling in places where the highest prices can be obtained). Rather, ecological compatibility and complementarity govern and direct the product flows. A strategic detail is that a station that runs short of a particular product, initiates the transfer. Products only travel when there is demand. On the other hand, the station making a request has to accept the price defined by the delivering station (plus transport costs plus 3% for running the network as a whole). All this is understood as 'inbuilt protection'. The 'heads' of the stations, who mostly are experienced farmers, carefully apply these principles in the complex movements that link the stations. A clear definition of common interests and an ongoing coordination is key in all this.[12]

A second guideline regards minimizing the number of transactions through which the products pass in order to reach their destination. In the standard situation a local trader often buys the produce, selling it on to a wholesale merchant who, in turn, sells to local traders in other places who then sell the merchandise to consumers. That makes, in this case, for four transactions. Each of these needs to generate an acceptable return; and in addition each single transaction may be subject to Value Added Tax (VAT). Ecovida reduces this to just one transaction: between the sending and receiving stations. The sending station receives the products from the producers and sells them, via the receiving station, to consumers and the money received is sent back via the stations towards the initial producers.

Wherever possible this reduction in the number of transactions goes even further. This occurs in a surprising way: by organizing the circulation of the products as *barter*. Wherever there is a kind of ecological complementarity, one station agrees with another one (located in a different ecological zone) to deliver a certain amount of products in exchange for other products (with more or less the same value) and the received products are 'paid for' by selling them in each *feira*.[13] The big advantage of this type of barter is that it eliminates (or greatly reduces) the need for working capital.

What we are witnessing here basically is, we think, a *separation* of circulation and trade (see also González de Molina et al. 2020, 85). Circulation is about moving products (and services) to other places; it is also about the associated storage, transport, packaging, certification and (if needed) processing. Trading, on the other hand, is about making private profits. In the framework of commercial trading, transport, packaging, certification or whatever need to be individually and/or together, profitable activities. They have to produce profits. Circulation becomes subject to trade. Consequently, these activities are structured in such a way that they *de facto* generate the needed return on the capital invested in these activities.

Trading is structured so as to obtain profit. *Circulation as organized by Ecovida is structured so as to improve the labour incomes of the participating peasant producers*. To do so Ecovida purposefully separates circulation from trade. Ecovida eliminates trade (at least in

[12]In this respect O Circuito shares some remarkable commonalities with other, comparable networks elsewhere such as the Dutch Wadden Group, Landwinkels and KDV (Oostindie et al. 2016), the Italian Consortium for the Production, Storing and Distribution of Parmigiano-Reggiano (Parmesan cheese) in Italy (Roest 2000) and the cooperation between BioAlpin (a producer group) and Mpreis (a supermarket chain) in Austria (Furtschegger and Schermer 2015).

[13]This practice resembles the system of tied sales used in the past between e.g. Western and Eastern European countries. This was done to deal with different, often incompatible currencies.

its own circuit) and instead makes products circulate. In this respect it constructs and runs a market. But whereas elsewhere trade and circulation flow into one, organic and indivisible whole (where one can only distinguish *analytically* between the two), in the market constructed by Ecovida (and, for that matter in many other nested markets) trade and circulation are *materially* separated. Circulation remains (and is re-ordered so as to reflect new governing principles) and trade is ended. This is a clear expression of *transformativity*.

Of course, it is transformativity in a nutshell – it only is a small transformation that just regards a very miniscule portion of Brazil's massive food market,[14] and it only concerns a few steps out of far larger processes of exchange. But in this nutshell[15] new relations are being constructed that effectively (a) allow disengagement from wider circuits controlled by capital and (b) the construction of well-operating alternatives that, in turn, carry (c) the promise to extend further.

With the separation of circulation from trade comes a redefinition of social roles and relations. There are no traders (*sensu stricto*) in Ecovida. It is the members of the network, peasant producers, who run the network and who govern the many flows along the *rotas*. Similarly, the agendas (what is to be done, how, when and by whom) are different. This is visible in the reduction of food losses. Products that are losing their good appearance and/or freshness are not perceived, in the network, as seemingly unavoidable losses (compensated for by enlarging the price differential). They are detected in good time and then processed in order to be circulated in another way. Unchaining circulation (from the bonds imposed by trade) also implies a redefinition of the producers who move from being *price-takers* (who have to accept the prices imposed by traders) to being *price-setters*. Each station organises bi-monthly meetings of all its producers to collectively agree on the price levels (taking into account labour time, inputs and depreciations). In a way this represents a *democratization* of the economy (Wright 2016) – or at least a beginning of it.

