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Sociology for Just Food Futures: Past, present and future

Introduction

Given that sociology can be broadly defined as the study of the causes and consequences of social life, social change, and human behaviour, it is perhaps not surprising that food studies has come to represent an important and distinct sociological field. Yet, already in the 19th century, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin had declared: “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are” pointing to the profound relationships that exist between humans and the foods they eat (and avoid). Thus, when it comes to the trajectory of the sociological study of food, what is surprising is how it took so long for this field to emerge. This is not to suggest food was absent from scientific study, but rather that it was broadly considered as a social problem or means of social classification, as opposed to an object of study in and of itself. When it came to rural sociology, there had been emphasis on the organization, management and impacts of agricultural practices and systems, with issues of food production typically addressed in agrarian studies, development sociology, agricultural economy, and social anthropology. However, since 1980s, sociologists actively contributed to the emergence of food studies as a distinct, and expanding, academic field. As Carolan (2012:1) notes, the sociology of food has ‘deep roots, from its origin in rural sociology, on the agriculture “side,” to its links with cultural studies, on the food “side”’. In this sense, the trajectory of food studies within the Rural Sociology Group (RSO) reflects wider disciplinary trends.

Food, as a research theme within the Rural Sociology Group, emerged in the 1990s out of our rural development work. It implied a broadening of scope from farming and agricultural practices to a consideration of multifunctionality. This led to a re-grounding of research into the local environment (social and ecological) and a deepening of focus, for example into the production of specialty products, adding value to products, and on-farm processing and direct sales. From here, a series of projects emerged on short food supply chains and new food networks and the impact thereof on sustainable rural development. These projects were, to a large extent, characterized by a focus on the supply-side, exploring and analysing practices and strategies of farmers and artisan processors. Through EU-funded projects (see table 1) on new short food supply chains (SUS-CHAIN), on origin food and geographical indications (SINER-GI), and on collective farming marketing initiatives (COFAMI), we looked into governance and asked how farmers were trying to (re)gain control over the food supply chain and retain a higher share of value added. We also looked at the opportunities and bottlenecks for scaling-up these new supply chains and food networks.

In 2008, at the peak of the Food Price Crisis, Han Wiskerke was invited by the Peri-Urban

Regions Platform Europe (PURPLE) to give a lecture looking into the need for and characteristics of a food policy for urban and peri-urban regions. This lecture, entitled 'Urban food dynamics: towards an integrated and territorial food policy,' opened up our focus towards other food provisioning practices, such as distributing, selling and eating. Importantly, the turn to food consumption did not leave production behind. Rather, in line with growing calls to move beyond siloed and linear visions of food, consumption was always understood in relation to production and to the landscapes in which it is grown, processed, sold and consumed. This approach was facilitated by a great deal of thinking about how to link food to emergent issues and topics that cities in particular were dealing with in terms of public health, climate change, (green) living environment and socio-spatial inequalities (Wiskerke 2015). Links were made between the role of food and agriculture for urban employment, urban agriculture and food security. Concomitantly, this also implied that we began to focus on food provisioning practices in (peri-)urban areas and on rural-urban relations. This 'consumption and urban' turn (while continuing to study production and the rural) provided the inspiration for the EU funded projects PUREFOOD, FOODLINKS and SUPURBFOOD (see table 2). Specific areas of research since then have been short food supply chains (or spatially and socially proximate food networks) including urban and peri-urban agriculture, public food procurement and the role of cities and city-regions in developing food strategies and policies (Wiskerke 2009). Through collaboration with planners in the Working Group on Sustainable Food Planning of the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP) since 2009 (Viljoen and Wiskerke 2012) and a part-time and temporary (2013-2016) professorship at the Amsterdam Academy of Architecture, Han Wiskerke brought in additional elements of spatial design along with utopian thinking (Wiskerke and Verhoeven 2018), which has given shape to our current and future visions for the sociology of food.

A deep sociological understanding is always tied to deep contextual understanding. With this in mind, we recognize that to make sense of where we are, and where we want to go, it is important to know where we came from. In this chapter, we reflect on the trajectory of the sociology of food in the Rural Sociology Group, elaborating on the aforementioned EU-funded projects, including several PhD projects, which have shaped and continue to shape our thinking and trajectories. We then consider current trends we see within the group related to the sociology of food. We conclude with a statement on the future of the sociology of food from our position as a Rural Sociology Group committed to just and sustainable food futures.

