

Commons and Commoning for a Just Agroecological Transition: The importance of de-colonising and de-commodifying our food systems

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“‘Àjọ je dun lò mu iṣe ṣe ṣe”²
Yoruba proverb

Section I - Exploring food systems through post-commodity and post-colonial lenses

The history of the global food system is characterised by the transformation of the tangible and intangible commons (i.e., land, water, knowledge, seeds, work) into individual proprietary entitlements (mostly given to male owners) within political and power structures that benefitted settlers and wealthy landowners at the expense of indigenous peoples and other rural communities (Hamilton and Bankes, 2010; Federici, 2019). One can identify four major pulses of enclosure and commodification of commons that can be connected with the construction of the European food system:

- the Early Medieval enclosures of land and femininity (Federici, 2004);
- the colonial period that added millions of hectares of land in America, Africa and Asia to the land used to feed Europeans (Friedmann and McMichael, 1987);
- the early days of modern capitalism and industrialisation, with the alienation of labour and the dismissal of the care economy undertaken by women (from that very moment considered as non-productive and a private household issue) (Moore, 2015; Federici, 2019); and
- the neoliberal phase of financial capitalism (in the last quarter of the 20th century), where traditional factors of production (work, land, natural resources, knowledge) were increasingly de-localised, monopolised and downplayed in relation to the hegemonic factor: the fictitious capital that is exclusively based on trust and convincing narratives by economic actors (Ferrando, 2019; Schiller, 2019).

For centuries, European cities have been fed with the products of plantations and slavery, beneficiaries of long-distance trading and often in direct competition with cities located a few miles away from the origin of the food (Haraway, 2015). The construction of contemporary capitalism was accompanied by the normalisation of the idea that food is nothing but a commodity (Vivero-Pol, 2019).³ Through the lenses of World System Theory (Wallerstein, 1974; Arrighi, 1994), the establishment of the European food system is intrinsically

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² N.A.: Translated into English (“Eating together makes the exercise easier”).

³ Although we emphasise here the role played by capitalist actors in the encroachment and commodification of natural resources, we do not forget or understate the importance of state appropriation of natural resources owned and governed by collectivities. Both state and private appropriation of people’s commons are mutually reinforcing processes. For instance, in post-colonial Africa, the State is responsible for land grabbing and dispossession of customary land rights that were then transferred to international foreign corporations under long-term leasing agreements.

connected with the dismantlement of collective forms of proprietary regimes, both in the Global North and the Global South, the erasure of collective governing mechanisms and commons infrastructures, and the subordination of soil, territory and lives to the needs of European citizens and productivism (Sassen, 2014; Mattei and Nader, 2008; Linebaugh, 2008). Non-capitalist economies and non-individualist forms of living were neglected or directly attacked as backward, inefficient or pre-modern; therefore, the primary goal of those actions was to replace non-market-based economies with market-driven ones.

The roots of the European urban food system are also rooted in the history of the colonial, the masculine and the commodified, transforming food, gender and Nature into cheap commodities (Patel and Moore, 2018). Contemporary agribusiness began forging its political and economic relationships during the colonial period. The East India Company was filling the markets of London with its products and the wallets of its investors, while starving its workers and the rest of the people in the sub-continent (Chakraborty, 2016). Land and social relationships in the Global South were subordinated to the colonisers' vision of the patriarchal society, disempowering women in the South by enclosing the commons on which they depended (Federici, 2004), whereas the products of the colonised land were used to supply markets in the Global North where women were increasingly relegated to the kitchen without any social or financial recognition of their roles.

The objective of this chapter is to contribute to the development of a multi-pronged approach to food systems' transformation in Europe, one that resists the capitalist model (De Angelis, 2017), recognises the colonial, patriarchal and capitalist roots of feeding Europe, and promotes alternative forms of getting together, sharing and co-producing with Nature. Indeed, a redefinition of the contemporary European city must go hand-in-hand with the de-commodification and de-colonisation of its past and present. In our view, an historical, political and ecological understanding of European cities as the beneficiaries of uneven development provides epistemological and methodological tools to bridge the gap between cities and the countryside. This understanding supports agroecological urbanism as a technical and political reaction to the food-disabling urban landscapes that have separated urban dwellers from the food they eat, from the nature that they exploit, and from the living condition of the people that make food possible everywhere in the world (Deh-Tor, 2017). Indeed, it contributes to exploring the principles of a new paradigm for urbanisation, adding to the principles of solidarity, mutual learning, interspecies exchanges, environmental stewardship, food sovereignty and people's resourcefulness (Deh-Tor, 2017). In addition, given the central role that food plays in the provision of care, it brings in the perspective of feminist theorists and activists who have made evident the link between masculine enclosures of women-tapped commons and the exploitation of reproductive labour as founding pillars of the capitalist development in the last centuries (Federici, 2019; Patel and Moore, 2018).

We discuss three case studies that represent different "loci of contestation" of the absolute commodification of food. Taken together, these cases show how the political, imaginative and organisational power of commons and commoning can bridge the urban-rural divide, and contribute to the convergence of various movements, including agroecological urbanism (Tornaghi, 2017) and food sovereignty (Rivera-Ferre et al., 2014). They also point to the importance of adopting a political vision of commons and "commoning" as intersectional antidotes to co-optation in the food movement. Through a combination of theory and practice, history and imagination, empowerment and de-commodification, the chapter brings to the forefront those dimensions of food that cannot be monetised and valued in market terms, calling for policies grounded in valuations of food that do not only follow scholarly

economics⁴ (i.e., listening to and learning from non-Western non-economic epistemologies, and promoting non-heteropatriarchal visions of the food system). In the context of the edited volume, we also believe that the paradigms of commons, commoning (Dardot and Laval, 2015; Ferrando and Vivero-Pol, 2017) and commons-based food systems may support agroecological urbanism in defying the set of capitalist social relationships (including the disempowerment of food-producing women by curtailing their control over food-producing commons and their seclusion within the household walls) that divide local communities (Dalla Costa, 2007).