The uncoupling of circulation from trade also makes Ecovida *relevant*. Farmers producing the food that circulates in and through Ecovida realize incomes that are significantly higher than those of their 'conventional' neighbours. As the head of one of the stations said: 'our farmers depend far less on the banks'. The participating farmers get better prices, while consumers pay less. And this is not a coincidence. It is one of the purposes of Ecovida – it is one of its governing principles (as is the case in many other nested markets).[16]

Obtaining this double benefit (improved incomes for farmers, less spending for better quality food for consumers) is not done by magic. Ecovida simply avoids the dilemma that conventionalized organic agriculture faces: by selling through large retailers, consumers have to pay excessively high prices or producers have to accept low prices. Avoiding this dilemma is made possible by effectively transforming the markets that link producers and consumers: by disengaging circulation from trade. This implies, as specified above, that the circulating food is not dealt with as capital that has to generate a required return. It implies fewer transactions and fewer VAT payments. It implies less food

[14]The reader is reminded that nested markets are not necessarily small. Data on the Netherlands, Japan and Italy are given in Ploeg (2018, Chapter 8).

[15]Or 'niche' as it is understood in 'strategic nice management' (SNM) theories. See Kemp, Rip, and Schot (2001); Roep and Wiskerke (2004).

[16]See D'Annolfo et al. (2017) and for Europe: Ploeg et al. (2019).

losses. It also implies less investments.[17] Taken together this creates a fund that allows for benefits that are shared by both producers and consumers. It is a fund that results from the transformation realized in this particular nutshell – and it underpins the transformativity that comes with the construction of such new, extended peasant markets.

During the pandemic of Covid-19 the Circuit was hit in different ways. In 2020 there was a reduction in sales of processed foods (such as jams, jellies, juices and others) while sales of fresh foods (like vegetables and fruits) slightly grew. Farmers' incomes, however, were negatively affected since processed foods contain more value-added. At the level of the Circuit as a whole the changes brought a reduction of turnover of between 20% and 30% (depending on the location of the stations) and this brought considerable concerns, the more so since public procurement purchases went down as well. On the other hand the sales in the new route to the São Paulo station generated an increase in sales, which partly offset the contraction in other regions. Overall it was possible to finish 2020 with the same total sales as the year before. To face the economic crisis and the contraction of sales, Circuit members are now exploring other strategies and channels for marketing, such as providing food baskets, sales through websites and Whastapp, and short relations with urban consumer groups. The effects of the pandemic also affected the costs of inputs needed for packaging as well as the participatory interaction process. Virtual meetings and the associated lack of personal and physical meetings negatively affected the '*sintonia coletiva*' ['the collective play']. (as the head of one of the stations observed).

'Chao Zhuang Shi Chang' [Nested market]

The 'nested market' (巢状市场 in Mandarin or *Chao Zhuang Shi Chang* in Pinyin) of Sanggang is composed of loosely organized consumer groups in cities such as Beijing and Baoding and groups of cooperating peasants in villages. Sanggang was the first village that developed this type of market[18] that connects consumers and producers through social media. Once a month the peasant villages indicate which food products (cultivated in the village) are available; consumers use the internet to order what they need; and the products are delivered to collection points in town to be collected by consumers. Payment is made electronically. Additional communications (e.g. complaints) occurs through *Wei Xin*, the Chinese version of 'we chat'. Thus consumers acquire fresh and genuine food for prices that, on average, are at supermarket level and producers get a higher price than that paid by traders.

However, the obtained price differential is not the only difference – and is probably not even the most important advantage. Equally important is that this specific market is able to absorb small quantities from producers. Thus poor and elderly producers can find an outlet for their produce. Conventional traders are not interested in small quantities (or only if they can pay very low prices). Beyond that, the producers' committee provides

[17]No shops need to be built since Ecovida uses the infrastructure of existing feiras. The same applies for transport as Ecovida uses lorries owned by the involved farmers.