Turning to food

One could argue that food has been a topic on our research agenda since the very start of the group, i.e. we focus on farming, which is the practice of producing food, feed and fibre. However, food as topic of research and as a research theme on its own dates back to the EU-funded IMPACT project, which was coordinated by the Rural Sociology Group and which ran from 1998 to 2001. IMPACT explored the diversity, dynamics and socio-economic impacts of rural development practices in Europe. To better understand the underlying mechanisms and strategies of these rural development practices, the IMPACT project elaborated a detailed typology of rural development activities. This typology distinguished nine specific fields of activity, which were classified within three main categories (Ploeg, J.D. van der; Long, A.; Banks 2002; van der Ploeg et al. 2000):

1. **Re-grounding,** which implies a shift in the mobilisation, and use, of resources (land, labour, capital, inputs) within the family farm household. An important re-grounding strategy focuses on reducing the costs of farming, by substituting externally provided inputs with more efficient uses of internal farm resources. A second re-grounding strategy aims at the mobilisation of off-farm income, mostly by taking up paid employment off the farm (pluri-activity).
2. **Broadening**, which repositions the role of farms in the wider countryside by taking up forms of economic enterprise that tap into newly emerging markets in rural areas. These include activities as diverse as: nature and landscape management; agri-tourism; leisure and sports; care provision and energy production. Though apparently diverse, these activities have in common that they are all non-food oriented activities and that they respond to new societal demands that are articulated to farming and the wider countryside.
3. **Deepening,** which seeks to reposition the role of the farm enterprise within agri-food supply chains, and extend the involvement of the farm with different stages of food production and supply. Rather than delivering raw materials to industrialised and centralised food supply chains over which they have little control, farmers themselves take up activities beyond the farm-gate (processing, marketing etc) and play an active role in defining the specific qualities of products produced on the farm. Specific fields of activity are: organic farming; high quality production and regionally specific products; and short supply chains.

Our food research agenda emerged from this third category of rural development practices. Looking back at the development of this agenda since the early 2000s, two main research lines can be distinguished, which we outline and discuss below.

Research line 1: Alternative food networks and sustainable rural development

Building upon this 'deepening' trajectory, our food research agenda started as a 'productive' or 'hopeful' critique on the modernisation of agriculture and globalization and industrialisation of food systems. The criticism focused on the environmental impact of modern and industrialized agriculture and food, on growing power inequalities in the food system and unequal distribution of value added and on the lack of transparency in global food supply chains. The latter was frequently problematized in relation to food scares in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Casey, Lawless, and Wall 2010). The hope relates to the emergence of a wide variety of new food networks characterized by notions of re-localization, social and spatial embedding and a turn to quality (Renting, Marsden, and Banks 2003; Watts, Ilbery, and Maye 2005). This resulted in a steadily growing body of academic research and scientific output in agri-food studies on short food supply chains, local food systems and alternative food networks (Goodman, DuPuis, and Goodman 2012; Renting et al. 2003; Wiskerke 2009), with a focus in the European literature on territorial food quality (and geographical indications) and the socio-economic and socio-spatial impacts of these alternative food networks on agrarian and rural development (Michel-Villarreal et al. 2019; Tregear 2011). Our contribution to this body of research consisted of four EU-funded projects and several PhD studies related to, or building on, the aforementioned IMPACT project. Examples of PhD studies are those of De Roest (2000) on the production of Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, Van der Meulen (2000) on different beef production and processing networks in Italy, Roep (2000) on

farmer's cheese processing and marketing in the Netherlands, and Miele (2001) on markets for organic products in Germany, the Netherlands and Italy. PhD projects that also belong to this research line, but that are not linked to nor carried out at the time of the IMPACT project, are those by Lopez Moreno (2014) on labelling of origin food products in Europe (with case studies in Spain and the Netherlands), by D'Amico (2015) on alternative food networks in Calabria, and by Villarreal Herrera (2017) on sustainable dairy supply chains in the Netherlands, Ireland and the United Kingdom.

