Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

# Conflicting Alternatives:
# Power and privilege in the alterity quest of sustainability-led initiatives

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PhD Thesis

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# Power and privilege in the alterity quest of sustainability-led initiatives

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To my father, who is not an environmentalist, but taught me to love nature.

To my mother, who is not a social justice activist, but showed me how to be sensitive to injustice.

Paradoxically, this dissertation is all about them.

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*Abstract*

In recent years, researchers across the social sciences have studied a range of so-called alternative economic and political practices. Such alternatives are understood as spaces, initiatives, or organizations to which some sort of difference is attached in relation to a mainstream Other. Alternatives represent a safe place and an idea widely used to describe or inhabit something different. Alterity, in this context, refers to the spirit of building initiatives and practices, uncovering how they do things differently, and apparently more ethically, justly and sustainably so than the "dominant paradigm." Moreover, the rise of sustainability-oriented alternatives in the Global North illustrates far-reaching dynamics of changing environmental governance, particularly in relation to the growing role of civic society actors.

However, as alternatives are deployed as the new activism, the discourse of alternatives too often lacks a reflection on the meaning and significance of the proposed alternatives with critical questions - about what and whose alternatives are being widespread and accepted, for whom, how and why - remaining largely absent in public conversations and scholarship about alternatives and their speculative futures.

In this dissertation, I aim to critically examine the often celebrated alternative-provisioning strategy for social change and the way it is articulated by sustainability-oriented alternatives to the mainstream system of consumption-production. I seek to answer the following overarching research question: What roles do power and privilege play in the construction and expansion of an alternative-provisioning strategy for social change? Specifically, I examine questions of power and privilege within the creation, expansion and institutionalization of such initiatives and I explore their theoretical and political significance.

I explore Community-based Economies and so-called Alternative Food Networks in Europe and in the United States in three empirical studies. Throughout, I use analytical tools derived from political ecology, environmental justice and critical food studies to highlight the mutual construction of an alternative subjectivity and strategy, power, privilege and social transformation. Drawing on in-depth qualitative field-based research, the thesis addresses important conceptual and practical questions about the tensions between the resistance to hegemonic powers and the reproduction of power and privilege.

The results of the empirical studies that compose this dissertation demonstrate how an array of existing power and privilege relations are embedded in the construction and expansion of an alternative-provisioning strategy for social change. In particular, I identify four major power and privilege dynamics across the three case studies: i. Neoliberal rationalities shape alternative subjectivities; ii. The neoliberal governance apparatus embraces the provisioning of alternatives; iii. Privileged imaginaries entangled with socio-economic and political structures construct and sustain certain alternatives; and iv. Unequal discursive power and broader power imbalances allow the thriving of privileged and biased narratives around alternatives. The results bring important insights about what social change alternative-provisioning strategy can achieve and what present constraints prevent this social change from materializing for all.

Acknowledging these results, I challenge the strategy of reading for difference, while I call for a more egalitarian and unifying strategy for social change. Such a strategy, rather than seeking artificial alternativeness for a few, would unite allies - without homogenizing - and find similarities in the effects of the current socio-economic political system among social classes and groups, putting the political efforts for social change on the spaces where the impacts of neoliberalism, racism and capitalism have profoundly concentrated.

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While developing this thesis I have had three main elements of support, influence or inspiration, and it is difficult to separate those three. One is my mother, even though she has no idea what this thesis is about. Her values, visions and ways of doing were a source of inspiration way before I started this thesis, but they became even more relevant for me in the last four years. My research project could have been named "Why my mother does not eat organics". I was tempted to use it for the title of the dissertation, but I save it for a future paper. My mother is for me an example of an alternative life, but it would have never been acknowledged as that by anyone.

Another pillar is Gilad, my partner, muse, and fierce discussant. Our encounter transformed this thesis into an unexpected ethnography, and I believe it has enriched it a lot. I am very thankful for his support, patience, love and the good food even in his difficult position of being under the academic gaze. This thesis has been a personal and intellectual transformation for both of us individually and together, for good or bad, ending up in a common acknowledgment of our altered lives and the pleasures of alternatopias.

Finally, a combination of colleagues and friends, with my supervisor Isabelle as a key element of this group. Isabelle believed in me since that masters' committee, and introduced me into and supported me throughout an otherwise hard environment that is academia. She taught me to be a good academic, and even more important, to realize that I am. She gave me all a student needs: good mentorship, encouragement, freedom and funding. She still wonders how I have changed my career from engineering to critical social sciences, even it's all her fault. She made it easy.