[18]It partly builds on the tradition of migrant workers bringing 'glass noodles' (a much appreciated specialty of the village) with them to their urban work locations. The glass noodles were meant as gifts for friends, bosses and family members. Later on the College of Humanities and Development Studies at China Agricultural University helped to organize the current nested market that links the village with urban centres.

those who lack needed resources (piglets, chickens, seedlings, etc.) with the means to produce. Sales are secured, provided that the quality of the products meets the standards. This means that this specific market mechanism triggers and sustains production that otherwise would be lacking. Simultaneously it secures good prices for the producers. In other words, *Chao Zhuang Shi Chang* generates economic activity and helps to reduce poverty where capital fails to do so (see Schneider, Salvate, and Cassol 2016 for a similar observation that applies to Brazil).[19] This is, we think, an important expression of transformativity.

The village of Sanggang has 173 households and, in total, 654 inhabitants. Of these, up to 103 households produce (partly) for the nested market (although not every one of these households delivers every month to the nested market). The monthly delivery of food products to the consumer groups might amount (especially in the Spring Festival period) to 30,000 Yuan (equal to 3750 Euro). This is an important contribution to the local economy (and especially to the incomes of the poorer strata in the village). It also explains why the regional authorities recently decided to use the *Chao Zhuang Shi Chang* mechanism as lever in the their programme for poverty alleviation. Poverty alleviation through the *Chao Zhuang Shi Chang* mechanism, strongly contrasts with the standard approach that critically depends on capital investments and the search for high returns. Throughout China, this new approach has received a lot of attention (Ye and Congzhi 2019).

The nested market is also important in so far as it familiarizes peasants with new forms of cooperation and self-organization. It establishes new contacts between city people and villagers and since the former have started to visit the village it has spurred the beginning of agro-tourism and cleaning up the village.

After the outbreak of Covid-19 the nested market of Sanggang was suspended for a while. In April 2020, though, it was decided to try out another strategy: making use of commercial express services instead of villagers delivering the food to the urban consumers. After selection of a company, food has already been delivered several times in this new way. It includes the use of refrigerated vans for transporting fresh vegetables, eggs and especially meat. The costs are not much higher than direct delivery by the peasants, but this way saves a lot of time and energy, whilst the consumers can receive the products at home. On the other hand, the new delivery system is less environmentally friendly since it requires more plastic packing material. It also lacks the face-to-face interactions that came with direct delivery by peasants.

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 outbreak, the example of Sanggang is being used by many other villages to organize self-controlled e-marketing. Over the years, Sanggang had made, as it were, the model of the nested market ready for operation and when needed it could be smoothly rolled out.

Landwinkels [country shops]

Social struggles do not unfold in linear and straightforward ways. On the contrary, there are ups and downs, each bringing distinctive agendas. As João Pedro Stédile, national

[19]Generally speaking, nested markets are critical for the entry of 'outsiders' into the agricultural sector. See e.g. Minkoff Zern (2019) for Latino farm workers in the USA seeking to build their own farm and Monllor (2012) and Morel (2016) for the case of young, new entrants in Europe.

leader of the MST in Brazil, recently argued: 'We are in a time of resistance now. We are living in times to improve the organization, to 'plow the land for sowing'. These are not harvest times, even though social conflict continues' (Sauer 2020). In times of resistance, lines of defence need to be created, 'bulwarks' as it were, that allow for feeding rising struggles in 'harvest times'. If crises in the hegemonic system result in cracks (Holloway 2010), the bulwarks allow for agile forward movements that might open more new spaces. In periods of mere resistance, these bulwarks, or economies of opposition (Pahnke 2015) might appear, in a superficial analysis, as limited and unchallenging sub-realities. Their significance, though, is that they allow for quick actions right at the moment when they are urgently needed. This means that in order to correctly assess the political significance of peasant markets, one needs to take time into account.

'Country shops' is a Dutch network of cooperating farm shops. There are 89 associated farm shops that, apart from their own farm products, also sell the products of the other partners belonging to the network as well as products delivered to them through their cooperative. Together these farm shops constitute an interesting peasant market with its own distinctiveness, connectivity and rootedness. Initially the network only operated in the central eastern part of the country (we described this first germ in our 2012 article), but over the last 10 years it has been extended across the entire nation.

When the Covid-19 pandemic struck the Netherlands, the country shops witnessed a sudden jump in sales. Within a few weeks the total turnover (at shop level) went up by an amazing 50%–60%.[20] More than half of this increase was supported and sustained by the cooperative. This shows how the solid techno-institutional infrastructure created in the preceding years, allowed participants to address new demands in an agile way at 'harvest time' (to echo Joao Pedro Stédile).