SUS-CHAIN, which started in 2003, was the first EU-funded food project that was coordinated by the Rural Sociology Group. In this project we carried out a comparative analysis of the agro-food sector in seven European countries (Kirwan et al. 2004; Vuylsteke et al. 2004), followed by an in-depth reconstruction of the start and development of fourteen new food supply chains (two per country), inspired by actor-network theory (Brunori and Wiskerke 2004). In reconstructing these fourteen supply chains specific attention was paid to the following aspects:

- The economic performance of the new food supply chain, and in particular the distribution of value added;
- The organisation and governance of and power relations within the food supply chain;
- The role and importance of public support (e.g. financial, advocacy, legislation) and other interventions in founding and/or further developing the food supply chain;
- The socio-cultural, ecological and territorial embedding of the food supply chain;
- The overall sustainability performance of the new food supply chain (in relation to that of its conventional counterpart), with specific attention for the impact on the rural economy.

The main results of SUS-CHAIN were published in the book 'Nourishing Networks: Fourteen lessons about creating sustainable food supply chains' (Roep and Wiskerke 2006) and several peer-reviewed book chapters and papers (Wiskerke and Roep 2007; Roep and Wiskerke 2012; Roep and Wiskerke 2013).

Acronym	Full title	Start-End	Website / Weblink
SUS-CHAIN	Marketing sustainable agriculture: an analysis of the potential role of new food supply chains in sustainable rural development	2003-2006	https://www.sus-chain.org/ https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/QLK5-CT-2002-01349
COFAMI	Encouraging collective farmers marketing initiatives	2005-2008	http://www.cofami.org/ https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/6541
SINER-GI	Strengthening international research on geographical indications	2005-2008	http://food.origin-for-sustainability.org/2005/ https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/6522
GLAMUR	Global and local food chain assessment: a multidimensional performance-based approach	2013-2016	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/311778

Table 1. Overview of EU-funded projects on alternative food networks & short food supply chains

In 2005, two new EU-funded projects started: COFAMI and SINER-GI. SINER-GI is the only EU-funded project featuring in this chapter that was not coordinated by the Rural Sociology Group, but it is highlighted here as it was the main source of inspiration for the MSc Course 'Origin Food: People, Place and Products', which is still running today (as part of the Gastronomy specialisation in the Master Food Technology). COFAMI explored the emergence and diversity of collective farmer-driven marketing initiatives, the factors limiting and enabling the further development of these collectives and their societal impact (Renting et al. 2011). The majority of the cases studied in the COFAMI project were collective food marketing initiatives (e.g. high-quality foods, regional foods, direct producer-consumer relations), but also a few non-food marketing cases were included, such as those focusing on the collective provisioning of ecosystem services. GLAMUR, which started in 2013, was a co-coordination effort of the Rural Sociology Group and the Department of Agriculture, Food & Environment at Pisa University. GLAMUR partly built on SUS-CHAIN, including a revisit of several food supply chains studied in SUS-CHAIN, but with a more elaborate, in-depth and multi-method performance assessment of food supply chains, addressing not only social, economic and environmental sustainability, but also ethical and health issues. Moreover, it also attempted to compare local and global food chains, but this turned out to be difficult, if not impossible, due to the high degree of hybridity as local chains depend, for example, on global inputs while globally available products may rely on localized production and processing practices (Oostindie et al. 2016).

Research line 2: Urban and city region food systems

Around 2010, a second food research line began to emerge, which implied an 'urban turn' in rural sociology. The ongoing process of urbanization, with more than fifty percent of the world population living in urban areas since 2007, and the food price hikes in 2007/2008 began to point to an important shift in the food security discourse: food insecurity is not (only) a production failure issue, but a challenge of food accessibility and affordability. Both in policy and research, food was generally seen as synonymous to agriculture and thus as a rural policy domain and an agricultural production challenge (Sonnino 2009). Also, our food research was, until then, rather biased towards food supply (production and processing) and the rural domain, as one can tell from the EU-funded projects and PhD projects presented and discussed under research line 1.

In addition to the process of urbanization and a changing (urban) food security discourse, another emerging reality attracted our research interest: cities and city regions taking up the role of food system innovators and food policymakers (Wiskerke 2015). Food was becoming an entry point and lens through which several urban challenges, for which municipalities are responsible, could be addressed and connected, such as climate change, waste collection and processing, social and spatial inequalities (in access to and affordability of food) and diet-related ill-health.