In the next section, we introduce the main ideas that underlie our collective reflection, i.e., commons and commons-based food systems, commoning and food as commons. Section III then takes us to Geneva where peasant organisations mobilised international human rights law to obtain the recognition of their collective rights to and relationship with Nature, in the framework of food sovereignty. Section IV moves the setting to London, where some urban dwellers are fighting for a food system that is bottom-up, inclusive, anti-colonial, anti-patriarchal and constructed around food sovereignty and commoning. Section V brings us to the Italian city of Bologna, where individuals and associations are deploying the paradigm and practices of the food system as a commons to resist an economic and social framework based on expulsion, subordination and domination (Sassen, 2014).

The cases presented here have been documented from within by those of us who, as scholar-activists, share a commitment to supporting various social movement struggles that seek to advance and protect commons and commons-based food systems, commoning, and food as commons. These cases offer a unique insight into the dynamics, tensions and aspirations of different groups who, vocally or quietly (Visser et al., 2015), are experimenting with the ideas of food and the food systems as commons in various locales.

Section II – Commons and Commons-Based Food Systems, Commoning, and Food as Commons

Being a de-colonial and feminist group of authors, we cannot but recognise the plurality of meanings and institutional arrangements the commons have in contexts characterised by different epistemologies (de Sousa Santos, 2018; Kothari et al., 2018) and praxis (Mattei, 2013). We are also aware that the notions of “commons” and “commoning” may not resonate with all people, communities and individuals, and that the idea of the common good was already appropriated in the past in order to justify Western moral superiority and legitimise the occupation of land. In addition, we believe there is much to learn from the ways in which commons and “commoning” are lived, experienced and reproduced on a daily basis around the world, with important differences between urban and rural settings (not only in the Global South and not only in rural areas)⁵.

There is not one “correct” interpretation of the commons, or one way of translating the idea into practice. Rather, authors and disciplines have been elaborating very different conceptions, spanning from pure economic considerations of common-pooled resources (rival but difficult to exclude) to the understanding of the commons as the catalyst of anti-capitalist

⁴ Throughout the 20th century, a few Western economists established a theoretical framework to classify all types of goods into four categories, based on rivalry and excludability. After that, food was considered a private good and therefore a perfect subject to be allocated exclusively through market mechanisms.

⁵ Actually, commoning food in urban settings, mostly done by eaters that largely purchase food and are therefore consumers, has different features from commoning in rural areas, where more than three quarters of rural inhabitants produce food themselves, either for self-consumption or selling.

vindications. Commons have been described based on the inner nature of the good, the proprietary regime or the governing mechanisms.

Overall, we agree that the commons are not defined by the ontological properties intrinsic to the goods, but rather by collective decisions (*ergo* phenomenological) that are context-specific and highly conditioned by the contextual and material co-construction of Nature and Society as an ecological *unum*. Moreover, we all share a vision of the commons that is not static and definite, but that considers the commons as constantly dialoguing with “commoning” and therefore being always redefined by collective action. It is “commoning” together that confers to a material and non-material resource its commons consideration (Dardot and Laval, 2015).

We use the term commons-based food systems to designate the natural resources and practices that underlie and enable the collective and democratic management of the material and immaterial resources that are essential to the establishment of fair, sustainable, resilient and self-governed food systems (Pettenati et al., 2019; Maughan and Ferrando, 2019). Contrary to the industrial and capitalist food system in which resource accumulation and exploitation for profit are the norm, a commons-based food system revolves around collective governance, rational utilisation of natural resources (considering the livelihood of future generations) and a fair distribution of revenues and food products (Vivero-Pol et al., 2019).

Those among us who promote the idea that food could/should be governed as a commons (as a complementarity to “commoning”) see food as a life enabler and a cultural cornerstone, a resource with multiple meanings and different valuations for societies and individuals (Wall, 2014; Szymanski, 2016). From this point of view, food shapes morals and norms, triggers enjoyment and social life, substantiates art and culture (gastronomy), affects traditions and identity, relates to animal ethics and determines, and is shaped by power and control. These multiple and relevant meanings cannot be reduced to the one of tradeable good, and the value of food cannot be fully expressed by its price in the market. As a result, food cannot be reduced to a commodity⁶ (Vivero-Pol, 2017).

The examples discussed in the next three sections express our different visions of commons, commoning, and commons-based or commons-generating food systems, but are kept together by our shared interest in learning from and supporting the struggles and practices associated with these notions and with de-commodified, anti-colonial and anti-patriarchal visions of the food systems. We start with the experience of the transnational agrarian movement La Via Campesina, which struggled for, participated in the drafting of, and achieved the adoption of a United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants (hereafter UNDROP)⁷ and other people working in rural areas by the UN General Assembly in December 2018. The adoption of UNDROP marks the culmination of a 17 year process aimed at obtaining international recognition of peasants’ collective human rights to land, seeds and the means of food production. It articulates a set of anti-capitalist and anti-imperial values, assumptions and objectives that are radically opposed to that of enclosure, commodification, and unsustainable exploitation and control of Nature.