The abruptly increased demand was basically geared to (1) non-prepared food, (2) basic ingredients for preparing food at home (e.g. flour and yeast), (3) foods perceived as healthy (e.g. pure fruit juices) and (4) high quality products (to compensate for restaurant closures). Country shops are well known for these product categories. Beyond that, in Covid-19 times the shops represented a good alternative to crowded supermarkets where social distancing often turned out to be difficult. In their turn the country shops and their cooperative were well placed to meet the abrupt increase in demand due to a range of interacting features. These are (1) the horizontal (as opposed to hierarchal) organization of network and cooperative, (2) their relatively small scale and (3) the absence of bureaucracy. Beyond that (4) the network and cooperative do not depend on credit: both are completely self-financed (which allows for quick decisions); (5) supply lines are short; (6) there is no dependency on just-in-time delivery. Finally (7), the constellation as a whole is not oriented to profit making: building prospects for the members to develop their farms and country shops (and thus improve their labour incomes) is the guiding principle.[21] Thus,

[20]Similar achievements were reported for peasant markets throughout Europe and many new initiatives for direct selling were started in order to compensate the reduced demand from restaurants, trading companies, food industries and large retail (see Ploeg 2020, for more details).

[21]This is a telling commonality shared by Ecovida in Brazil, nested markets in China and country shops in the Netherlands. Capital (in the Marxist sense) does not govern the circulation of food products. Circulation is not oriented at high returns on invested capital, but aims to improve labour incomes. This is related to the patrimony of these networks consisting mainly or exclusively of own and self-financed resources. Together such features shape these realities into a kind of 'expolary economies' (Shanin 1990) that are able to operate in ways that definitely differ from the way in which capitalist and/or state-controlled economies function.

the cooperative showed its value in a persuasive way: It contributed to the country shops quickly meeting new demands – far more than isolated, non-cooperating shops would ever have been able to do.

All this reflects agility: the capacity to act quickly and effectively to unexpected changes. This agility remarkably differs from the viscosity of large retail and big food industries. The country shops suddenly turned out to have traction: they attracted and were supported by growing numbers of people who felt alienated by the hegemonic food system.

In synthesis, in the case of the country shops transformativity comes to the fore as agility, superiority and persuasiveness. Wherever and whenever the hegemonic system enters in crisis, the new practices and connections (contained in the country shops and their cooperative) suddenly and convincingly show their relevance and superiority. They can deal with problems that the hegemonic system cannot easily resolve and this applies especially when there is urgency. By doing this, nested markets (e.g. the cooperating country shops) trigger and sustain the claim that far larger parts of society can and probably need to be transformed. In times of crisis peasant markets are 'agitprop' in disguise. When opportunities arise (due to crises in the hegemonic system), they are able to react: they are prepared. Slightly paraphrasing Stédile: 'they had their land well-plowed'.

Relevance

Each of these three cases has considerable relevance: these different peasant markets substantially contribute to improving the living and working conditions of those who deliver to and/or provision themselves through these markets, which are nested in, but are at the same time, distinctively different from the wider, conventional markets. Beyond that, they show the capacity to substantially enlarge their relevance and they do so with their own forces. The associated country shops in the Netherlands realized a total turnover of 21 million Euro in 2010; in 2019 their joint turnover totalled 25 million Euro – a growth of nearly 19% over 10 years. In 2019 the average turnover per farm shop totalled 280,000 Euros – this helped to sustain many jobs that otherwise would have disappeared. In Sanggang the nested market grew from an average turnover *per month* of 15,000 Yuan in 2015 (this roughly equalled 2000 Euro which comes down to an average 33 Euro/month/household which is, in the Chinese countryside, far from negligible). In 2019 average sales for the nested market as a whole had developed to 25,000 Yuan per month – a growth of 66% over 5 years. This allowed for a growing number of villagers to join the market and for participating households to simultaneously increase their sales. In its first two years of operation *O Circuito* realized average sales of 415 metric tonnes per year (with a value, at that time, of 0.75 million Reais; Magnanti 2008). This increased to 3000 MT per year in 2016 and in 2019 the flow of food delivered to distant local food markets had developed into an astonishing 7500 metric tons per year – a growth of 1800% over 11 years. In the year 2020 all three cases also demonstrated their capacity to deal with the many difficulties that came with the Covid-19 pandemic. Above all, the three cases show the relevance of markets being organized as commons (Ostrom 2010). Even under extremely difficult circumstances, the markets governed by devices of collective control generate social inclusion, resilient food production and access to healthy foods at cheap prices, thus benefitting both suppliers and buyers.