But it was one specific event in 2008 that laid the foundation for our research on urban and city-region food systems, namely the aforementioned invitation by the Peri-Urban Regions Platform Europe (PURPLE) to give a lecture about the need for and characteristics of an agricultural and food policy for urban

and peri-urban regions. This lecture was developed into a paper (Wiskerke 2009) for a special issue of International Planning Studies entitled 'Feeding the city: the challenge of urban food planning', and into two research proposals (PUREFOOD and FOODLINKS) that were both funded by the European Commission. On a side note, this special issue of International Planning Studies, edited by Professor Kevin Morgan of Cardiff University, coincided with the founding of the working group on Sustainable Food Planning of the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP) and its inaugural conference in Almere in 2009, organised by Kevin Morgan, Han Wiskerke and Arnold van der Valk (Professor of Land Use Planning at Wageningen University). The second conference in Brighton resulted in the book 'Sustainable food planning: evolving theory and practice', edited by Andre Viljoen (Professor of Architecture at the University of Brighton) and Han Wiskerke (2012).

The EU-funded projects PUREFOOD and FOODLINKS had a similar core, but a different approach and objective. The similarity lies in a focus on a new food geography shaped by three dynamics:

1. Short chain provisioning of food in and to urban and peri-urban areas;
2. Revaluing and localizing public food procurement;
3. Integrated food policymaking at city or city-region level (i.e. urban or city-region food strategies and policies).

PUREFOOD was an innovative training network which enabled us – together with universities in the United Kingdom, Italy, Latvia, Brazil and Uganda – to recruit 12 early-stage researchers (PhD candidates), of which four focused on local food systems, four on public food procurement and four on (aspects of) urban food strategies. FOODLINKS primarily focussed on knowledge brokerage between scientists, policymakers and civil society organisations (Wiskerke and Bock 2012). This project was carried out by a consortium consisting of these three stakeholder groups, who collaborated in three Communities of Practice (Karnder et al. 2016): 1) short food supply chains; 2) public food procurement; and 3) urban food strategies. Several PUREFOOD early stage researchers participated in these Communities of Practice, which was also due to the fact that the same universities and researchers from the Netherlands, United Kingdom, Latvia and Italy were involved in both projects. While PUREFOOD focused on doing novel empirical and theoretical research, resulting in peer-reviewed articles and book chapters and in PhD theses (Trenouth and Tisenkopfs 2015; Cretella and Buenger 2016; Halliday and Barling 2018; Sonnino et al. 2014), FOODLINKS focused on making scientific knowledge accessible and useful for policymakers, civil society organisations and other practitioners. This resulted in different kinds of outputs, such as an action plan for sustainable food procurement (Barling et al. 2013) and a guide for urban food strategies (Moragues Faus et al 2013). As such FOODLINKS also marked the start of collaborating with non-academic partners in international research and innovation projects, something we continued with in SUPURBFOOD and ROBUST.

SUPURBFOOD also focused on urban food provisioning and was carried out in seven European city-regions: Rotterdam, Gent, Bristol, Riga, Zurich, Rome and Vigo. Key themes were: short food supply chains, closing loops and cycles (circular economy) and multifunctional and productive use of urban and peri-urban space. Towards this end, we partnered with SMEs involved in food distribution and delivery, waste collection and recycling and community collectives providing food and other ecosystem services. Another aspect to SUPURBFOOD was North-South dialogue. While the call for proposals indicated that lessons learned from research in Europe should be transferred to the global South, we opted for a different approach by starting to ask what we in Europe could learn from experiences in Asia, Africa and Latin-America (and vice versa) and brought researchers, policymakers and SMEs from different continents together in two interactive workshops to exchange experiences. SUPURBFOOD resulted in a variety of scientific papers (Koopmans et al. 2017; Reed at al. 2018; Swagemakers et al., 2018; Maye et al. 2021), but also in policy and practitioner briefs.

The last project to highlight in this overview is ROBUST, which is not a typical food project like the other three but a more general project on rural-urban relations. However, food was one of the key themes in this project as it is one of the prominent ways through which rural and urban areas are connected. The main themes were largely similar as those of PUREFOOD and FOODLINKS, with ample attention for connecting rural producers and urban consumers through direct sales, for localizing public food procurement and for further developing urban and city region food strategies (Arcuri et al. 2022).

