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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

From coping strategy to hopeful everyday practice: Changing interpretations of food self-provisioning

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Abstract

While alternative food networks (AFNs) have become the leading conceptualisation of sustainable food systems, vibrant scholarship on food self-provisioning (FSP) in Central and Eastern Europe has remained confined to the geopolitical region it investigates. This article brings these two bodies of thought closer together in two steps. First, we trace four framings of FSP deployed over the last three decades—coping strategy, cultural practice, hobby and source of good food and reading FSP as transformative practice—to demonstrate its progressive affinity with AFNs. Second, we follow the most recent framing in highlighting the material reality of local food production as a feature shared by both FSP and AFNs. From this perspective, FSP can be understood as a more radical variant of AFNs given its more substantial environmental and social impact (FSP is more widespread and socially inclusive and less dependent on market transactions). By uncovering the epistemological underpinnings of these different framings of FSP and exploring their implications for food practices on the

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ground, this article draws general lessons for scholarship aiming to advance food system transformation.

KEYWORDS
alternative food networks, care, Central and Eastern Europe, discourse, epistemology, performativity, sustainable food system

INTRODUCTION

The publication of the latest *City of Brno*[1] *Master Plan* in 2020 started a bitter conflict between plot holders in several allotment sites on city-owned land and city planners and politicians. Allotment sites emerged on the outskirts of the city in the early 20th century (Gibas et al., 2013; Sovová & Krylová, 2019) and gradually became enclosed by built-up areas as the city expanded. Local politicians' and planners' attitudes towards allotments have varied from support during times of food shortages and economic crises to disinterest during the decades of the communist regime (Gibas & Broumová, 2020). With the adoption of a market economy in the early 1990s, indifference turned into hostility. Allotment sites, particularly those nearer the city centre, came to be seen by developers as lucrative places for profit generation and by politicians and planners as places offering the opportunity to modernise the city. Thus, the area of allotments gradually decreased, and several allotment sites fell victim to new housing projects (see also Spilková & Vágner, 2016, on similar developments in Prague). With the draft of *the City of Brno Master Plan* in 2020, this trend became an official strategy as it proposed to abolish and 'develop' a further 173 hectares of allotment sites. The proposal's publication was immediately followed by protests from gardeners and environmental activists.

The reasoning of both sides of the conflict drew from divergent representations of food self-provisioning (FSP).[2] Planners and politicians view FSP as a residuum of the past that no longer belongs in a modern city and poses an obstacle to its development. Conversely, gardeners strive to present their activities as advancing public interests and mobilising arguments, particularly about greening the urban environment and providing health and educational benefits. Their case was heard to some extent with the passing of the *Gardening Act* by the Czech Parliament in May 2021 (Gardening Act, 2021), which acknowledged gardening as a publicly beneficial activity. While the law urges municipalities to support spaces for gardening, the situation in Brno is rather paradoxical. On the one hand, the *Master Plan* envisages the allocation of a limited space to 'novel' food gardens (i.e., community gardens) while simultaneously abolishing large tracts of 'traditional' allotments.[3] The city planners' strong distinction between the desirability of traditional versus novel forms of urban FSP, which implicitly underpins these plans, can be traced to academic discourses on FSP, which we map in this article.

Struggles over space for urban food production have been discursively undergirded by implicit notions about the rural and the urban, nature and culture, tradition and modernity and other parallel dichotomies (Tornaghi, 2017). In Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), these dichotomies are further reinforced by the discursive linkage of the FSP with the failed socialist regime (Samec & Gibas, 2021). In contrast to practical urban policy-making and development, evidenced by the above Brno case, however, recent scholarship on FSP in CEE has clearly turned towards a more positive framing of these practices. The affinity of FSP with alternative food networks (AFNs), the

dominant school of thought on sustainable food systems, has become increasingly compelling (de Hoop & Jehlička, 2017; Sovová et al., 2021; Vávra et al., 2018a). As a result, scholarship on CEE FSP is increasingly recognised as a relevant contribution to debates on sustainable food systems transformation (Jehlička et al., 2020). This gradual yet pronounced shift in academic discourse on CEE FSP is the central focus of this article.

In making this fundamental claim, the article contributes to a growing strand of literature that suggests an alternative reading of post-2000 developments in the CEE region vis-à-vis the West and consequently advocates the need for a new understanding of the wider relevance of knowledge generated in this region. This literature highlights the reversal of the relative positions of the East and West in terms of the roles of precursor and follower in world-making processes:

> 'Postsocialist transition' seems to have propelled Eastern Europe from Europe's past to Europe's future… Now, when the effects of 'transition' are starkly evident, the former socialist world seems to be ahead rather than behind. (Dzenovska, 2018, p. 24)

This scholarship refers to CEE 'foreshadowing the future of neoliberal reform' in Western Europe and North America (Graan, 2013) and conceptualises the condition of East European rural depopulation driven by Westward migration as 'emptiness' and relates this change to transnational forms of power transcending the confines of East European states (Dzenovska, 2018) and to world-making processes (Dzenovska, 2020). This literature recasts CEE as a source of knowledge important for understanding today's world. Nevertheless, these accounts tend to relate to the bleak present and at best unknown and uncertain futures. While we embrace the project aimed at propelling knowledge from CEE to the forefront of knowledge production, in this article, we seek to do this by offering an interpretation of CEE FSP as a hopeful, inspiring and even attractive 'lesson' emerging from Eastern Europe.

This article has two interrelated objectives. The first is epistemological. We map out how CEE FSP has been interpreted in academic literature in the last three decades, distinguishing four ideal discourse types and scrutinising the assumptions and epistemological traditions that underpin them. Our partly chronological ordering follows the process through which CEE FSP evolved from a discursively marginal(ised) practice conducted in a peripheral region to a relevant contribution to knowledge on sustainable food systems (see also Jehlička, 2021).