Transformativity

As these three case studies show, there is multiple transformativity in peasant markets. They allow for, and consolidate, major transformations in the sphere of production. They also bring changes in the market by separating circulation from profit-oriented trading. Peasant markets induce a fundamentally different type of circulation: one that centres on the defence and improvement of labour incomes in production whilst simultaneously improving the situation of consumers. Peasant markets are also transformative in so far as they contribute to the strengthening of social movements: they create mechanisms that allow for agile actions whenever and wherever need arises. They also help to generate prosperity where capital is unable to do so and particularly among groups that capital would normally shun. Peasant markets, in short, help to enlarge autonomy and strengthen the agency of rural actors and movements. Last, but not least, the contribution of these markets to transformativity also resides in their capacity to contribute to new coalitions of rural producers and urban consumers (the twenty-first Century modality of the classical 'unity of workers and peasants') (Heinisch 2017; La Via Campesina [LVC] 2017). Peasant markets also have weaknesses, some already well known, others still probably to emerge. But do such weaknesses imply that the construction of nested markets by social movements represents an endeavour that will fall short of its aims (as Goodman 2004; Dupuis and Goodman 2005; Tregear 2011) argue, or even fail outright (as suggested by Bonnano and Wolf 2018)?

Mission impossible or building counter-hegemony?

The voices of criticism basically fall into two categories. The first category embraces fundamental considerations. It is a critique *tout court*. The key question is mostly framed as: 'is it possible *at all* to fight capitalism by means of capitalism itself?'. The second category gives more consideration to the practicalities and asks whether these nested markets will be subject to conventionalization, as has happened with parts of organic agriculture (Guthman 2014). It is suggested that the newly-constructed nested markets will be captured in a step-by-step way by capital: taken over, subordinated and neutralized. Or worse: they will be turned around to pave the way for new rounds of accumulation. These are, indeed, questions that need to be taken seriously (partly because they might help to detect different kinds of weaknesses).

A first general observation is that the transformativity entailed in peasant markets and the like is the *capacity* to contribute to wider transformations that affect society as a whole. Whether or not such a transformation will actually occur cannot be known beforehand. Nor can we know beforehand when, how, or where it will occur. Transformativity definitely does not mean that here and now, before our eyes, society is being changed, as with a click of the fingers. Transformativity is about struggles, which are open-ended processes that are far from unilinear. They occur through stages (that build upon each other) and will probably experience unexpected twists and turns. One cannot, we think, declare beforehand that such struggles are doomed to fail, especially not when they are in their early stages. Admittedly, there are many reasons to be cautious and critical about this transformativity (Mier y Terán Giménez Cacho et al. 2018). However, the reasons given by the main critics for being sceptical are not very convincing.

Referring to peasant markets, Bonnano and Wolf (2018) argue, in what they call a 'critical analysis', that 'many forms of resistance do not transcend the sphere of market relations' (215). They are caught in 'the vicious circle of employing capitalism to transcend it' (215) and this makes 'resistance [into] the illusion of opposition' (220; see also Busch 2018). We think a fourfold mistake is being made here. Firstly, it is wrong to equate capitalism and markets (Braudel 1989, 1990; Bavel 2018). There have been markets throughout history, notably in pre-capitalist constellations as well as in socialist countries (van der Spek, van Leeuwen, and van Zanden 2014). Secondly, Bonnano and Wolf miss the critical point that, in today's global and neoliberal capitalism, markets are a strategic nexus between the real economy and the imperial networks that drain, subordinate and deform the real economy. This makes the 'sphere of market relations' a central arena of social struggle. Thirdly, it simply is not true that this same 'sphere of market relations' is not transcended. As in the case of *O Circuito,* people are engaging in new markets in order to defend and consolidate major transformations (such as the change to agroecology) in the sphere of production. Fourthly, the critique seems to assume that 'the sphere of market relations' is a homogeneous category. It is not. In this article we have argued that seemingly identical 'things' may appear, in real life, as *different* products, that flow through *distinctively different* channels, which are provided, used and managed by *different* people according to *distinguishable* rules. Together such concrete differences constitute patterns (colloquially called markets) that not only differ from each other but which are basically antagonistic. This antagonism resides in three features. First, general markets operate through profit-oriented activities that enlarge the *return on capital*, whilst the nested markets discussed here are oriented at defending and improving *labour incomes*. Second, general markets are governed by capital, whereas peasant markets are governed by labour (in the form of peasant producers and food consumers). Third, the capital-controlled markets are constructed as webs of dependencies, whereas peasant markets are structured as patterns of complementarities. In all these respects the discussed peasant markets clearly transcend the market relations moulded and controlled by capital.