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# CHAPTER 1

## Power and privilege embedded in the rise of sustainability-led alternatives

***"Of those cobblestones, these alternatives"***

Barcelona Solidarity Economy Network slogan, in reference to the May'68 struggles

1. Introduction

Friend*: It is so challenging to start a community. Very frustrating! People say they want to get engaged and that they are totally in the project. But when the time of investing money comes, to buy the land and stuff, it´s all about problems, people leave, people say they do not have money…. You have to have money to build an eco-village!*

Me: *I see. But eco-villages already exist, the regular villages, don´t you think? There are communal relations there too… And there are so many villages with land and housing available.*

Friend*: I agree. But villages are not where people want to live, normally.*

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This conversation took place recently in my kitchen while a friend of mine and I were cooking. He is a very committed long-term environmental activist from California, who is now engaged in permaculture design, which provides him a livelihood. He is currently trying to start an intentional community in an old *masía* (old farm) near Barcelona.

The extract is short and simple but it exemplifies well what this thesis is about.

During the last four years, I have been interested in understanding why people engage in what are seen as alternative practices. What is the role of ideals and values, of the commitment to build a better world, of the frustration with the system, and of pure hedonism in the emergence of these practices?

I have been also eager to unravel how alternativeness is constructed, and by whom. For example, why eco-villages are portrayed as sustainability and community utopias while villages are getting emptied of their residents.

Lastly, I have found myself especially perplexed with the question of what the alternative-provisioning strategy for social change, which I see on the rise, is likely to be able to achieve in terms of social transformation, and what it is likely not. In other words, which forms of power and privilege will this strategy be able to overcome and which others will it likely reproduce, acknowledging that such a strategy is built on difference and freedom but at the same time is highly dependent on sameness (people with similar ideas and status) and personal choice?

The dialogue above is also illustrative of the many conversations I have had about alternative practices in the last four years, in which my position has been – often, but not always – the one who brings the voice of those excluded from the alternative-creation strategy to the dialogue.

a. Creating alternatives as a political strategy for social change

In recent years, researchers across the social sciences have engaged with a range of so-called alternative economic and political practices. Such alternatives are understood as spaces, initiatives, organizations to which some sort of difference is attached in relation to a mainstream Other (Fuller et al., 2010). Alternatives are becoming a new political identity and strategy. Alternatives represent a safe place and an idea widely used to describe or inhabit something different. Here, that attached difference, or alternativeness, often awards these initiatives a certain capacity of bringing about social change. Alterity, in this context, refers to the spirit of building and understanding initiatives, movements or practices stressing how they do things differently, and apparently more ethically, justly and sustainably than the "dominant paradigm" (Fuller et al., 2010; Gibson-Graham, 2006; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Goodman et al., 2014; Zademach and Hillebrand, 2013). It relates to a sense of "otherness". Here alterity, or the quest for difference, does not refer to the attempts to do things differently, but rather to highlight that difference as a form of enacting social change. Gibson-Graham, as the stronger proponents of "the reading for difference" note that "the strategy of making difference does not automatically produce new ways forward, but it can generate new possibilities and different strategies" (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 623., see also Gibson-Graham, 2006; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Harris, 2009).

The alternative-provision strategy for social change, that is, the proposition and creation of alternatives with the aspiration of increasingly achieving positive social transformation, seems to have gained momentum, as it is illustrated by the strong discourse around alternatives in activist circles, NGOs and even institutional arenas in the Global North. Activism is now replete with rationales of alterity, where ideas such as "doing things differently", "create an Option B", "having options" or "providing alternatives" are recurrent. Initiatives and practices are repeatedly portrayed as solutions to or different from the mainstream "Other", often using/evoking or fostering binary perspectives between, apparently, two disconnected paradigms. However, as alternatives are deployed as the new activism, the discourse of alternatives too often lacks a reflection on the meaning and significance of the proposed alternatives with questions such as "alternatives to what?" or "alternatives, so what?" remaining largely open.