The second objective deals with this development on a more practical level, inspired by the idea of performativity, or the ability of language and discourse to effect change in the world (Gibson-Graham, 2008; Law & Urry, 2004). We seek more general lessons for the academic search for a more sustainable food system, encouraging scholars to look beyond the geographies and societal experts usually associated with this quest. We believe that shifting FSP from the periphery to the centre of academic debate on the future of the food system will also facilitate a transformation in the practical perception of FSP (including the perceptions of city planners and politicians), which in turn can shift food gardens in cities from endangered remnants of the past to cherished places holding the promise to alleviate the detrimental effects of the global food system and enhance the quality of life in cities. We hope that the long (and unfinished) road to the legitimisation of FSP will serve as a cautionary tale and will help to recognise the importance of other grassroots, quiet sustainability practices across a diversity of contexts. Using the Czech case as an illustration, we demonstrate how academic interpretations echo in public and policy discourses.

The article is structured as follows: The next section briefly mentions the source of AFN scholarship as the established body of literature. Section three tracks the changing interpretations of FSP,

divided into four parts each critically engaging with a distinct body of literature on FSP: (1) coping with economic hardship, (2) cultural tradition, (3) hobby and source of good food and (4) reading FSP as transformative practice. The epistemological underpinnings of these interpretations are discussed in the closing paragraphs of each subsection. This section is followed by the Discussion section, where we compare AFN and FSP scholarship, and finally the Conclusion section.

AFN SCHOLARSHIP

In this article, we juxtapose FSP with the academic interest in sustainable food systems we have seen growing in the last two decades. The notion of AFNs has been a central concept in these debates. The first article in the Web of Science database with the term *alternative food networks* in the abstract was Marsden's (2000) article in *Sociologia Ruralis*. In subsequent decades, the term has become established as a keyword in food-related research in sociology, geography and anthropology. Much of the early AFN scholarship drew empirically from examples located in Western Europe, often constituted by initiatives with explicit goals to provide an alternative to the industrial food system, driven by activist producers and/or consumers. Typical examples of such AFNs include community-supported agriculture, consumer co-operatives, community gardens and local/organic farmers' markets.

The research on AFNs was productive in identifying possible ways out of the crisis-laden globalised food system (Jones et al., 2010). However, several weaknesses of the concept were identified early on. On the level of academic discourse, scholars such as Tregear (2011) and Renting et al (2012) called out the unclear definition of AFNs, as the term covered a large diversity of initiatives sharing little more than their difference from the conventional food system, constructing a false dichotomy (Sonnino & Marsden, 2006). The vague notion of alterity also obscured the diverse motivations actors might have to take part in AFNs. Contrary to scholarly representations, both producers and consumers are often not driven by political agendas and environmental consciousness but by more mundane concerns such as food quality or economic survival (Tregear, 2011).

On a more practical level, AFNs scholarship was criticised for its focus on a small social and economic niche. AFNs typically attract young, educated, high-income, white urban dwellers in the West, and the food produced and consumed within AFNs accounts for a marginal proportion of overall consumption (Clapp, 2016; Tregear, 2011). Other researchers (Sonnino & Griggs-Trevarthen, 2013; Tornaghi, 2017) noted that AFNs are often dependent on unpaid activist work or public funds, which endangers their long-term stability. Addressing these critiques, scholars have advocated for more research on the economic relations underpinning AFNs (Rosol, 2020; Tregear, 2011; Wilson, 2013). While AFNs often strive for more socially just relations between producers and consumers, they rarely challenge the market and monetary transactions as the dominant economic arrangement. Illuminating the economic relations fostered by AFNs is a way of addressing the risk of elitism while also exploring how different initiatives relate to the mainstream economy and thus giving meaning to the notion of 'alterity' (Rosol, 2020).

This interest in non-commodified food supply chains brings AFN scholars closer to the sympathetic stream of literature focused on home gardening. The potential of home gardens for a more sustainable food supply is also generally recognised in the West (see Schupp & Sharp, 2012, for the US; Teitelbaum & Beckley, 2006, for Canada; Vávra et al., 2018b, for Western Europe). However, the research on home gardening's actual contribution to food production in the West remains nascent and focuses mainly on urban gardening (Taylor & Lovell, 2014). Furthermore,

the traditional ways of food production described above as FSP and practised widely in CEE have until recently remained outside this research interest (Jehlička et al., 2020). At the same time, the long-standing scholarly efforts for a more nuanced understanding of AFNs (for which we lack space in this article) have not yet fully displaced the presumed 'ideal-type' AFN as a consciously oppositional initiative driven by environmentally and socially aware actors, which, however, remains embedded in market relations and is mostly accessible for privileged groups. This simplified understanding also forms the frame of reference for our discussion of changing discourses on FSP.

FOUR DISCOURSES ON FSP IN CEE

In this section, we survey the literature on FSP in CEE produced in the last three decades and draw out four academic discourses on FSP. These discourses[4] were identified according to the varying interpretations of motivations for FSP and its social and economic outcomes. We derived these two components from the literature on AFNs, where motivations and evaluation of outcomes feature prominently (see, e.g., Baldi et al., 2019; Seyfang, 2008; Tregear, 2011; Veen et al., 2014). While each discourse or literature cluster is formed around core ideas and assumptions, they also overlap and are not divided by sharp boundaries. Individual articles sometimes combine ideas of more than one discourse. The ordering of the discourses is partly chronological, with more recent interpretations formed around critiques of previously established ones, particularly the *coping with hardship* thesis. However, this evolution has not been strictly linear, and various discourses coexist in the present.

FSP as a coping strategy

Immediately after the political changes of 1989, the dynamic social processes in CEE were seen by many Western scholars as a possible source of wider scholarly inspiration. This interest was related to macro-level issues such as civil society, ethics of political conduct, value systems prioritising the environment, infusing capitalism with greater social sensitivity and the like (Jehlička & Jacobsson, 2021). Micro-scale, hands-on and everyday topics such as FSP never became part of these early attempts to 'learn from the East'. Once it became apparent that CEE resorted to imitating the unrestricted variety of neoliberal capitalism, any interest in Eastern lessons quickly waned.