There is no doubt that international public law is embedded in colonial roots and central to the legitimation of violence through the recognition of boundaries, frontiers and the absolute

⁶ For more on the six dimensions of food, i.e., food as an essential good, natural resource, human right, cultural determinant, tradeable good and commons), see Vivero-Pol (2017).

⁷ <https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/RES/73/165>

sovereignty of states over people (in particular indigenous people) and the planet (Anghie and Chimni, 2003). Yet the case of UNDROP is interesting precisely because peasant movements and their allies identified international human rights law as a space of power and political contestation. Advancing the paradigm of collective human rights, associated with that of the commons, these movements used the UNDROP process to open up dialogue and much needed societal debate on the peasantry, but also on the future of food and humanity.

Section III – Commons in UNDROP⁸

Approximately 2.5 billion men and women from indigenous, peasant and other rural communities worldwide are estimated to depend on lands managed through customary, community-based tenure systems. These lands would account for over a quarter of the world's land surface, intersect about 40% of all terrestrial protected areas and ecologically intact landscapes (Garnett et al., 2018), and produce more than half of the food consumed every day in the world (Kay, 2016). However, these communities have formally recognised land rights over only one-fifth of these territories (RRI, 2015). Lack of recognition of their customary rights and persisting marginalisation, coupled with biased approaches towards collective forms of land ownership and use, and the gradual erosion of their traditional institutions, in many cases entails a great vulnerability of commons to appropriation by the State and private actors (Thornberry and Viljoen, 2009).

Over the last decades, indigenous peoples, peasants and other people working in rural areas organised at the transnational level, have brought their struggles to retain control over their lives, livelihoods, lands and territories to the United Nations, framing their claims within a human-rights discourse (Errico, 2017; Claeys, 2015). Their claims have triggered the drafting of new international human rights instruments stemming from discrimination-related considerations. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted in 2007 by the UN General Assembly, and the UN draft Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and other people working in rural areas was adopted in September 2018 by the UN Human Rights Council, and three months later by the UN General Assembly. At the core of these instruments are provisions that recognise and seek to protect, to varying degrees, their collective rights to lands and natural resources, including commons that are a source of food.

The process of elaboration of UNDROP was initiated in 2012 under the leadership of Bolivia, at the request of the transnational agrarian movement La Via Campesina (LVC). The Declaration, the initial draft of which was elaborated by LVC in the late 1990s, constitutes a direct reaction against the enclosure of rural commons, what Borras and Franco (2012) have called a peoples' counter-enclosure. Seizing the political opportunity created by the global food crisis of 2007-08, which highlighted new waves of land and green grabbing and the challenges facing small-scale producers in their access to land, LVC succeeded in putting its demand for new peasants' rights on the agenda of the Human Rights Council (HRC).

At the first session of the Open-Ended Intergovernmental Working Group established in 2012, states and observers (including LVC activists, allies and technical experts) used the draft elaborated by LVC as a basis for discussion (UN, 2012). This draft adopted a comprehensive approach to human rights that goes beyond the individual entitlement and an holistic understanding of the interaction between food production, transformation and

⁸ This section builds on a conference paper presented by Stefania Errico and Priscilla Claeys at the 2017 Utrecht conference of the International Association for the Study of the Commons (IASC) under the title: 'Human Rights and the Commons: Bridging Gaps and Exploring Complementary Approaches to the Governance of Land and Natural Resources'.

consumption. It included the main demands of peasants and other groups of food producers, namely the right to land, the right to seeds, the right to biodiversity, and the right to food sovereignty. It placed these new rights (not yet formally recognised as such in the international system of human rights) within the broader framework of already recognised civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, with a special emphasis on the right to organise, access to justice, and the criminalisation of human rights defenders.

This initial draft contained no explicit reference to the commons, but it insisted on the collective dimensions of the right to land and natural resources in the broader context of a food and economic system where human beings and nature are intrinsically interconnected. Article 4, on the right to land, listed unused land, forests, fishing grounds and territories as important areas where peasants rear livestock, hunt, gather, fish or toil. Article 4 emphasised peasants' rights to manage, conserve, benefit, toil and produce. It further included the right to benefit from land reform, with explicit references to the prohibition of land evictions and the need for land regulation measures such as land ceilings and the prohibition of *latifundia* (large-scale exploitations), to address widespread issues of landlessness and displacements. As such, peasant activists demanded that their individual and collective rights to land and their special and direct relationship to land and nature (Article 1.1 on the definition of peasants) be recognised, respected and protected from private and state interference, while calling on the state to regulate land markets and redistribute land.

Between 2012 and 2018, five sessions of negotiations took place at the HRC under the Chairmanship of Bolivia, leading to successive drafts of the Declaration. In the final draft, which was adopted in September 2018, Article 17 of the Declaration contains the main provision concerning land and natural resources, and recognises an individual and collective human right to land; it also contains an explicit reference to the 'commons' (UN, 2018). Specifically, the article provides for the legal recognition of existing customary land tenure rights, and establishes an obligation for States to 'recognize and protect the natural commons with their related systems of collective use and management' (Article 17.3).

The text used in this article builds on the language used in paragraph 8.3 of the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (VGGT) unanimously adopted by the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) in May 2012 (CFS, 2012). Paragraph 8.2 of the VGGT states that 'the legitimate tenure rights of individuals and communities, including where applicable those with customary tenure systems, should be recognized, respected and protected'. Paragraph 8.3 of the VGGT notes the existence of 'publicly-owned land, fisheries and forests that are collectively used and managed (in some national contexts referred to as commons)', and calls on states to 'recognize and protect such publicly-owned land, fisheries and forests and their related systems of collective use and management, including in processes of allocation by the State'.