Importantly, while there is a wide societal consensus on the socio-political benefits of this strategy, the alterity narrative and approach might be obscuring other possible forms of social change, more universal or egalitarian, based, for example, on discourses of universal rights, justice or social/racial equity.

b. Sustainability-oriented consumption-production alternatives

An important part of the current discourse and praxis of alternatives relates the creation of alternative systems of consumption and production. These practices have emerged as an important and engaging

realm of activism (e.g. Bialski et al., 2015; Crane, 2012; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Leitner et al., 2007b). They are forms of shaping, contesting or subverting the System: the political, economic, cultural and social context which these initiatives inhabit. These groups might seek to "combine alternative knowledge production with practices contesting market rationalities", to "seek to slow down the pace of everyday life, bringing producers and consumers face to face", to "seek to reorganize local work" and "might demand specific amendments to local state regulations" (Leitner et al., 2007b, p. 19). I refer to initiatives such as community gardens and farms, consumer cooperatives, bike repair workshops, community energy projects, waste recycling and transformation groups, transition towns, or land trusts, among others. These groups and initiatives, which might range from grassroots to state-led, work on the material aspect of transition, that is, changing the way we relate to (produce/consume and hence think about) food, energy, technology, transportation, etc. They aim to have an effect on the different ecologies embedded in those elements as well as on the politics that govern them.

In the Global North, these alternatives are built around principles that distance themselves from traditional capitalist forms of economic organization, and are often initiatives committed to a transition towards a low-carbon and more localized economy. For example, most of the community-based economies are sustainability inspired (promoting locally-made or grown agricultural products, low-carbon mobility practices, ecologically sound constructions, renewable energies, sustainable waste management and the creation of a circular economy, etc.). In the food domain, those that are part of the so-called "alternative food networks" (Goodman et al., 2014) denote a higher environmental consciousness and practice in food production and consumption (represented in some central elements of these networks such as in the production of organic foods and the different forms of local retailing). In other words, in the background of environmental crisis, alternatives are necessarily environmentally sustainable. Indeed, environmental sustainability has created a "superior" quality against which alternativeness is most commonly assessed: alternatives are constructed by ascribing them more sustainability than the mainstream Other. The orientation towards environmental sustainability of these alternatives is also an indication of the milieus behind them: progressive white educated middle classes, who project and reinforce their environmental subjectivities through these practices (Agrawal, 2005; Dowling, 2010; Rutherford, 2007).

Since the 2007-2008 financial and economic crises, these initiatives have become more visible, more popular and socially accepted (Arampatzi, 2017; Calvário and Kallis, 2016; Conill et al., 2012; Stavrides, 2014). They have, at times, become part of the political program of governments at different scales and have been funded and institutionalized through different public schemes. For example, alternative currencies are being adopted by local governments, with the paradigmatic case of Bristol but also others (North, 2006). Barcelona has recently supported the creation of different cooperative housing projects on

public land. Municipalities across the globe are developing urban agriculture programs relying on community groups. The public acceptance of and institutional support of time banks in the E.U. is remarkable, especially in the U.K. (Seyfang, 2010). Such projects also reflect the recent attempts of both progressive "new municipalism'" and austerity policies that favor activists groups to enhance social fabric and environmental protection (Hancock et al., 2012; Hilbrandt and Richter, 2015; Magrinyà, 2015).

The Barcelona Solidarity Economy Network[1] (XES is the Catalan acronym) exemplifies well the emergence and growth of these alternatives. The network had seen important increases in the number of members and the amount of institutional support it has received over the last decade. The Municipality of Barcelona funds part of the network's activities and has also supported the creation of social economy initiatives with the creation of a Social and Solidarity Economy sub-Department within the Economics Office. Today, the XES network is a big confluence (over 250) of varied initiatives mostly centered on the production of sustainable goods and services, such as Alterevents (catering services and events' organizers inspired by social and environmental principles) or Alternativa3 (organic fair trade commercialization); cooperative forms of organizing production, such as Som Energia (a renewable energy cooperative of consumers) or iActa (a judicial services cooperative); and third sector organizations, such as Can Cet (employability programs for disadvantaged populations) or GEDI (hosting minors under government protection). Under the banner of the solidarity economy, these initiatives brand themselves as alternatives to the mainstream systems of production and consumption of goods and services.

In a recent campaign launched by the network, these initiatives presented themselves as the outcome of confrontational struggles such as the ones of May'68. XES selected indeed the slogan "From those cobblestones, these alternatives" for their annual fair in 2018, in reference to the cobblestones that starred in the French revolt (See Figure 1 below). The connection between May'68 struggles and these initiatives in the production-consumption realm, according to XES, is that "the dreams of that revolution are today specific projects, practices and realities within the social and solidarity economy ambit" (XES, 2018). Yet, this message seems to ignore the broader and revolutionary ambition of the May'68 revolt – that is the dismantling of authoritarian political structures and the democratization of social and cultural institutions ranging from education to the news media and beyond as well as the seizing of the means of production by the working class (materialized in several general strikes and seizing of factories). What the slogan is correct about is that the strategy of alternative provisioning is replacing more confrontational forms of activism.