This early and short-lived interest was soon replaced by a normatively posited 'transition' discourse, framing CEE countries as post-socialist and transitioning towards market economies. This narrative was strongly shaped by Kornai's (1980) notion of the shortage economy (Thelen, 2011, p. 46), which deems the socialist economies as inherently inferior in comparison to capitalist market economies. This perspective fits into the contemporary framing of (post)socialism as underdevelopment and a market economy as a prerequisite for democracy (Williams et al., 2013).

The general (geo)politics of knowledge production had a strong influence on the interpretation of local practices, particularly those related to informal economies such as FSP and sharing. Such practices were widespread in CEE, particularly in comparison to Western scholars' domestic experiences. To explain this difference, scholars resorted to narratives of economic development and modernisation based on models developed in Western contexts. Rose and Tikhomirov (1993), for instance, explicitly considered the prevalence of FSP in Russia, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia and Poland as a sign of simple, undifferentiated, 'pre-modern' (p. 112) societies, where

'the micro-rationality of individuals is an obstacle to the goal of modernization' (p. 125). In the same vein, Alber and Kohler (2008) explained higher participation in FSP in CEE countries as a path-dependent practice developed to cope with the shortage of goods in planned economies.

Acheson (2007) compared the sharing networks she studied in (highly industrialised) Slovakia in the 1990s and 2000s to a typical feature of traditional peasant societies. Similar to Alber and Kohler (2008), Acheson predicted that informal economies would disappear with the continuing development of market capitalism in CEE. Seeth et al. (1998) not only interpreted the FSP as a reaction to economic problems during the transition but also stressed the opportunity costs of home gardening, highlighting that a 'large amount of human time of often highly educated personnel is allocated to this economic sector' (p. 1623).

For a long time, the *coping strategy* explanation established itself as the main discourse on FSP and informal economies in CEE. This discourse had three typical features. First, it saw FSP, sharing and mutual help as purely economic practices devoid of social and cultural aspects, let alone environmental dimensions. Second, the high prevalence of informal economies was used as evidence of people's economic dependence on these practices, ruling out the option that people could choose to engage in them voluntarily. Third, the notion of FSP as a coping strategy was invariably framed negatively without the consideration of more positive framings such as FSP as a sign of resilience, sovereignty, grassroots resourcefulness or a counter-hegemonic space (Jehlička, 2021; Sovová & Veen, 2020).

The *coping strategy* discourse, originally coined by Western researchers of CEE, was also adopted by scholars from the region. Echoes of this narrative persist in relatively recent accounts as a way of situating food growing practices in the context of CEE (see Duží et al., 2014, p. 95). Even more importantly, this negative and narrowly economistic reading of FSP and informal economies became an established trope in popular and policy discourses as seen in some of the struggles over allotments in development plans. The strength of this narrative, we believe, is rooted in the combined discursive powers of (1) privatisation and development of urban land as a feature of Western prosperity and (2) the association of the FSP, particularly urban allotments, with the failed socialist regime (see also Samec & Gibas, 2021). Both starting points are debatable: First, neoliberalisation and enclosure of urban space are subject to critique in much of the current literature on urban food systems and on the right to the city (Tornaghi, 2017). Second, the tradition of allotment gardening and FSP precedes the socialist era in CEE (Gibas et al., 2013), and their meaning is close to that of similar initiatives grounded in different contexts, for example, community gardening. Despite these largely flawed assumptions, the persistence of the *coping strategy* discourse in public debates and political contestations is conducive to defending neoliberal acquisitions of urban space.

Epistemologically, the *coping strategy* framing derives from neoclassical modernisation theory, emphasising the priority of economic processes and supposing unidirectional development from tradition to modernity, placing CEE behind the West and thus foretelling its future (for a critique of modernisation theory in anthropology and geography, see Escobar, 1995; Flint & Taylor, 2007; Massey, 2005; Shanin, 1997). Socialist modernity was considered an unproductive deviation in development, with FSP and informal economic practices understood as a means of helping people cope with the detrimental consequences of the transition towards the 'normal' (i.e., market economy) development path. This transition also implies the temporality of informal economies, as neoliberalisation enables more efficient, market-based access to food. Scholars (although often implicitly) apply the marketisation and formalisation theses in their interpretations, assuming that informal activities will eventually be taken up by formal sectors and non-monetised labour and transactions converted to market transactions (Williams &

Round, 2007, p. 212). Interpreting CEE FSP in this way—as a disappearing, socially marginal and negative phenomenon—contributed to its marginalisation in academic knowledge production (Jehlička et al., 2020). The following discourses on FSP emerged as attempts to critique this narrow understanding and offer more inclusive interpretations.

FSP as cultural tradition

Aware of the shortcomings of the overtly economic interpretations mentioned above, more nuanced studies acknowledged that while the FSP has an economic dimension, the reasons behind the practice are more complex, relating also to culture, identity and social norms and relations (Smith & Stenning, 2006). The cultural dimension was often mobilised by authors wishing to distance themselves from the *coping strategy* thesis and emphasised that the motivations for FSP are not economic. Jeff Smith's (2003, p. 179) essay on *házi*, the Hungarian term for homegrown or homemade food, is a good example:

> *Házi* is different than what poor people do for survival growing vegetables in the garden and raising pigs and the like because the family can not [sic] afford to buy things at the market or in stores—this is a kind of low level subsistence agriculture.

Cultural narratives often draw on historical explanations such as traditional peasant culture and the importance of land and farming in the national identity. In a detailed study of changes in Latvian household food production patterns over two post-socialist decades, Trenouth and Tisenkopfs (2015) found that gardening and foraging remained common practices despite the increased availability of food in supermarkets, and they emphasised the rootedness of the practice in cultural traditions. Ries (2009) described a rich and long cultural history established around household potato production, exchange and consumption in Russia. A recent case study from the Czech countryside emphasised the importance of gardening in the (re)construction of local identity (Vávra et al., 2021). In her pioneering ethnographic study of the relationships between the declining health of the population in post-communist Russia, the quality of food supplied by the capitalist market, and the importance ascribed to homegrown food, Gabriel (2005, p. 204):

> …witnessed or was involved in innumerable exchanges, especially food exchanges, that could not be explained either by lack of money or by deficits in nearby shops. Network exchanges make cultural sense (or what some might call "symbolic" sense) because they express proper human relationships, which are not supposed to be based on a profit motive.