In addition to EU-funded projects this second research line was, like the first research line, also shaped by different PhD projects, some of which were part of the PUREFOOD project. Constance (2017) studied two urban food cooperatives in New Mexico (USA) and how they framed local food, which also entailed an exploration of rural-urban relations. Wegerif (2017) undertook a detailed study of how Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), one of the fastest growing cities in the world, is provided with food through a very heterogeneous and dynamic network of peasant farmers, small scale rural and urban food processors, traders and transporters and formal and informal vendors on streets and markets. Sulemana (2016) carried out a critical analysis of Ghana's home grown school feeding program and showed how the rules and regulations of this program did not align with the practices

Acronym	Full title	Start-End	Website / Weblink
PUREFOOD	Urban, peri-urban and regional food dynamics: towards an integrated and territorial approach to food	2010-2014	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/264719
FOODLINKS	Knowledge brokerage to promote sustainable food consumption and production: linking scientists, policymakers and civil society organisations	2011-2013	https://www.foodlinkscommunity.net https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/265287
SUPURBFOOD	Towards sustainable modes of urban and peri-urban food provisioning	2012-2015	http://www.supurbfood.eu/ https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/312126
ROBUST	Rural-urban outlooks: unlocking synergies	2017-2021	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/311778 https://rural-urban.eu/

Table 2. Overview of EU-funded projects on urban and city region food systems

Farmers market in the United States, photo by Petra Derkzen

and strategies of both the school food caterers and the family farmers. Another PhD thesis on school feeding was written by Lozano Torres (2019) , who examined this for the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre and analysed how family farmers organised themselves in cooperatives to deliver food to Porto Alegre's schools. PhD research on urban food strategies as part of the PUREFOOD program was carried out by Cretella (2019) and Halliday (2015). Other examples of PhD research within this second research line include those of Veen (2015) on community gardens in urban areas in the Netherlands and of Sovova (2020) on food self-provisioning and the diverse food economies of urban gardeners in Brno (Czechia).

The PhD projects and international collaborative food projects that have been carried out in the past 20 years, the cases that we have analysed, and sometimes studied over longer periods of time, the conceptual contributions made on the basis of empirical (action) research and the ways of working (in particular the shift from consortia of researchers to collaborations between researchers, policy-makers, SMEs and CSOs) have contributed to the development of our approach to the sociology of food, which we explain below.

Key elements of an RSO approach to the sociology of food

At the start of the millennium, McMichael (2000) remarked that that the power of food as a force of resistance could be found in its material and symbolic functions of linking nature, human survival, health, culture and livelihood. Indeed, this idea of food as a powerful entry point to understanding, resisting, and changing social-economic and ecological pathways has served as a motivation for many RSO scholars. Food is a common entry point: an empirical object to investigate other ideas around issues of, for example, governance, markets, commons, gender, and resistance. That said, our shared identity as sociologists researching food, comes less from shared theories (which are diverse, though at times overlapping), and more from our ways of working.

Based on interviews with RSO faculty working on food topics, a RSO approach can be loosely identified. The approach rotates around normative entry points, everyday worlds and practices, grounding in space and place, alternatives and diverse economies, activism and governing otherwise.

Normative starting point

A commitment to just transformation demands a normative starting point. As researchers, we tend to apply micro-sociological approaches, paying attention to expressions of food provisioning that do not normally feature in the academic literature and that seek to resist conventional understandings or framings. We all recognize food as intimately tied to culture and values and reject interpretations which restrict food to a commodity. Together, our work speaks to the importance of diversity and pluralism and to possibilities.

People's everyday realities

We tend to start with people in their everyday worlds and work from there, whether it relates to understanding how and why people grow food (see the work of Sovova and de Vrieze), or how people access and share food (Morrow), how people organize to influence food policies (see the work of Duncan), or to shape their own futures apart from state and market (Jongerden), or how they imagine their future (see the work of Wiskerke). This focus on the everyday world is often framed around specific practices, or the 'actions, processes, relationships and contexts through which and where the ordinary, real and everyday world is constituted' (Jones and Murphy 2010:308). For example, Jongerden works on self-constituting practices: how people create liveable lives for themselves, often with others. Duncan has researched how women's food practices are altered due to processes of land grabbing, and focuses now on the practices of disagreement and convergence in food systems governance. Sovova, de Vrieze and Morrow explore, albeit in different contexts and ways, diverse economies as bundles of social practices, while Wiskerke researches differences and similarities in food provisioning practices through international comparative research.

In studying practices, we note the importance of autonomy in pushing alternatives or making the less-visible more visible. We particularly focus on those food worlds and food practices that often remain hidden and are easily neglected in scientific research as they are considered to be marginal and irrelevant, or simply not mainstream enough to have a significant meaning or impact. Yet, making the hidden and neglected worlds and practices visible and giving a voice to the ones that often remain unheard, is a key feature of our approach.