The inclusion of specific provisions calling for the recognition and protection of the commons in these two international instruments, within the broader context of the emergence of an individual and collective right to land, could significantly contribute to the transition to ecological and integrated food systems. This would be based on the access to and reproduction of the commons (i.e., coastal fisheries, hunting grounds, forest foods) rather than their exploitation and subordination to the needs of consumption. Indeed, rural households all over the world depend, to a significant extent, on the commons and are particularly threatened by their enclosure. In the future, the Declaration could directly support the protection of the commons because it contains provisions concerning the overall

“enabling” environment concerning commons, touching on key aspects such as participation in policy-making and trade-related issues, among many others. However, embedding the recognition and protection of the commons within the human rights framework raises interesting and complex questions when it comes to the interactions between commons, state and market.

UNDROP is grounded on the “respect, protect and fulfill” framework typical of human rights instruments, which points to specific sets of action on the part of the State. All its provisions are therefore framed around this scheme, according to which the State shall: 1) refrain from interfering or curtailing the enjoyment of the rights concerned; 2) protect individuals and groups against abuses by third parties, including business enterprises; and 3) take positive action to ensure the enjoyment of these rights by facilitating or providing the conditions necessary for this (see, for example, UN, 2009).

More specifically, States are expected to recognise and protect the customary tenure systems of peasant communities, including commons, and support their long-term viability. They should play a redistributive role if there is unequal access to land, natural resources and means of production, paving the way for the potential establishment of new commons within the context of redistributive agrarian reforms. They should also devolve authority and power to local communities, recognising these communities as co-managers of natural resources and their socio-ecological setting, while ensuring that commons are self-governed in an inclusive, accountable and sustainable manner. Similarly, the VGGT calls on States to secure and implement legitimate tenure rights (including to commons), including by devolving authority and responsibility to govern natural resources to the local level.

While certain approaches to the commons see commons as key innovative and transformative tools that would help food systems move beyond the state and the market (Bollier and Helfrich, 2015), UNDROP forces researchers and activists to consider the possible tensions and synergies that could be found between the human rights approach that relies on the actions of the public authorities (including city, counties, regions, etc.) and the commons approach, where self-regulated actions of the collectivities are often emerging outside of the state-market dualism. In addition, while the recognition of collective human rights that is at the heart of UNDROP is a clear attempt at decolonising the international human rights system (Claeys, 2019), the implementation of the Declaration will raise complex questions relating to the fulfilment of individual rights within communal rights systems, and the settlement of conflicts between various users of the land at the local level.

When transposed from the international level to the localism of European cities, commons and commoning need activists, politicians and academics to think historically and consider the present, both through the past and the future. The case of the United Kingdom presented in the next Section is therefore an attempt to look at the way in which the food sovereignty movement could be enriched and strengthened by the adoption of an intersectional and historically strong engagement with the colonial ties of the current food system and its repercussions in terms of social and environmental injustices.

Section IV - The missing post-colonial approach in the British Food Sovereignty Movement

We believe that a critical and politically oriented exploration of the link between food and the commons triggers fundamental questions relating to colonialism, post-colonialism, commodification, and social justice. This is nowhere more evident than in the United

Kingdom foodscape, a space rooted in colonial ties and reproductive of the colonial legacy. If we want to think through the lenses of global enclosures, expulsions and appropriations, we also need to think of the mounting obesity pandemic, the rising figures of food insecure households, and the lack of power by citizens to govern their own food systems through the lenses of history and intersectionality. Therefore, it is important to ask whether the urban citizens and predominantly farmer-led UK Food Sovereignty Movement that was created in 2012, whose aim is to create a fairer and more sustainable food system in the UK (Shawki, 2015), plans to do so with or without incorporating feminist, post-colonial and post-commodity approaches. The discussion that follows, based on the personal experience of one of the authors as a community food practitioner and activist-researcher, looks at the UK food sovereignty movement as an invitation to imagine and implement practices that are not only fairer to ecology and eaters, but also to marginalised communities (i.e., diaspora) and groups (i.e., women farmers).

The UK Food Sovereignty Movement was born in 2012 from a gathering of food producers, academics and NGOs in London. Adopting six principles of the Nyéléni Declaration, a grassroots union of farmers, growers and food workers, the Land Workers Alliance, was also formed. Since then, the UK Food Sovereignty Movement has been pushing for a radical change in the narrative and positionality of the UK food movement. With an accent on deepening diversity of policy choices, governing mechanisms and management practices, the UK food space is shifting from being a mere receiver of top down policies to becoming a vocal actor in crafting preferred policies. Throughout the years, the movement has aimed to improve the livelihoods of its members and create a better food system for everyone by building networks and solidarity, training, campaigning and lobbying. At a second gathering in 2015, three key strands and working groups emerged: the first to develop an integrated people-led food policy for UK, the second to explore issues around land, and the third to deepen the diversity of the movement.

The great success of the movement has so far been its role as a policy disruptor. Landworkers Alliance research, lobbying and position papers on agricultural and food-related policies have broadened the public debate in the UK⁹, as has the mobilisation of various food movement actors to collaborate and deliver an integrated national food and agricultural policy proposal “A People’s Food Policy” (Butterly and Fitzpatrick, 2017). This has contributed to an increased cohesion among different movements and the construction of a coherent background and way forward. Likewise, the “Land for What” conference (November 2016) resulted in the emerging Land Justice Network¹⁰, consisting of academics, housing, food and land reform activists; this network is re-setting the terms of debate on land proprietary regimes, land uses and collective decisions on land governance.