[1] http://xes.cat/es/

Activists' attempts to build alternative practices represent the desire of people to inhabit different worlds (Carlsson and Manning, 2010; Kallis and March, 2014; Sargisson and Sargent, 2004). Broadly, these initiatives react against the damaging economic system of the dominant globalized capitalism that creates acute economic and social disparities as well as irreparable environmental damage. Initiatives also challenge the outstanding control of this economic system by the political elite who predominantly favours the (corporate) private sector and rely on global markets, extinguishing more small-scale and local economic spaces and the culture and values that used to sustained those. In addition, the lack of meaningful participatory spaces in governance and policy making is challenged with the creation of assemblies and cooperatives.

The rise of the alternatives-provisioning discourse and praxis is also influenced by broader trends that shifted activism from more confrontational strands to more positive activity. These trends are related to funding and professionalization dynamics that prioritize certain types of ideas and outcomes over others (Bartley, 2007; Davis, 1991; Dinnie and Holstead, 2017). In addition, positive activities are also easier to mobilize volunteers around (Poppendieck, 1999) and might be less emotionally challenging and consuming than confrontational politics, as activists often remark.


**Figure 1: XES propaganda announcing the annual fair**

The logic of producing social change through the creation of difference is thus the focus of my research. Here, I build on emerging debates in geography on the theoretical and political significance of alternative practices (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011a; Fuller et al., 2010; Gibson-Graham, 2008; Goodman et al., 2014; McCarthy, 2006a; Middlemiss and Parrish, 2010; Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012; Seyfang and Smith, 2007). The effectiveness of different types of activism has been long discussed in social movements scholarship, with a focus on the drivers and impacts of activism and on the strategies and tactics deployed. Yet, by generally framing these initiatives under the transformational vs. reformist type of change, or

oppositional vs. incremental change, this scholarship misses a key aspect of the construction of alternatives. In the discourse around alternatives-provisioning, "the search for and recognition of difference is a vital political act" (McCarthy, 2006b, p. 804). This particularity brings relevant aspects to the debates around social change and the transformational potential of alternative practices, in particular in regard to questions of power and privilege. Here, alternativeness is constructed by situating certain initiatives and practices as radically different from existing power structures, rather than within those. In addition, in the discourse and practice of "creating alternatives" two different meanings of "alternative" overlap: alternative as "something different from the usual" (like in alternative lifestyles, alternative energy sources), and alternative as "allowing for a choice between two or more things" (like in alternative plan). This overlap strikes me and motivates this research.

c. The politics of alternatives and the alterity quest

My thesis is focused on initiatives that perform practices of consumption and production with an underlying sense and discourse of alterity. The construction of such practices (herein after "alternatives") is embedded into certain politics, including their contested and often contradictory meaning, role and impacts within the current socio-economic and political context. The analyses of the politics of alternatives draw on a variety of fields such as critical environmental studies, political ecology, political economy, food studies or cultural ecology. Some of the most striking and salient issues of the politics of alternatives can be gathered around three main topics. The first aspect relates to alternatives' capacities to promote deep socio-political change attending to their strategies and their unintended consequences. The second one discusses the exclusivity and the privilege embedded in alternative practices. The third issue is related to the way alternatives are constructed as such and how and who defines altenativeness.

*Role and capacities of alternatives in relation to hegemonic power*

One of the questions surrounding alternatives revolves around the position of the alternatives and the alternative strategy in relation to dominant power structures. The underlying question here is one of capacities or expectations: to what extent are alternatives able to bring about social transformation given their position in relation to existing power structures?

Community economies are enactors of politics of possibilities, that is, groups that operate in diverse ways within the current socio-political regime and economic system and challenge the discursive domination of the capitalist system (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Lee et al., 2008). Here, alternative practices are praised for being spatiotemporal Utopias (Harvey, 2000; Kallis and March, 2014; Wright, 2010), helping to recover "the imagination of what a world that isn't capitalist could look like" (Harvey and Haraway, 1995, p. 519). Gibson-Graham use this argument to call for a strategy towards a post-capitalism consciousness, in which

other forms of economic relations are highlighted against the overstated predominance of capitalist relations in discourse and episteme (Gibson-Graham, 2008, 2006). Under this picture, these alternatives materialize/illustrate different economic configurations that demonstrate not only that a different economy is possible, but that it already exists.