Relational and socio-spatial approach

Given the materiality of food, and the connection of food to place, be it through the ground it is grown on, the forest it is foraged from, the river it is harvested from, or the kitchen it is prepared in, an understanding of a relational sense of place is key to our approach. The focus on the spatial revolves around how relations are constructed and reconstructed in and through space and place. Place can be conceived as porous and integrating the local and the global in a progressive way (Massey 1994). For Massey (1994:154), places are processes, boundless, made of multiple, sometimes conflicting identities and in

continuous reproduction where 'the specificity [of a place] is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus'. Key to this understanding of place are relations and geometries of power, suggesting that power is not just a product of relations, but 'power itself has geography' (Massey 2009:18).

This translates directly to the use of foodscapes. Foodscapes contain a physical material quality and are often representative of an individual and communities relationship with food (Adema 2007). Foodscapes are also interpreted as a process (Dolphijn 2004). This perspective especially comes into play when utilizing participatory techniques where the concept of foodscapes is used 'to pinpoint the local everyday spaces of food and eating in the lives of [the] co-researchers' (Brembeck and Johansson 2010:800), or identifying health-supporting environments and social relations that shapes our views on food (Brembeck et al. 2013). Further, applying the concept of foodscapes allows for the interpretation of environments that are 'transformed ideologically and/or literally into food-centred spaces', highlighting the human-centred component (Adema 2007:3), as well as non-human dimensions and relations. Affirming the importance of foodscapes to our approach, we can point to the Foodscapes Cluster of the Centre for Space, Place and Society (CSPS), of which RSO is a founding member. The Foodscapes Cluster brings together scholars who engage in the study of food and its social, political, environmental and economic meanings shaped by local contexts. It is in these local contexts that promising alternatives can be identified, studied and supported.

Diverse economies and alternatives

Alternative food practices have been identified as key to pathways for the development of resilient socially and ecologically sustainable food provisioning practices. These practices have gained heightened visibility under the umbrella of alternative food networks (AFNs). We recognize that our ability to see and imagine more sustainable food futures is both enabled and constrained by the models and methods we now use. This approach is supported by a diverse economies framing that functions as a conceptual tool that encourages the identification of different food provisioning practices and appraisal of their roles in sustainable food futures from their own terms. We refer to this as a diverse food economies approach. In light of this, many of us draw inspiration from Gibson-Graham's (2006: 70) utilization of the iceberg metaphor: The idea is that we need to shift our perspective from the obvious, mainstream food systems, to the multitude of food provisioning practices ongoing, developing and emerging from below the surface. This also relates to the aforementioned characteristic of our way of working, i.e. making the hidden visible and giving a voice to the unheard and most-affected.

When applied, the diverse food economies approach provide important insight into how people provision food beyond the formal market (in some form or function), including how collectives of people come together to try out alternative/different ways to access food. From a diverse food economies perspective, it becomes clear that many food practices are not economically determined.

Importantly, the diverse economies framework (Gibson-Graham 2008) has supported thinking on the diverse ways people create livelihoods, and the (real and potential) role of commons in the everyday practice and

Agricultural cooperation in Rome, photo by Han Wiskerke

governance of our food systems. For example, work on food sharing and food waste considers formal to non-formal modes of governance to understand shared responsibility (Morrow 2019)). This approach has also supported our thinking around circularity and (Morrow and Davies 2021; Duncan and Pascucci 2016) and regeneration (Duncan, Wiskerke, and Carolan 2021), informing inputs that aim to challenge dominant narratives about how and why people provision food the way they do.

Activism in different forms

With a trend towards researching alternatives in specific places, it is perhaps not surprising that there is also a focus on activism, and even reflections on our own identities as scholar-activists (Duncan et al. 2019)© 2019 The Author(s. This work has considered micro-activism, as well as the work of local and national movements, up to global activist movements. What distinguishes this work from alternative practices is the more explicit focus on resistance, analysing how resistance is conceptualized and the developments of categories of differentiations, but also resistance from a constructive position, such as what is contrasted when people disagree and an emphasis on the construction of other worlds and practices. This work is, in some ways, tied to thinking of the former RSO chair, Jan Douwe van der Ploeg, and his work on resistance of a third kind (van der Ploeg 2007).