Elsewhere, the development of the food sovereignty movement in Latin America and Sub Saharan Africa has been entwined with anti-colonial struggles. On the contrary, there is a sense that the acknowledgement of Britain as the “mother country” of the British Commonwealth, the seat of the first truly global empire, the birthplace of the industrial revolution and the epicentre of global finance (Akala, 2018: 2), is severely lacking in the discourses and interactions that take place in the UK. It stands to reason that anyone familiar with the work of food regime theorists (McMichael, 2005; Bernstein, 2016) knows that the commodification of land, food and labour, the displacement of peoples and the relegation of women to the kitchen are inextricably linked to the construction of the first global food

⁹ Many more papers on different issues can be found here: <https://landworkersalliance.org.uk/publications/>.

¹⁰ <https://www.landjustice.uk>.

regime and, therefore, to the current setting. Moreover, these processes are not a mere memory of a remote past. Most of the land appropriated during colonial times was never redistributed and is still connected with the global food system. In addition, evictions and expulsions keep happening, the full emancipation of women is still far from materialising, and the appropriation of water, seeds, culture and knowledge is still a reality around the world. Yet, those practices do not form the core claims of the UK Food Sovereignty Movement, mostly because they happen somewhere far from the UK, in distant places and those ill-management practices usually happen to “the others” (Sibley, 1995; Said, 1978; Fanon, 1963). Moreover, UK research on food-related issues is still “linked to European imperialism and colonialism”, with only a few examples of decolonial approaches to food justice (Bradley and Herrera, 2016) and colour-focused reflexivity “in the practice of making power visible at all levels” (Batliwala, 2010: 18). Other ways of knowing and understanding food and food systems have not found enabling spaces in the Westernised epistemology of food narratives, mirroring the marginalisation found in other areas of knowledge (see de Sousa Santos, 2014).

For the de-commodification of food and the construction of a socially and environmentally just food system, the intersections of social power and oppression tied to colonialism and post-colonial relationships must necessarily be a central theme in the food transformation discourse and practice not only in both the Global North and the Global South, but also across the Global South and the Global North. These framings can enable space for a more realistic politics “to make new ideas, concepts and associations” (Light et al., 2009) with food considered as a commons as one element of this. There is an urgent need to put considerations of Britain’s colonial past and present ramifications at the centre of the national and global food politics discourse, collectively formulating an intersectional and historically rooted vision of the future of food. No agroecological city should be oblivious of its past and the contemporary reproduction of its legacy.

Some seeds have already been sown, but they must be nurtured. In 2016, a diverse delegation from the UK participated in the 2nd European Food Sovereignty Forum¹¹ (one of the authors was part of that delegation). A paper on “*Decolonisation and Food Sovereignty in Europe: Thoughts from the edges*” (Mama and Anderson, 2016) was presented and raised questions about colonialism, post-colonial inequalities that are still operational, and the narrative and practise of food sovereignty in the Global North. As part of the post-forum reflections, critical race theory, food justice and the commons were considered as three pivotal elements to advance the decolonisation of food systems. A more fundamental question also emerged, namely “*How is the food sovereignty movement in the Global North, particularly in Europe and the UK, reinforcing the very structural oppressions that it claims to challenge with food justice and democracy?*”.

A first consideration to this question, disturbing and ironic, is that the movement is not driven by, or deeply inclusive of, those from diaspora communities whose heritage is from those colonised/decolonised countries where food sovereignty emerged. The UK Food Sovereignty Movement is mostly Global Northern-focused and farmer-led, with less urban participation and weak considerations of Global Southern diaspora communities. What then are the barriers, perceived or power-related, that Western food sovereignty advocates and the diaspora communities hold? Does the movement perhaps mirror Western societal divisions and oppressions?

11 The 2nd Nyéleni Europe Forum for Food Sovereignty took place from 26-30 October 2016 in Cluj-Napoca, Romania.

In that sense, the daily experience within the wider UK food movement suggests that it is one of “race and class based disparities” (Cohen et al., 2012) and white privilege (Slocum, 2007). It is also gendered with the over-representation of white male leadership (Moyle, 2015; NBFJA, 2017) often reinforcing existing inequalities (Bradley and Herrera, 2016). Feminist and queer spaces within the UK Food Sovereignty Movement are challenging this predominance of white male European voices within the food system, although the marginalisation of diaspora voices from colonised/decolonised countries is still rather obvious. Are Black and Ethnic Minorities groups so traumatised by the violence of enslavement, indentureship and generational impoverishment that there is no desire to engage or participate in these alternative food movements (Harper, 2016)? Is the disconnection and translocation from native land and the cultural aspects of food production, transformation and consumption preventing BAME groups participating in re-drafting food politics? Or are these spaces seen as unsafe, unwelcoming, and inherently racist?

The Global North food sovereignty movement leans strongly towards “the local” and often excludes “the Other”. Perhaps unintentionally, the extreme food localism erases immigrants’ and diaspora’s contributions to food systems (Counihan, 2016). Yet, how can we think of potatoes, beans, tomatoes, etc., without considering the violent transfer of those foods and other colonial crops (and the water, soil, labour and knowledge embodied in it) from Africa, Latin America and Asia? Sweat, blood and land from all over the world contributed to the diversity of the local food systems that the food sovereignty movement is trying to strengthen and scale up. The coloniality of power, knowledge and of just being needs to be explored to truly understand the continued impact (Mignolo, 2011). Place-based food systems need to recognise the geographical complexity of the local, shed light on the historical and present intersectionality of the food system; it also needs to work for the inclusivity of the different cultures and food narratives co-existing in the same places. How can the food sovereignty movement promote the reclamation of indigenous and cultural knowledge in the UK (a multiverse of people from different countries and cultures) with a mono-cultural discourse dominated by Anglo-Saxon affluent white males?