Alternatives change the politics of what´s possible, by playing different politics and changing subjectivities, for example, by the community aspect that characterized many of them (García López et al., 2017). They can repoliticize aspects of everyday life and promote counter-hegemonic senses among participants (of communing practices). In a way, this line of arguments aligns with the idea that "social transformation occurs not merely by rallying mass numbers in favor of a cause, but precisely through the ways in which daily social relations are rearticulated." (Butler, 2000).

A more critical posture about the role played by alternatives increasingly recognizes that their attempts to challenge entrenched power relations in production-consumption systems seem to depend in some way on the existence of mainstream economic and social relations (Holloway et al., 2010). This position acknowledges the construction of alternatives as a solution to address socio-environmental problems as derived from a neoliberal program in which responsibilities are shifting downwards towards civil society (Jessop, 2002; Peck and Tickell, 2002; Rosol, 2012; Hilbrandt and Richter, 2015). Under this view, the most celebrated discourse around alternatives suggests that one can escape or at least improve world socio-environmental conditions as long as they find and craft solutions to such conditions and provide corresponding services, regardless of the support they obtain from the state. Here, responsibilized individual subjects (Dean, 1999; Rose, 1999) become part of the alternatives-provisioning strategy (Guthman, 2008a; Pudup, 2008; Busa and Garder, 2015; Robbins and Rowe, 2002; Middlemiss and Parrish, 2010; Dobson et al., 2003; Seyfang, 2006). This is represented, for example, by food activists that show a strong sense of self-help, performing environmentally sound and healthy practices, while renouncing on challenging the inability (or lack of desire) of the state to ban, for instance, of pesticides in the traditional agro-industrial complex.

This brings me to my next point. A common but overlooked aspect of these politics relates to the capacity of alternative initiatives to operate in parallel to the mainstream. Others have referred to this ability as "opting out of the system" (Alkon and Guthman, 2017). Opposite to other forms of activism, providing examples of successful healthy, moral and environmentally sustainable socio-spatial relations and networks does not involve direct opposition to the system nor the urge to change laws and regulations (although some might ultimately do change the orientation of certain programs), but to find the gaps in which alternatives can be inserted (i.e. operating a food coop thanks to a legal vacuum). Indeed, this lack of oppositional stand might facilitate that many of these alternatives are adopted and promoted by state

actors, as a form of compensating for the failures and impacts of the business-as-usual capitalist extractive economy. Fomenting these initiatives and creating spaces of difference might be done in order to motivate an incremental change in society towards a more socially and environmentally respectful economy. But the promotion of alternative practices can also be seen as a way to regulate, control or marketicize them (Brown and Getz, 2008; Guthman, 2014, 2007), while at the same time allowing for the un-regulation of the conventional spaces, practices, where the real mess is.

When alternatives are available, people (those who have access) can shift the view away from the conventional spaces, and find safety, comfort and even hedonistic pleasure (Soper, 2008) in the different, beneficial practices of alternative initiatives (i.e. participating in community organizing in an otherwise broader context of lack of participatory process/spaces and lack of democracy). This is the example of food quality schemes (including organics), fair trade, all sorts of sustainability certifications, time banking, B-corps, etc. Moreover, the alternative values and ideals on which these initiatives are built on are open to a progressive incorporation into the capitalist economy (Brown and Getz, 2008; Guthman, 2014; Jaffee and Howard, 2010; Renard, 2003), and are often also co-opted.

To sum up, the position of alternatives in relation with existing power structures (regulatory power, market power, disciplining power or legitimation power among others) is open to debate. The perspective seems to depend on the reading of these dimensions by scholars. Regarding the power of capitalism, the sort of community economies that Gibson-Graham see as post-capitalistic are seen, instead, peri-capitalistc by Anna Tsing, because they exist at the margins of the current political economy and they are linked to such structures and hence open to ongoing alteration by the core (Tsing, 2015). Other positions go as far as situating alternative practices, in particular alternative food networks, "in the belly of agri-food industry" (Qazi and Selfa, 2005), implying a stronger and inexorable relation of alternatives with the mainstream food market system.

*Exclusivity and privilege*

Additionally, and directly feeding the first debate, scholars have pointed to the social inequalities and exclusionary discourses at work in the most promising alternative initiatives (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011b; Allen, 2004; Anguelovski, 2015a; Goodman, 2003; Guthman, 2008b; Hilbrandt and Richter, 2015; Slocum, 2007). A critical question here is whether such experiments really address broader structural issues such as poverty, uneven distribution and social inequality (issue stressed by Reynolds, 2015). This is not to say that all initiatives with a transformative horizon must focus on equity as a priority, but at least should be very aware of which forms of oppression, inequity or inequality they might be producing, exacerbating or failing to address despite their alterity quest.