Governance and Policy

Innovations in food systems governance are urgently needed to inspire action, mobilize resources, manage complexity, and advance alternatives. Such innovations are a key component of transformations towards more equitable food systems. Towards this end, much of the work described above has been

contextualised with a view towards improving policy and governance of food systems at the local, national and supra-national level. This has happened through funded projects, but also through consultancies and independent efforts to translate our work for impact.

Future research agenda

The problems plaguing food systems are well researched and well known. A growing global population, growing inequity, and urbanization, are all expected to contribute to a food insecure future that risks jumping the guard-rails of social and planetary boundaries. This presents a complex and troubling challenge: how can we support transformation towards sustainable and just food systems? One thing is clear: the objective of future food systems can no longer be to simply maximize productivity. The main challenges ahead are not technical, they are social, cultural and political; and sociology has the potential to contribute to addressing these challenges in meaningful ways.

As sociologists researching and teaching about food and food-related topics, we are committed to ensuring that universities remain spaces for dialogue, engagement, debate and also visioning for just and sustainable food futures. We see our research as contributing to food system transformations and fostering an environment where the specific context of our intellectual labour and knowledge are generated through the practice of thought and the action towards the goals of equitable, and just futures (Gopal 2021:889) .

Towards this end, we recognize the importance of devoting more attention to issues of power and inequalities while also being aware of intersectionalities in our work and beyond (Morrow and Parker 2020; Duncan, Levkoe, Moragues-Faus 2020). This extends to identifying and naming structural inequalities that impact food practices and institutions, as well as inequalities in terms of how people are actually impacted by the food system so that we do take inequality as a starting point to understand connecting.

To identify, understand and support equality is also to recognize and prioritize pluralism. We have found that work on future visioning and utopian thinking is an effective method towards this end. Such visioning work is actively supported by arts-based and creative methodologies (Pearson et al. 2018; Wiskerke and Verhoeven 2018), and we anticipate continuing to develop and refine these methods. We also recognize that while this vision informs our work as a group, we are certainly not the only ones holding such a vision. We are committed continue to listen, learn and foster collaboration to advance, challenge and even adapt, our vision.

In terms of future questions and research, we have the individual and collective tasks of grappling with increased complexity and societal fragmentation. For example: What does it mean for our approaches and research when we have historically positioned ourselves in solidarity with farmers who are now protesting and resisting policies we assess as important for sustainability? Looking back at agrarian sociology in the 1990s, there was a concerted focus on understanding diversity: we need to understand this diversity and different ways to make farming more sustainable. This was an important, but rather neutral analytical position. Today, we have established a more normative and collaborative research agenda, but with a focus on alternative approaches and resistance at the margins.

Taking up foodscapes as a framework allows us to conceptualize food in terms of relations and to the extent to which these relations expand and contract. We have opportunities to explore the 'thrown-togetherness' of place (a particular locus) with a view towards sense-making. Yet, to complement this place-based approach, there are efforts to expand beyond place to space. The spatial helps us to talk about relations that stretch out, beyond the geographical boundaries of a city region, exploring assemblages of actors, practices, flavours and materiality. Applying such an approach helps us to emphasize the concept of relations and connections. Moreover the relations we focus on are also part of the networks we research and participate in.

Similarly, taking a diverse economies approach, we note that there is a strong focus on the micro-scale level and the approach does not always facilitate the identification of interconnections and wider relations and networks that local, alternative processes are embedded in. Looking ahead, there are questions to consider as to whether there is a need for a scaling-up of the diverse economies approach to re-engage with debates around political economy and political ecology, for example. We see value in arguing for an expansionist view of diverse economies, recognizing that by adopting a minimalist vision of capitalism, some practices or ideologies and structures are ignored (Koretskaya and Feola, 2020). We are encouraged by diverse economies approaches advancing anti-racist, anti-patriarchal and anti-capitalist work (e.g. Hossein 2021; Borowiak et al. 2018), and we are well positioned to contribute here. We also need to understand how we can better engage with strong theory without giving up hope. Towards this end, we can imagine drawing inspiration from critical reparative approaches.

Looking ahead, we turn to the words of Leonard Cohen1:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

With these words in mind, we will continue to seek out the cracks and ring the bells to advance more just and sustainable food futures.

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1 Taken from the song 'Anthem' by Leonard Cohen from the album The Future (1992).

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