The conventionalization thesis argues that initially different practices will eventually 'mov[e] away from the ecological integrity, progressive values, and transformative potential of the original […] movement' (Goldberger 2011). The once radical 'deviation' becomes conventional and loses its disruptive power. This thesis has been used, especially in the USA, to analyze, and criticize, the unfolding of organic agriculture over time. Under capitalist conditions conventionalization is perceived as being more or less inevitable; it is understood as a process that necessarily results in the disappearance of initially attractive outcomes. This thesis implies that whenever alternative practices (such as building new, nested markets) develop beyond 'niche proportions' (i.e. become generalized), their relevance and transformative potential necessarily evaporate.

Without denying the threat of conventionalization, we think this reasoning neglects that such a process, if it does occur, is far from uniform. When it occurs, it does so in different ways. It can occur at different stages and tipping points, and may bring different aspects to the fore. There will be different drivers and interests influencing the process. Conventionalization could result from scaling-out (Mier y Terán Giménez Cacho et al. 2018), but, as we have shown with the case of the circuit, up-scaling might go together as well with further radicalization.

Conventionalization might be a Janus-faced phenomenon. In the Netherlands, for instance, 'conventionalized' organic dairy farming now receives a milk price that is ten *Euro*cents higher than the price obtained in conventional dairy farming. Before 'conventionalization' the price difference was 10 cents of a *guilder*, so the current price differential is twice as high as it was when organic dairy farming was not (yet) economically and institutionally embedded and supported. Thus, in this case at least, 'conventionalization' has enlarged the price differential and, by so doing, made organic dairy farming into a powerful and permanent critique of the conventional alternative.

More generally speaking, social movements introduce novelties into the socio-technical world that otherwise would not have emerged – novelties that (depending on the situation and the power relations) might resist, be unfolded further, linked to other novelties so as to compose more promising and stronger constellations which open opportunities for new people to engage with. But it may be the other way around as well: novelties might get deactivated and the initial promises might turn into deceptions and demobilize once powerful movements.

By way of conclusion

We think that the movements that currently actively try to change parts of the socio-technical world by introducing novel ways to produce, distribute and consume and thus pushing back the immediate control and impact of capital should be understood as engaged in what Gramsci (1998) called the struggle for hegemony (see also Holt Giménez and Shattuck 2011 and Borras 2020). By developing production in instances where capital is unable to do so (as in the case of Sanggang), constructing mechanisms that allow for timely and much needed responses to situations in which capital is paralyzed (as in the Country Shops) and by circulating food products in such a way that the position of both producers and consumers is improved (i.e. *O Circuito*), peasant markets show their transformativity and relevance and thus build and show (counter-) hegemony: they function far better than capital-controlled mechanisms and devices and thus show that there definitely are alternatives to capitalism. Peasant markets thus 'occupy spaces […] and advance toward a hegemonic position' (Gramsci 1975, 42). In this respect Hobsbawn's synthesis of Gramsci's thoughts is very relevant: 'The struggle for hegemony must be waged *before* the transitions, as well as during and after it' (Hobsbawn 2011, 327, italics in original). For 'in the *absence* of hegemonic force even revolutions run into the sand' (328, italics in original).

According to Gramsci the clues are to be found in the social movements themselves, in their struggles and in the 'formation of a collective will'. 'Through these movements and only through them can a hitherto subaltern class turn itself in a potentially hegemonic one […]. Only in this way can it […] become the engine of transformation' (Hobsbawn 2011, 331). Peasant markets are building blocks of counter-hegemony, demonstrating *in vivo* the transformative capacities of current social movements. This is why it is so important to empirically study 'the emergence of a permanent and [loosely] organized movement – [that is] distant from a rapid "explosion" – down to its smallest capillary and molecular elements (as Gramsci calls them)' (331). This is why any *a priori* position on building new nested markets must be avoided. The fight for hegemony ('a strategy of the long haul', 329) is too complex, open-ended, heterogeneous and unpredictable to be reduced to any simplistic scheme that forestalls its fate beforehand.

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