The ostensible paradox embedded in the alternative strategy for social change is that even if "alternatives are in seemingly opposition to what is bad, they work against broader transformation (…) because the creation of alternatives simultaneously produces place and people that for various reasons cannot be served by an alternative and therefore are put beyond consideration (Guthman, 2011, p. 6). Sustainability-led alternatives in the consumption-production realm are mostly defined by the progressive white educated middle-upper class, based on their experiences, knowledges, aspirations, etc (Guthman, 2008b, 2003; Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, 2013; Johnston et al., 2011; Slocum, 2007, 2006) and hence it is not surprising that these groups populate the most celebrated alternatives, failing to attract people beyond the "usual suspects" (Alkon and McCullen, 2011; Slocum, 2007; Zitcer, 2014; Hilbrandt and Richter, 2015). These critiques situate the most celebrated alternative practices as "little and temporal islands reserved for a concerned but exclusive middle class and a selective urban creative milieu" (Bialski et al., 2015, p. 6). The capacities needed to start and sustain these sorts of initiatives, including the capacity to volunteer (Hopkins, 2009; Middlemiss and Parrish, 2010; Seyfang et al., 2013) or personal capacities such as individual leadership (Hopkins, 2009; Martiskainen, 2017; Middlemiss and Parrish, 2010) point alternatives-building as a quite challenging and resource-demanding task, which might be detrimental for certain social groups in particular.

However, the reality is that even when the efforts to attract people beyond the low hanging fruits is tremendous, the inclusion of historically marginalized groups is not easy as it might be pre-determined by different factors. Foden has proved that cultural capital hinders the inclusion of disadvantaged populations in radical anti-capitalist initiatives (Foden, 2015). The practices and ways of operating within the groups distinctly reflect middle class forms of being and acting (meetings, consensus, discussion) (Neal, 2013). The politeness, education, skills, or shared circumstances within groups, imprint the "possession of particular forms of cultural capital, leading to potential bias by social class, nationality or ethnicity" (Foden, 2015, p. 56). In addition, communities' homogeneity might lead to a re-definition of certain types of activities (examples of trendy activities such as balcony gardening, knitting, food preservation, etc.) giving them certain – upscaled- status. Those new meanings of sharing, collaborating, cultivating or hand-crafting creates invisible restricting dynamics which affect the type of people willing or able to participate in community initiatives and also further shapes the priorities articulated by alternatives.

Also of concern is that the public and scholar discussion on alternative modes of being and living seems to be centred on what these usual suspects have to say in this respect. Other voices are invisibilized or silenced, such as those from the non-dominant races or ethnicities, which tend to be either diminished or translated to Western imaginaries and terms (de la Cadena, 2015; Lander, 2005, a specific example from urban gardening in Reynolds, 2015). Then, what is commonly portrayed as alternative should also be

discussed as alternatives emerge everywhere constantly. As Cavanagh and Benjaminsen rightfully assert, "alternatives (…) are being experimented with (out of inspiration or desperation) on a daily basis among the poorest of the poor. They have no choice but to seek alternatives to what they are experiencing" (Cavanagh and Benjaminsen, 2017, p. 210).

An example of the prevalent discourses on alternatives comes from the low-budget practices, such as sharing, second-hand shopping, or dumpster diving, that are praised in certain academic and activist circles. While scholarly attention to low-budget practices is often focused on the voluntary restraining practices, and their embedded moral and communitarian value (Demaria et al., 2013; Doherty, 2003), sharing and saving practices are often born out of material or financial need, and they are indeed central features of poverty. Yet, those practices do not enter the repertoire of what is presented by the activist and academic community as low-budget practices. While the voluntary restraining practices are important in the context of social transformation and critical opposition to consumerism, an open-ended investigation into responses to scarcity and sustainable behaviors needs widening the boundaries of this research program. This requires including in the low-budget narratives the often neglected aspects of poverty and people who have to deal with 'no budget' situations such as bottle collecting, temp-work or street vending (Hilbrandt and Richter, 2015)

To conclude, scholarship on alternative practices still needs to reflect on how these practices, despite their proclaimed higher ethical standards, social embeddedness and social sustainability, may in fact be recreating relations of domination and oppression.

*Questioning alternativeness*

All the aforementioned debates reveal how alternatives are indeed entangled with their constituent "other", that is, the mainstream socio-economic and political structure and the embedded relations of dominance and exclusion which they try to oppose. These entanglements rise questions of what precisely makes such projects "alternative", that is, how difference is constructed and alternatives are formed as such.