We believe that the combination of food sovereignty, agroecology and commoning is a tool for an “anticolonial assault” (Wynter, 2003).¹² Decolonialism is the right to self-determination and the basis of a bottom-up, empowered and emancipatory engagement with the food system. Agroecology is more than sustainable agriculture (practices and techniques), it is, first and foremost, a decolonial practice. Commons-based food systems and agroecological practices will reclaim and reassert the social, cultural and spiritual aspects of food, either at the local level or by different food cultures that currently co-exist at local levels. In that sense, valuing food as a commons and commoning as the practice of realising equitable and ecological food systems highlights the relevant bonds that food triggers in family and at the community level. This can be found in some diaspora communities.

Decolonial practices and narratives seek to shift power and the distribution of resources, not just as redistribution or reparations but by shifting the centre of those relationships: and the imperial city (be it London, Paris or Brussels) has been the centre of the food system for centuries. By drawing on non-Eurocentric worldviews to develop new/old ways of food exchange, be it with nature or humans, based on reciprocity, mutual legitimisation and the essentialness of food for human survival and cultural foundations. Commons are regarded not as fixed but autopoietic relationships between nature and humans themselves, with its resources to be used by humans. People of different cultures, ethnicities, genders and status

¹² To know more on Sylvia Wynter’s thoughts on decolonialism, see McKittrick (2015).

share a common trait: all need to eat every day and all value food for dimensions other than its price. “Humanness” as connection, practice and way of being, can be epitomised by the common need to eat food. So, being human means having a need to eat.

Therefore, this paradigmatic disruption of the commodified must go beyond the agroecological narratives and practices that challenge the neoliberal notions of private ownership, financialisation, capitalism and market fundamentalism. A decolonial and commons-based attack against the legacies of imperialism and colonialism includes, first, the decommodification of labour where black and brown bodies continue to be exploited as cheap labour; second, the decommodification of means of production of food, such as seeds, land or water (Maughan and Ferrando, 2019); and third, the decommodification of food itself, underplaying the monetised tradeable dimensions of food (that exists in any case) and re-positioning other non-monetised dimensions that are equally important for humans, such as the cultural dimensions, the right-based approaches to food or its essentialness for our bodies (Vivero-Pol, 2019).

Together with the construction of agroecological, democratic and regenerative food systems, we believe that the task of the Food Sovereignty Movement in the UK is to dismantle the narrative scaffoldings and structures of race, class, sex and other oppressions that divide us. These prevent the collective agency from shifting towards a commons-based food system in the UK, where everybody has access to sufficient and adequate food to have a dignified and meaningful life. Valuing food as a commons, beyond the collective rights it may carry (a legal notion already quite disruptive), provides the underlying philosophical foundation for the system of human/nature relationships to counter the current food system paradigm based on commoditised food at the service of consumption and the neo-colonial structures of the metropole and the periphery (i.e., cash crops from the Global South, globalised open markets working only in one direction, free flow of money but not people, land grabbing schemes in the South).

In exploring the potential of commons-based food systems as researchers, practitioners and activists in the UK food movement, we have come across fundamental questions relating to colonialism, the construction of the contemporary urban food movements and social justice. In particular, they felt the urgent need to redefine considerations of Britain’s colonial past and present ramifications into the food politics discourse that is rapidly unfolding in the UK. This includes when (and how) it is built from the bottom-up. The way in which history and intersectionality can be integrated in the food (sovereignty) movement is not simple and is posing multiple questions that can only be answered by means of experimenting and experiencing.

All over the world, including in the Global North, there is a rise in the intersectional attempts to challenge multiple injustices that characterise the history of capitalism and the contemporary relationships between people, food, land and socio-environmental injustices. The people behind these experiences may not use the vocabulary of the commons or think of what they are doing as “communing”. However, this is not important: what matters is their ability to collectively imagine and dynamically perform a food system that rejects the idea of people and nature as commodities, that is solidly rooted in the continuous and regenerative interaction between people and planet, and whose value is not only that of the exchange but is also fully aware of the multiple forms of historical and contemporary domination of people and the planet that characterise the dominant food system.

The last reflection of this chapter is dedicated to a new form of resistance devised by urban eaters and rural food producers at the bottom of the food chain in response to the ongoing efforts by state and capital to enclose their lives through liberalised trade policies and the privatisation of food-producing resources. Drawing on the example of Campi Aperti in Italy, we argue that the collaborative effort of rural and peri-urban producers and urban eaters for the preservation and expansion of spaces of autonomy is crucial to the thriving of commons-based food systems involving the production, distribution and sharing of food outside of the paradigm of the commodity. The example presented here offers insights into how a community of small farmers and critical citizens-eaters subvert some key notions of capitalist food markets, such as the sharp distinction between producers and eaters-consumers, the price setting mechanism, the regulatory role of state agencies, and the reality of corporate governance among others.