In narratives of national histories, FSP has been framed as a form of everyday resistance. For example, Hungarian FSP epitomised the desire for dignified meaningful work, defying both the socialist state and the capitalist market:

> The communist state claimed to provide everything needed in life and therefore *házi* was an insult to the state. Similarly in capitalism everything is in theory available on the market for consumption, and because capitalism is said to be more efficient […], to do it yourself seems stupid and a waste of time. But *házi* is about dignity, creativity, self-reliance, individuality, and self worth; it symbolises the power […]

to be a human being not a robot-worker, backward peasant, or mindless consumer. (Smith, 2003, p. 180)

While the emphasis on culture and identity was an effective way of undermining the *coping strategy* discourse, this argumentation also led to a dismissal of FSP as a source of food. This argumentation strategy was very visible in the debates around the *City of Brno Master Plan* as well as the Czech *Gardening Act*. In both cases, supporters of urban gardens alluded to the history of allotments, emphasising that they currently function as spaces of recreation and community building with additional environmental benefits. Their economic aspects, and with that their contribution to food production, were either omitted from these narratives or deliberately downplayed and referenced as largely a matter of the past. Such framing in fact prevents the inclusion of FSP in debates on localised and sustainable food production—a feature prominent in the following discourses.

The interpretation of the FSP as part of a cultural tradition can be linked to structuralist thinking in the social sciences. The philosophy of structuralism is based on the premise that phenomena observed on the surface have their causes hidden deep in invisible structures, such as language or culture (Murdoch, 2006; Smith, 2001). Accordingly, practices observed in everyday life, such as FSP, can be explained as manifestations of distinct and rooted cultures. The proliferation of FSP in CEE then presents a surface manifestation of traditional peasant cultures (Trenouth & Tisenkopfs, 2015) suppressed by socialist modernity or specific socialist cultures of silent resistance to communist ideology (Gibas et al., 2013). Linking FSP to deeper cultural structures releases the practice from the clutches of the narrow *coping strategy* thesis but leaves unchanged its understanding as a largely passive outcome of a hidden structure, in line with the non-humanistic tradition of structuralism characterised by an interest in structures but not in the agency of people.

FSP as hobby and source of good food

Studies that started to appear after 2010, authored mainly by scholars based in CEE, tend to agree on a combination of two key reasons why people engage in FSP nowadays: appreciation of homegrown food as healthy, fresh and tasty, with the transparent origin and generally of better quality, especially when compared to food purchased in supermarkets, and enjoyment (practising gardening as a hobby).

Surveying 462 owners of home gardens in Czechia, Šiftová (2021) found that 91% of gardens were used for food production and that the motivations behind the practice were the better taste of the food, healthier mode of its production and enjoyment of gardening as a hobby. Jehlička et al. (2021) conducted two extensive representative surveys of Czech and Croatian households' reasons for growing food. They found strikingly similar results in both countries, with healthy and fresh food clearly being the major motivation behind FSP (reported by 57% of food-growing households in Croatia and 56% in Czechia). Economic reasons were also present but were less important than the desire to obtain fresh and healthy food (16.8% of Croatian and 18.7% of Czech respondents mentioned financial savings). Similar findings (sometimes combined with the cultural embeddedness mentioned in the previous section) have been reported in Slovenia (Mehić et al., 2015), Poland (Smith & Jehlička, 2013) and Latvia (Aistara, 2015; Trenouth & Tisenkopfs, 2015).

The dimensions of good food and leisure are intertwined: Good food is understood as the 'fruits of one's labour', where the quality comes from knowing the production process and investing in it

in terms of labour as well as emotionally. FSP as hobby denotes self-fulfilment, meaningful work, conviviality and meetings with family or neighbours. By accentuating time spent in a garden with family and friends as leisure, this interpretation overlaps with the *cultural tradition* discourse in some studies (Mincyte et al., 2020; Smith, 2003).

The *hobby and good food* narrative introduces three important shifts from the previous interpretations. First, FSP is acknowledged as a source of food but disconnected from the previous interpretation of coping with economic hardship. Gardeners' accounts captured by these studies (e.g., Sovová & Veen, 2020) mostly agree that financial savings are not their primary motivation, and FSP might not be viable if seen in strictly economic terms (due to costs for renting the plot and buying seeds and materials). At the same time, they agree that not having to buy fruit and vegetables during the harvest season is a pleasant benefit of gardening.

Second, the diversity of motivations for FSP beyond simple economic or cultural impetuses is recognised. Clarke et al. (2000) argued that FSP was rather a leisure activity than a coping strategy even in Russia during the transition in the 1990s while at the same time being an important source of food for a large part of the population. Sharashkin (2008) reported almost equal importance among four motives for FSP: auxiliary source of food, connection to nature, hobby/recreation and time spent with other people, all being identified as important by 70%–77% of respondents in his survey in the Vladimir region in Russia. Similarly, Rochovská and Majo (2013) highlighted several possible motivations for FSP in rural Slovakia: meaningful use of free time, lifestyle, habitual practice, healthy food and financial savings.

The third shift, derived from the above understanding of the variety of reasons behind FSP, is the acknowledgement of the diversity of social groups engaged in the practice. Survey data on the social structure of FSP practitioners in Czechia, in comparison with the population not directly engaged in the practice, disprove the *coping strategy* thesis on empirical grounds (Daněk & Jehlička, 2021; Jehlička & Daněk, 2017). While the *coping strategy* literature assumes higher levels of participation in FSP among low-income populations, analyses of the results of several nation-wide representative surveys provide strong counterevidence. In their interpretation of the relationships among class formation, sustainability and patterns of consumption in Poland and Czechia, Smith et al. (2015) identified a slightly higher FSP occurrence in middle-class households, compared to working-class households. Analysing the results of three different surveys in Czechia, Jehlička et al. (2013), Vávra et al. (2018b) and Jehlička et al. (2021) found that FSP was practised almost evenly across social groups defined in terms education, employment status or income. Ančić et al. (2019) observed similar results in Croatia.