Several scholars have pointed out that the very idea of "alternative" is not able to reflect all structures and components of such initiatives that are of key relevance when assessing difference or possibility (Holloway et al., 2010, 2007; Johnston, 2017; Jonas, 2010; Wilson, 2013). Alternatives are multi-layered and rooted in their contexts (Jarosz, 2008), but a binary of alternative/mainstream suggests "the possibility of passing judgment on a particular model in its abstract form" (Wilson, 2013, p. 721). As a result, a single-dimension adjective (alternative) or differentiated element might lead to oversimplified descriptions and analysis about their material and immaterial realities and their potential for social transformation.

Hence, scholars have called to conceptualize alternatives not as an either/or affair, but as a family of issues (Goodman et al., 2014, p. 104; also Jonas, 2010) that could counteract the dichotomy thinking.

Moreover, scholars on the politics of the alternatives remark that the qualifications or characteristics upon which difference, or alterity, is assigned are sometimes abstract or subjective (Johnston, 2017; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006). We tend to attach difference based on our experiences, imaginaries, aspirations, and hence notions of alterity can be ambiguous and arbitrary (Johnston, 2017; Spiller, 2010). For example, the analysis of alternative practices has predominantly focused more on the social aspect of them than on the ecological aspect. Such networks are rarely considered as socio-ecological systems, but rather their alternativeness' conceptualization and analysis remains in the realm of the social (Jones et al., 2010), for example, around community relations or local revitalization. In addition, in the alterity quest, alternativeness relies often on the production sphere. Differences in the reproductive sphere or the emotional sphere have not gained as much attention, but they are likely indispensable in any transformational attempt (González-Hidalgo and Zografos, 2017; Nightingale, 2011; Sultana, 2017).

Also illustrative of these selective attachment of alternativeness is the fact that despite the urban character of the beneficiaries of alternative practices (i.e. consumers), alternativeness is often built on defining characteristics of rurality such as direct relations, simplicity, locality, social embeddedness, etc. Despite the role of rurality in the imagination and construction of alternative economies, the politics between these two geographies is not solved in alternative practices. Scholars have suggested that urban and rural politics might play a role in the reproduction of inequalities (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005) within alternative economies, while calling for the re-politicization of the local and the alternative and for a better understanding of the urban–rural politics and social relations uniting producers and consumers (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Hinrichs, 2000).

Moreover, critical scholars have warned that many of the so-called alternative practices and activities (i.e. farmers markets and markets of recycled/reused products, both a large fraction of the community economy) remain fundamentally rooted in commodity relations (Bryant and Goodman, 2004; Crane, 2012; Freidberg, 2003; Hinrichs, 2000; McCarthy, 2006b). With the notions of embeddedness, networks and trust, a "softer treatment of capitalism" or eco-capitalism might be legitimized (Sayer, 2001, p. 700, cited in Goodman, 2003), without questioning fundamental hidden problems attached to market-based economic relations, such as marketness and instrumentalism (Block, 1990; Hinrichs, 2000). In other words, "alternative economic projects still center on the production, exchange, and circulation of commodities, few are so alternative that they eschew the circulation of capital in commodity form altogether" (McCarthy, 2006b, p. 809). While they claim to unveil the commodity fetishism, they create their own's (Guthman, 2003; Johnston and Baumann, 2010) for "satisfying the self-interest of rational

individual consumers" (McCarthy, 2006b), aspects that raise important questions about the biased perceptions of alterity forming alternative practices.

While scholarship has commonly argued that notions of alterity are biased or incomplete, it is rarer that scholars question the aptness or the benefits of using alterity as a strategy for social change. The three aforementioned debates around the politics of alternatives (about the relation of alternatives with the mainstream, their exclusivity, and the definition of alternativeness) call for an urgent need to understand and critically examine the on-going and often celebrated expansion of the strategy for social change based on building alternatives. This is the goal of my dissertation.