Section V – Campi Aperti and Genuino Clandestino: decommodifying food

The Association Campi Aperti was formed in Bologna (Emilia-Romagna region, Italy) shortly after the anti-globalisation movement gathered in Genoa in July 2001. At present, it has over 130 full-time food producers. Campi Aperti approached the struggle as a strategic operation in order to set in motion the necessary process for transformation from a subordinated and unequal position under the state and capital, with the idea of creating an ethical space in which to reproduce their livelihood as small farmers, together with new relationships to urban eaters and agroecological relationships to nature. The paradigm of food sovereignty was perceived by the founders of Campi Aperti as a framework with transformative political substance, which offered sufficient latitude to be adapted to the local context in which they were operating. The founders of Campi Aperti said: “The purpose of the self-management of market exchange, food production and reproduction is geared towards a market offering varied agricultural products mirroring the great local biodiversity” (Campi Aperti, 2013).

One significant aspect for any producers and farmers is to earn a decent income from the sale of their products. Unlike the industrial food economy that perceives farmers, peasants and producers as individual competitors with diverging interests, and is therefore able to dump the food prices at the farm gate to reach profit margins at the retail spot, Campi Aperti has lifted food out of the corporate markets by placing it in the solidarity economy and strengthening the social ties across all the phases of the food system. In its manifesto, it states the central value of their solidarity economy, namely, to break the competitive cycle and replace it with cooperation, solidarity, equality, and sustainability (Campi Aperti, 2014). For Campi Aperti: “The solidarity economy is preferred to a market economy because it allows to establish forms of practical solidarity between consumers and producers, united by the pursuit of common objectives, such as health, the environment, and the dignity of work” (*ibid*).

The first steps away from the conflictual relationships imposed by a competitive and unequal market are the liberation of their produce from the yoke of the traditional distribution streams, and the emancipation of the farmers from the threat of the global-local supply chain and the constant exposure to the instable price volatility. Instead, together with citizens who are called “co-producers” (i.e., urban citizens who are buyers and eaters)¹³, the producers

¹³ In Campi Aperti, participants have decided to frame the urban eaters as “co-producers” instead of mere consumers to emphasise the solidarity and connectivity between rural-based and urban-based components of the movement.

enter into a conversation about production and distribution that co-constructs the price of food. This involvement of the co-producers in the price-setting enables them to understand the ecological and labour conditions behind what they consume and what type of cultivation inputs it takes to feed them. The experience with Campi Aperti shows that the benchmark for this price-setting model guarantees a decent living for farmers and an acceptable price for consumers (because they know what they are paying for). In this sense, Campi Aperti realised that a different understanding of food and food-producing intricacies required a different type of market, one that acts as a catalyst for de-commodifying food through the forms of practical solidarity that are pursued, both through recursive practices and being institutionalised by the governance system of the association. By collectivising the decisions on price-setting, self-regulated mechanisms of labelling and production, they introduced “commoning” practices that are useful for the community in three dimensions: provisioning of healthy and fair food, fostering social life, and enabling peer governance (Bollier and Helfrich, 2019).

The second key element of the collaborative, equal and sustainable food system that challenges the fetishism of the food commodity and gives visibility to all the actors of the food system, is the participatory-guarantee system (PGS), a self-certified system of organic products jointly managed by the co-producers and producers. This self-managed certification system has a dual function. On the one hand, it acts as a boundary to the outside system, represented by the state and the market, as food producers do not seek state-issued or corporate certificates because they already have certification labels recognised (and valued) by consumers-eaters. On the other hand, it acts as an internal regulator (self-regulating mechanism) for possible misbehaviour. This certification system has also proven to be a regulator for correcting misconducts in the long-run. In this case, the producer is held accountable by taking responsibility for resolving the problems raised by Campi Aperti. If the producer refuses to deal with it, the producer has to leave. This type of self-regulation is based on a clear set of principles that form internal boundaries for well-functioning commons (Ostrom, 1990). The PGS is the instigator for three main constituents of Campi Aperti’s struggle for food sovereignty: direct sale or *vendita diretta*, peasant agriculture or *agricultura contadina*, and empowerment.

The PGS is a bottom-up and collective response to the up-hill struggle with local authorities and existing pro-large business legislation that is faced by many small-scale producers of transformed foods (for example, wine makers, bread makers or brewers). The hygienic standards for organic products under EU-legislation are largely devised for large-scale economies, disregarding, and in some cases rendering almost impossible, the production of small-scale producers. It is for this reason that Campi Aperti’s label is called “Genuino Clandestino” (*Genuine Clandestine*). Each certified product carries this label, jointly with the description “Community fighting for food self-determination”, a notion that could be interpreted as bridging the idea of food sovereignty, autonomy and the commons.

Because they position themselves as a viable alternative to the agro-industries, the PGS is succinctly employed to overcome economic barriers (IFOAM, 2015). The high standards of the PGS combine the sustainable values of organic production applied at all stages of production with the focus on a farmer’s control over seeds, plant or manure inputs for cultivation, water and soil quality, as well as transport costs (all of them, food-producing commons). The introduction of external and oil-based energy inputs is banned, since agro-ecological farming and circular farming methods are meant to be the norm. In addition, dependent workers are included in the inspection process to avoid exploitation and abuse. In case a transformed product required an off-site processing site, for example a flour mill or an

olive oil press, this processing site is also controlled for its sustainability standards, in particular regarding energy and waste.

In conclusion, the experience of Campi Aperti shows that solidarity across the food chain, the convergence of urban and rural resistance, and the collective construction of transformative strategy must be considered an integral part of the movement for agroecological cities and for the transition towards political and economic autonomy of the food chain. The fact that urban ‘consumers’ in Bologna are recognised (and named) by Campi Aperti as co-producers, and that many of them were crucial in setting up the markets in the city, may epitomise new productive solidarities or new ways of “commoning” that open up alternative paths for agroecological urbanism.