Studies that interpret FSP through the combined motivations of good food and leisure also shed light on the closely related practices of sharing knowledge, tools, mutual help and homegrown food. While the recognition of FSP as a socially networked activity appears in all discourses, the *coping strategy* narrative tends to view sharing as a *de facto* specialisation through which households co-operate to acquire food following an economic rationale (Acheson, 2007; Piras, 2020). In comparison, qualitatively oriented studies acknowledging practitioners' more-than-economic motivations view sharing as both resulting from and strengthening social relations. Torsello (2005, 2008) highlighted the important role of FSP in strengthening not only social ties but also trust within families (through collective maintenance of gardens). Bernard et al. (2016) interpreted the FSP as an important agent of social integration in rural areas, with high symbolic value attached to homemade food. The acknowledgement of the social benefits of sharing homemade food is common for both the *cultural tradition* and *hobby and good food* discourses. While the former interprets this practice as rooted in tradition, the latter sees it as driven by both social and material (e.g., abundant harvest) reasons.

A representative survey in Czechia showed that 74% of households participate in informal homemade food-sharing networks as recipients and/or givers and that these networks include all social groups irrespective of social class, income or education (Jehlička & Daněk, 2017). Crucially for debunking the *coping strategy* discourse, this survey showed that homegrown food transfers from poorer households to richer households exceed those in the opposite direction. Jehlička and Daněk (2017) explained this finding by the higher availability of time among poorer households (including among others, households of pensioners) to pursue a practice they consider enjoyable combined with a tendency to give the surplus of their produce to people in their social surroundings.

The *hobby and good food* literature thus transcends the framings of FSP as a practice that is negative, passive and responsive, driven by structural forces such as economics or culture. Instead, participation in these practices is a matter of choice driven by different reasons. Cultivation of food in a garden and the concomitant cultivation of social ties are commonly shared motivations that deliver both material and non-material benefits. The activities organised by the Czech Gardeners' Association (an umbrella organisation connecting most allotments in the country) are a practical incarnation of this understanding. Local branches of the Association hold events focused on the dissemination of gardening know-how (lectures, workshops, excursions) as well as social gatherings. At the level of allotments, gardeners commonly organise collective maintenance of shared spaces, waste collection and soil fertilisation. These spaces also host the informal sharing of knowledge, gardening supplies and harvest, which foster social relations among neighbours. Centred around a shared appreciation for homegrown food and gardening as a hobby, these activities rarely entail explicit environmental or social goals, which become more prominent in the next discourse.

From an epistemological perspective, liberating the understanding of the FSP from economic necessity and cultural expectations and opening it to more varied interpretation is reminiscent of the move from structuralism to post-structuralism in the social sciences (Murdoch, 2006). The post-structuralist confidence, following Barthes (1990) and Derrida (2016), that each text carries multiple meanings renders FSP open to diverse readings, which stands in contrast to the quest for a single theoretical explanation. Such interpretation does not deny economic motivations or cultural embeddedness as part of the rationale for FSP but also acknowledges various other motivations. The move to post-structuralist framings thus opens opportunities to look beyond the limits set by the previous narrow economic and structuralist framings.

Another avenue for emancipating FSP is offered by the deployment of feminist epistemology and methodology. Feminist geographers have long criticised privileging productive (i.e., monetised and formalised) activities as objects of academic enquiry at the expense of reproductive activities (subsistence, care and diverse economic forms operating beyond capitalist markets; Dyck, 2005; Gibson-Graham, 2006) and set about balancing this inequality in knowledge production. Feminist epistemology, similar to poststructuralism, is suspicious of all dominant interpretations as being masculinist or racist and seeks to de-centre the dominant interpretation by offering diverse viewpoints, thus deepening our knowledge. FSP, in this vein, is released from its marginal position (area-specific and culture-based peculiarity located on the fringe of the economy) and presented as a perspective offering valuable insights into the functioning of the food system as a whole, with the potential to find ways to overcome or mitigate its contradictions and weaknesses. This perspective rejects the narrow understanding of the food system as the dominantly market-driven system, replacing it with a diverse-economies perspective acknowledging both market and non-market values, paid and unpaid work, labour and care and influenced by economic and ecological processes (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020).

In the sphere of food provisioning and FSP, reproductive activities have been conceptualised as care (Mincyte et al., 2020; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2015). Sovová et al. (2021) revealed two interrelated caring dimensions of FSP: caring for the garden through environmentally friendly growing methods and caring for loved ones by providing them with healthy food. They confirm that FSP, while enjoyed as a hobby, also entails a sense of responsibility that exceeds the notion of leisure as a passive consumption of experiences. Pungas (2021) adds a third dimension of care, caring for self, emphasising the physical and psychological effects of gardening, which 'offers spiritual benefits through a meaningful activity' (Pungas, 2021, p. 69). As one of Pungas's Estonian respondents replied pithily to a question about the economic profitability of garden cultivation: 'See, the rose is blossoming, and I am relaxing, why should I then calculate the costs?' (Pungas, 2021, p. 69).

Reading FSP as transformative practice

Most recent scholarship on the topic of CEE FSP has transcended the boundaries of both the subject and the region to enter broader debates about the sustainability and socioeconomic organisation of the food system in the Global North. A growing body of work has used insights from CEE FSP research to advance more general scholarship on topics such as food sovereignty (Visser et al., 2015), resilience (Jehlička et al., 2019), metabolic rift and stewardship (Pungas, 2019, 2021) and diverse economies (Sovová et al., 2021). These studies consider the *coping strategy* discourse as no longer productive and instead continue in developing emancipatory and future-oriented readings of FSP. Compared to the previous interpretation of FSP as a hobby and source of good food, this work also ventures further away from empirical accounts. Rather than being a specific research interest per se, the FSP is used as an exploratory device to make a broader theoretical point.

The notion of quiet sustainability (Smith & Jehlička, 2013) can be seen as one of the key starting points of this line of scholarship. The authors seek to oppose the *coping strategy* discourse and instead emphasise the *hobby and good food* motivations in line with the reading introduced in the previous section. Beyond that, however, their work contributes to broader debates on sustainable food provisioning and, crucially for the context of CEE, its political dimension. This framing brings FSP (and by extension other informal food practices) into dialogue with scholarship on AFNs, which often assumes that environmentally sustainable and socially just ways of food provisioning are driven by conscious activist motivations. While FSP as practised in CEE does not easily fit this picture, Smith and Jehlička created a distinctive conceptual framework of quiet sustainability as

> practices that result in beneficial environmental or social outcomes that do not relate directly or indirectly to market transactions and that are not represented by the practitioners as relating directly to environmental or sustainability goals (2013, p.155).

This conceptualisation represents an inspiring perspective on three intertwined topics addressed by the reading of FSP as transformative practice: the environmental dimension of this practice, the non-market economies surrounding FSP and its political dimension (or lack thereof).

The contribution of FSP to sustainable food provisioning is well documented in terms of environmental indicators. The low use of fossil-based inputs together with short distances between production and consumption sites lead to reduced CO_2 emissions for homegrown food compared to conventional agriculture (Vávra et al., 2018a). Other benefits include the closing of nutrient

cycles and circular waste management through composting (Vávra et al., 2021). FSP contributes to practitioners' self-sufficiency and sensitises them to environmental issues. At the same time, these environmental benefits are closely intertwined with the social and economic aspects of the FSP (Vávra et al., 2021; Sovová et al., 2021)[5]

The multifaceted nature of FSP can be captured through the three dimensions of the metabolic rift (Anguelowski, 2015; Pungas, 2019; Daněk & Jehlička, 2021). The metabolic rift includes an ecological dimension, expressed in the transformation of agriculture into a profit-driven industrialised system dependent on fossil-based inputs; a social dimension, resulting in the marginalisation of small producers and rural populations; and an individual dimension, manifested by alienation of people from nature and the products of their labour. All three ruptures can be partly, yet significantly mended by FSP. The production of ecologically sound food improves the biophysical metabolism (Pungas, 2019), while the practice simultaneously creates socially inclusive distributive networks (Jehlička & Daněk, 2017). On the individual level, FSP reconnects gardeners with their labour and the sources of their sustenance—an experience that has become scarce in globalised, intelligible societies (Daněk & Jehlička, 2021; Pungas, 2021).

Direct engagement with food production lies at the core of Visser et al.'s (2015) discussion of FSP as a pathway towards food sovereignty.[5] Apart from providing an emancipatory reading of the FSP in Russia, this framing allows the authors to theorise the specific (lack of) politicisation of FSP in CEE. Globally, the food sovereignty movement is built on peasant struggles and mobilisation through networks such as Via Campesina or Nyéléni Forum. While similar movements are absent in the Russian context, Visser et al. draw on the concept of 'everyday resistance' (Scott, 1985) to theorise how FSP practitioners follow similar goals with different methods and political repertoires. Instead of claiming their rights in an explicitly political way, they are successful in subtle negotiations of entitlements, which allow them to combine FSP with paid work and use their plots according to their needs. Following Smith and Jehlička (2013), Visser et al. (2015) term these strategies 'quiet food sovereignty', an alternative pathway to practical, yet less politicised food sovereignty.

The notion of 'quietness' thus makes it possible to draw lessons from FSP for more radical propositions for food system transformation, without attributing activist motivations to practitioners on the ground. This conceptual move is useful beyond the context of CEE. For instance, Sovová and Veen (2020) argue that traditional allotment gardening in the Netherlands contributes to a more sustainable food system despite the relatively mundane motivations of its practitioners. A similar case is made by Feola et al. (2020) with respect to peri-urban agriculture in the Global South. Kosnik (2018) conceptualises FSP in Austria and New Zealand as a form of prosumerism, i.e., a more direct and environmentally friendlier involvement in one's food supply. She further argues that FSP and similar 'do-it-yourself' practices form part of a degrowth prefiguration (see also Daněk & Jehlička, 2021): by engaging in FSP, practitioners do not limit themselves to ethical consumerism but in fact decrease their dependence on the market economy.

The economic arrangements surrounding FSP are discussed in several works applying transformative, progressive interpretations of the practice (Visser et al., 2015; Pungas, 2019, 2021). Drawing on Amartya Sen's entitlement approach, Jehlička et al. (2019) presented the non-market nature of FSP as a source of resilience. A person or household can use the resources in their endowment set to obtain food in three ways: exchange (such as purchase at the market), transfer (such as gift or barter) or production (using land and skills to produce food). The industrial food system relies heavily on exchange, which makes the food supply vulnerable to different types of disruptions (Simms, 2008). FSP, in contrast, extends food resources also to the direct production of food in the garden and the distribution of a part of the produce in the form of gifts and barter, making

households and societies more resilient. Jehlička et al. (2019) emphasise the social embeddedness of FSP and the importance of intangible endowments such as knowledge and skills. Expanding on theories of resilience, they interpret CEE FSP not as a passive, defensive resilience against failures of the market but as a proactive, preventative and future-oriented resilience with transformative capacity.

Sovová (2020) adds to this view from the conceptual vantage point of diverse economies (Gibson-Graham, 2006). Apart from expanding practitioners' food provisioning options, she argues that FSP allows for distinctive economic subjectivities: gardeners' position in the food system is not limited to being consumers but allows them to identify as producers. This experience influences their food behaviours well beyond the gardens. In this way, FSP shows a way out of the commodified, market-based food system in which many AFNs appear stuck (Rosol, 2020) and opens spaces in which post-capitalist economies can be imagined. Appreciating the informal, non-market economy of the FSP represents an about-turn from the initial interpretations of this practice: What the *coping strategy* discourse framed as a symptom of underdevelopment and marginality is reread and rediscovered as a crucial asset.