Although the strategy, that could also be termed either alter- or counter-hegemonic, remains constant, the governance systems are continuously revised because of their dynamic engagement with self-managed economic experiments (i.e., the cost and price arrangements and the PGS). That continuous governance reflexivity attracts new producers and customers-eaters in a continuous redefinition of the network and the interactions among people, spaces and nature. Whilst the growth of the Association is desirable to gain political bargaining power with the municipality and national authorities, new producers often do not necessarily grasp the full intention and meaning of political autonomy. In that sense, internal frictions and tensions surfaced when Campi Aperti was in negotiations with the state and local authorities, and questions have also been raised concerning the focus on the trading aspect of the food system rather than the ‘commoning’ of means of production (e.g., land), and the fact that (differently from Community Supported Agriculture schemes) risk is not shared between farmers and eaters.

In this context, self-awareness, self-critique, dialogue and transformation assume a central role in the ability to engage in ‘commoning’. In light of this, Campi Aperti and its members have been exercising constant reflection on their political processes (i.e., reflexive governance after De Schutter and Lenoble, 2010), and are always looking for new ways to extend their complex horizontal governance systems in order to absorb the growing number of producers and co-producers without compromising their political and economic autonomies. In a European context where 70% of the population lives in cities, Campi Aperti and Genuino Clandestino offer a concrete example of solidarity, “commoning” and self-governance as acts of resistance against the *status quo* that are the pre-condition to a just and agroecological transition.

SECTION VI - Conclusions

This chapter has exposed a series of, often not too evident, connections behind the food system:

- that between enclosure of the commons in the North and South and the growth of the imperial metropolitan city;
- that between the plantations system, the birth of capitalism, the objectification of nature, and the continuous disempowerment of women and indigenous groups, who were relying the most on those commons;
- that between the reproduction of white male privilege and the impossibility of a just and agroecological transition.

Faced with these historical and contemporary inter-dependencies, the coalescence of different scholars' and activists' struggles for a gender-transformative (and anti-patriarchal), decolonised and de-commodified food system emerges as a highly needed goal. The disentangling of those connections is nothing but a first step in the pursuit of a fair and sustainable food system. A second step lays in cultivating reflexivity and facilitating frequent interactions between urban political consumerism in the North (expressing mostly a reforming attitude) and the rural food sovereignty movements in the South (challenging the system from an oppositional/radical stance). This is in order to encourage the convergence of urban and agrarian food justice struggles, where urban green spaces become experimental grounds for the decommodification of food and where urban food policies are constructed with and for the non-urban.

In this chapter, we explored alternatives to the commodity-based food system that considers nature as a mere object, labour as a cheap input that should be reduced to the minimum, and food as cheap energy for the body (Vivero-Pol et al., 2019). These paradigmatic changes towards food and the food system can inform alternatives such as agroecological urbanism. We understand this as a technical and political reaction to the food-disabling urban landscapes that have separated urban dwellers from the food they eat, from the nature that they exploit, and from the living conditions of the people that make food possible everywhere in the world (Tornaghi and Dehaene, 2019). The ideas of commons and commons-based food systems, "commoning" and food as a commons, although conceptually different, can inform democratic, fair and ecological food systems. This happens, as the three examples provided in this chapter discuss, by challenging the existing profit-maximising, individualistic and exploitative organisation of food production, consumption and post-consumption that the industrial food system represents. Moreover, the examples presented here include not just different praxis but, more importantly, values and narratives of food that drastically differ from the mainstream description of food as a commodity. The common thread of those cases is a pursuit of autonomy, self-determination by means of direct involvement in food production, consumption or governance, and a re-valuation of food as a multi-dimensional essential good that is historically defined, intersectional, and intrinsically ecological.

Moreover, the three cases presented in this chapter pivot around urban-rural interconnections, cross-chains solidarity, giving visibility to food people and food spaces that are often forgotten, and strengthening intersectional and historical self-awareness. In that sense, they epitomise what Arturo Escobar called an "autonomous design" that eschews commercial and modernising aims in favour of more collaborative and place-based approaches (Escobar, 2018). Such a design can be based on the radical interdependence of all beings, or mutual neediness, as posited by philosopher John O'Neill in his recent essay (O'Neill, 2019). This autonomous re-design can be done through the assumption of relevant knowledge (e.g., cuisine recipes, agrarian practices, public research), nature (e.g., seeds, fish stocks, land, forests, water), social relationships and more (e.g., solidarity, equality, justice, conviviality, anti-patriarchy and anti-colonialism) as commons or collective practices. Those knowledges, natural resources and behaviours can be co-constructed, valued and governed as commons by means of self-regulated arrangements. And that collective reconstruction can inform the transformative ideas and movements that aim to change the industrial food system, such as the right to food, food sovereignty, food justice or food democracy.

While this chapter welcomes political approaches to the commons that see commons as key innovative and transformative tools to help food systems move beyond the state and the market (Bollier and Helfrich, 2015), more debate and research is needed on the possible

tensions and synergies that could be found between the dominant discourses on human rights, food sovereignty, agroecological urbanism and the commons. However, we should not spend too much time thinking without practicing. The commons have traditionally been created by the instituting power of collectivities acting together under self-regulated rules (Dardot and Laval, 2015). Moreover, “commoning” does require nothing more than imagining, performing and experimenting together for a common purpose. The risk of excessive reflection is that, as in the past, it would give space for legalisation, institutionalisation and co-optation by institutionalised powers (i.e., landlords, kings or nation-states). This tension between by who and how the commons can be created, re-created or legitimately recognised is at the core of the political and moral debate, triggering discrepancies and conflicts that must be mapped, considered and addressed.

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