On a practical level, this discursive turn is becoming visible in urban gardens whose users are aware of recent trends in conscious consumerism, green urbanism and alternative economy. In the Czech context, discourses that resonate with contemporary debates on climate-proof, participatory urbanism are typically mobilised by newer community gardens or civic initiatives. Nonetheless, these tendencies are also visible in traditional allotments. Reacting to accusations by city planners and politicians that allotments are enclosed spaces inaccessible to the public, some allotments began organising open days. The discursive opening of FSP to diverse interpretations thus has been mirrored by the opening of allotment gates. This opening has also strengthened the local gardening community as necessitated by the novel issues faced when preparing for these open days.

The transformative discourse shares, albeit often implicitly, most of the philosophical foundations of the feminist and post-structuralist approaches in the *hobby and good food* discourse but extends the understanding in two important directions. The first direction, drawing on the diverse economies literature, emphasises the significance of the performativity of theoretical interpretation. Following Gibson-Graham (2006, 2008, 2014), these authors look at FSP as one among several components of the economy (such as market, alternative market and non-market) and remind us that the relative value of diverse components depends, in part, on how they are represented. Rejecting 'strong theories'[6] such as modernisation or post-socialist transition, these accounts are based on a 'thick description' of FSP framed into a weak theory, which 'does not elaborate and confirm what we already know, [but] observes, interprets and yields to emerging knowledge' (Gibson-Graham, 2014, p. 149), thus opening spaces for diverse and coexistent interpretations. This performative reading of FSP does not conceal that FSP can be driven by economic needs or rooted in cultural tradition in some contexts but points to limitations of such one-dimensional interpretations and offers alternative framings, typically those bringing to the fore the social and environmental effects of the practice.

The second direction of emancipation, or decolonisation, theorises FSP from the decolonial perspectives of critical theory. Decolonial thinkers (Azoulay, 2019; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2011; Müller, 2021) rejected, among others, modernisation theory's assumption of unidirectional development and the perceived universality of Western knowledge. Instead, they prefer to look at world societies and practices not as ranked on a ladder of development ultimately leading to Western modernity but as developing in diverse directions and in need of multiple interpretations. From this perspective, FSP deserves academic attention as a practice offering localised, well-tried

TABLE 1 Overview of the discourses on the food self-provisioning (FSP) with brief identification of prevailing interpretations and epistemological underpinnings

	FSP as coping strategy	FSP as cultural tradition
Practitioners' agency	Reactive/defensive	Passive acceptance
Valorisation	Negative	Neutral
Epistemology	Neoclassical economics, modernisation theory	Structuralism
	FSP as hobby and source of good food	Reading FSP as transformative practice
Practitioners' agency	Active	Active, creative, performative
Valorisation	Positive	Positive
Epistemology	Post-structuralism, feminism	Post-structuralism, feminism, decolonial critical theory

and sought-after solutions to global social and environmental crises in particular social and geographical contexts (Jehlička, 2021; Jehlička et al., 2021). This change of interpretation has the potential to shift FSP from a peripheral location (geographically and epistemically) to the centre of mainstream debates on sustainable food systems that allow people to live well within planetary boundaries.

DISCUSSION: CONNECTING SCHOLARSHIP ON FSP AND AFNs

The repositioning of CEE FSP from a defensive and backwards practice to a radical variant of AFNs and a genuine alternative to the conventional food system is schematically depicted in Table 1. The division between the *coping strategy* and *cultural tradition* discourses in the first row and the two more recent discourses in the second row represents the major shift in the evolution of thinking about FSP. The discourses above the midline regard FSP largely as a passive or defensive practice that can be explained by a single structural force. Another commonality is their retrospective orientation, positing FSP as a path-dependent practice stemming from either material scarcity or cultural traditions.

The break from these narrow interpretations was prompted by empirical explorations of the *hobby and good food* scholarship, which in several respects undermined the assumptions of the previous two discourses. These studies, based on representative surveys or in-depth interviews with gardeners, paved the way for a deeper understanding of FSP by appreciating the diversity of motivations behind the practice, social diversity of practitioners and diversity of its outcomes. These studies did not replace previous explanations with new authoritative claims about the causes of FSP's proliferation but instead broadened the range of possible interpretations. They argued that the economic and cultural reasons, while still valid in particular contexts, are often less important than motivations based on enjoyment and appreciation of the quality of home-made food. Particularly important within this discourse were interpretations of FSP as care—for the soil, friends and family and self.

Given this shift, the fourth discourse constitutes not yet another break but rather an extension of the *hobby and good food* discourse. The transformative reading of FSP is less concerned with critiquing previous interpretations and is instead more future-oriented. It is also less empirically grounded and more theoretically ambitious, advancing new theories of quietness (quiet

sustainability, quiet food sovereignty) and new insights into existing theoretical debates on themes such as social resilience, metabolic rift and diverse economies. A key feature of the transformative discourse, connected to its future-oriented disposition, is performativity or the ability of the (changing) interpretation to bring changes on the ground. Related studies refuse to limit the exploration of FSP to the mere mapping of practices. Instead, they use a 'thick description' (Gibson-Graham, 2014) of FSP practices as a starting point for formulating conceptual frames endowed with the potential to transform how FSP is represented and, by extension, to recognise its contribution to food provisioning systems. The directions of change brought by the transformative reading include quiet food sovereignty, a pro-active, preventative and future-oriented resilience, a way out of the commodified food system or a transition to a degrowth economy.

AFNs, practised, studied and theorised mostly in the West, and FSP, widespread in CEE, show similarities in terms of practitioners' motivations as well as material, social and environmental outcomes. Recent readings, including the last two discourses on FSP presented above, interpret both AFNs and FSP as being driven mostly by a desire for good food, their attractiveness as a hobby or form of recreation or the need for environmental, social and self-care. Inspired by AFN scholarship, the more recent interpretations of FSP view this practice as a positive and hopeful alternative to the global food system. Despite their affinity, the two practices differ in the number of people involved and volume of production. While young, educated urbanites form the bulk of AFN practitioners and their share in national populations is rather small, FSP is widespread in CEE, and all classes, age cohorts and social groups participate. Some food is grown by 53% of Croatians, 40% of Czechs (Jehlička et al., 2021) and 54% of Poles (Smith & Jehlička, 2013). While the contribution of AFNs to national food consumption in terms of volume is very limited, FSP accounts for a significant share of consumption at the national level, even when households that do not produce food are included: FSP accounts for 16% of the national consumption of vegetables in Czechia (Jehlička & Daněk, 2017) and 80% of vegetable production in Russia (Visser et al., 2015). If garden food production is considered a positive or even progressive move to more resilient, sustainable and socially responsible societies, then CEE societies are ahead of the curve, compared to the West.

For the purposes of this article, however, the key difference between AFNs and FSP is the way in which they are interpreted. At the time when the term *alternative food networks* was coined an umbrella term denoting novel, progressive alternatives to the global food provisioning system, the same but more widespread practices in CEE were interpreted as an obstacle to development and a passive reaction to unfavourable economic conditions (see Table 2). Although the first (albeit rare) claims about the similarity between CEE FSP and Western AFNs can be traced to the end of the 2000s (Round et al., 2010), the early interpretation of CEE FSP as a coping strategy has long endured both within academia and among practitioners, in both the West and in CEE. Such interpretation is epitomised, for example, in Brno City planners' proposal to replace allotments near the city centre with community gardens.

CONCLUSION

The academic framing of CEE FSP has changed substantially in the last two decades. The older, narrower, one-dimensional discourses interpreting FSP as either a coping strategy or a demonstration of rooted cultures have been complemented by discourses offering diverse interpretations emphasising the 'quietness' of this socially and environmentally progressive practice and understanding FSP as a hobby imbued with responsibility and care. This transformative repositioning

TABLE 2 Differing interpretation of the same practice

	Alternative food networks	FSP as coping strategy
Motivation	Environmental and social values	Economic needs
Prevailing interpretation	Progressive, attractive	Defensive, reactive
Novelty of the practice	New, expanding	Traditional, in decline
Imagined geographical location	Urban	Rural, peri-urban
Geopolitical location	The West	The South and East
Imagined position on the axis of development	Alternative to current system, opening new possibilities	Lost opportunity, obstacle to development
Political consciousness	Political	Apolitical, cultural trait
Environmental considerations	One of key objectives	Unintended by-product of other objectives

has brought academic framings of FSP closer to framings of AFNs. The discourse surrounding AFNs has also become more nuanced as scholars increasingly recognise the fuzzy boundaries between conventional and alternative modes of food provisioning and the overlapping and often mundane motivations driving practitioners.

Within this convergence of meanings, the more recent interpretations show that FSP can in fact be seen as a more radical form of AFNs. First, its profound social re-embedding of food production presents the closest possible connection between production and consumption. Second, FSP is largely free of market transactions, creating a distinctive economy centred around care and generosity. These two challenges—bridging the gap between production and consumption and finding economic relations enabling a proper valuation of food—lie at the centre of AFN scholarship and practice.

These changes in interpretation were made possible by adopting different epistemological approaches to FSP (see Table 1). We identified modernisation theory and structuralist epistemology as bodies of thought underpinning the *coping strategy* and *cultural tradition* discourses, respectively. The major shift brought by the *hobby and good food* discourse was facilitated by the adoption of post-structuralist thinking. Doing so opened the way to diverse readings of FSP acknowledging the importance of social and geographical context and the resulting diversity of meanings and outcomes of FSP. Particularly productive was the merging of post-structuralist and feminist thinking, embodied in writings on diverse economies and care. Last, reading FSP as transformative practice enriched the same line of thinking with decolonial theories, suggesting directions for positive framings of FSP as a practice endowed with transformative potential, thus reaching beyond food gardens into debates on the future of food systems.

This shift brought the interpretation of CEE FSP very close to the extensive scholarship on AFNs. The major difference between the two traditions remains the geopolitical regions where they are produced. While the literature on AFNs has been produced mostly in the West and is considered part of general knowledge, FSP scholarship is considered relevant only for the region where the practice is most extensive—CEE—with limited possibilities to influence debates outside the region. This dual approach to what are materially very similar practices seriously restricts our understanding of food systems. It also reduces opportunities to find modes of food provisioning that would be more benign to people and the planet. These limitations can be lifted if we liberate FSP from its discursively marginalised position and connect both literature on food system alternatives—an endeavour shown to be possible in this article.

Finally, not only is this shift important for decolonising academic readings of food gardening, but it can also have a very practical impact on urban sustainability and quality of life. Recognising FSP as a hopeful practice bringing social and environmental ethics to food systems can advance the struggles for food (growing) spaces in cities in CEE, such as Brno, and beyond.

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There is no conflict of interest to declare in relation to this research.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Brno is the second-largest city in Czechia, with a population of 399,000 (2021).

[2] Here, FSP refers to practices of growing one's own food using one's own (predominantly non-monetary) resources (De Hoop & Jehlička, 2017, p. 811). It excludes farmers whose entire or major part of production is intended for the market. We also refer to FSP as gardening because the bulk of these practices take place in gardens located near or next to practitioners' houses, in allotments or at weekend houses.

[3] In the Czech context, the term allotment is used for an enclosed area of land usually divided into individually managed plots (typically 100–300 m^2). Community gardens typically comprise a piece of land that is either managed collectively or divided into smaller (1–10 m^2) individual beds.

[4] We understand discourse in the Foucauldian meaning as 'systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak' (Lessa, 2006, p. 285).

[5] 'The right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems' (Nyéléni Forum cited in Visser et al., 2015, p. 4).

[6] Gibson-Graham (2014, p. S147) describes the strong theory as 'powerful discourses that organise events into understandable and seemingly predictable trajectories'.

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