2. Research aims, questions and theoretical approaches

a. Problem statement

Popular portrayals of and discourses around alternative practices tend to emphasize their positive role in producing more ethical, environmentally sustainable, and socially embedded relations. They are also seen as possibilities to contest, counterbalance or at least escape from the impacts of a damaging economy and the types of "unappealing" politics I describe above. Yet, the most celebrated alternative practices (the ones that are awarded with the distinction of difference as a change-enabling characteristic) seem to be led and organized by a quite homogeneous socio-cultural and economic milieu: progressive and mostly white educated middle-upper class groups, who, motivated by particular dilemmas or concerns (i.e. environmental sustainability) are crafting, not without effort, solutions to social problems. However, the extended perception of alternatives as something ethically superior, gives much power to those who happen to be privileged enough to define the parameters of social change. Moreover, the rise of sustainability-oriented alternatives and an alternative-provisioning strategy for social change in the Global North illustrates far-reaching dynamics of changing environmental governance, particularly in relation to the growing role of civic society actors. Beyond trends of power devolution, the institutionalization (adoption, regulation, research) by state institutions of some of these alternatives (see community forestry, community economies, alternative food networks, transition initiatives, etc.) also shapes and directs the route to and possibilities of socio-environmental change. What and whose alternatives are being widespread and accepted, for whom, how and why are questions that remain largely absent in the public conversations and scholarship about alternatives and their speculative futures.

While academic scholarship has paid limited attention to the politics of alternatives, I argue that power and privilege within alternatives and the alterity quest they are pursuing need to be better examined and further theorized. In particular I see the following scholarly limitations: (a) Unlike Gibson-Graham's call for reading for diversity, which encompasses all sort of initiatives and practices under the umbrella of

community economy, studies on the power and privilege aspects of alternatives have mostly been centered on the emergence of particular alternative practices. With few exceptions (such as Fuller et al., 2010; Goodman et al., 2014; Guthman, 2011; McCarthy, 2006) the alterity quest has not been framed in the scholarship as an emergent element in the tensions between current trends of neoliberal environmental governance and their contestations. In other words, an analysis of the on-the-ground workings of the alternatives-provisioning strategy for social change has remained largely absent or encapsulated within particular initiatives.

(b) While alternatives tend to be understood as grassroots activities, literature has failed to recognize that these same alternatives are often deployed and taken over by public and private institutions, producing arrangements involving grassroots spaces, institutional plans and funding schemes (Creamer, 2015; Dinnie and Holstead, 2017). This dynamic produces new initiatives, spaces and programs which need to be further understood as they work towards legitimizing and expanding some of the more grassroots initiative's values.

(c) Last, in order to understand the meaning of alternatives for a transformative horizon, scholars need to discern what and why alternatives mean to people and grasp the rationales, emotions and imaginaries around these practices. Indeed, I will argue that these overlooked immaterial aspects define the relation of the alternative strategy with the political and socio-economic structure.

b. Aims - Research questions

In this dissertation, I aim to critically examine the often celebrated alternative-provisioning strategy for social change and the way it is articulated by sustainability-oriented alternatives to the mainstream system of consumption-production. For that, I examine questions of power and privilege within the creation, expansion and institutionalization of such initiatives. At the same time, I explore their theoretical and political significance. I do so attending to current conversations in geography regarding the advance of neoliberal environmental governance (Heynen et al., 2007; Heynen and Robbins, 2005; McCarthy, 2004; McCarthy and Prudham, 2004) and the significance of alternatives within the supposedly hegemonic terrains of capitalism and neoliberalism (Fuller et al., 2010; Gibson-Graham, 2008; Goodman et al., 2014; Guthman, 2011; McCarthy, 2006a, 2006b; Zademach and Hillebrand, 2013). Though this exercise of deconstruction I hope to participate in the collective project of dismantling the current unequal and oppressive political-economic system.

My thesis seeks to answer the following overarching research question: What roles do power and privilege play in the construction and expansion of an alternative-provisioning strategy for social change?

I will answer this question by exploring Community-based Economies (CBEs herein after) and so-called Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) in Europe and in the United States. Throughout, I use analytical tools derived from political ecology, environmental justice and critical food studies to highlight the mutual construction of an alternative subjectivity and strategy, power, privilege and social transformation. Drawing on in-depth qualitative field-based empirical research, the thesis seeks to address important conceptual and practical questions regarding the tensions between the resistance to hegemonic powers and the reproduction of power and privilege. The answers to this research question will likely bring important insights to central debates on the politics of alternatives presented above, that is, on the role, capacities and actual alternativeness of alternatives.

A key assumption in this study is that the more celebrated alternative practices tend to be created and populated by white educated middle class activists is nothing too surprising. Yet, I suggest to go beyond common understandings of power and exclusivity (as matters of access or distribution) to understand how these are formed and reproduced within alternatives in subtler ways. Thus, I am not so interested in describing the exclusive character of alternatives (as spaces, for instance, where some people participate, and others not), as I am in understanding how the privileged character of certain alternative practices is formed in the first place, as well as how and why certain alternativeness is attached to these selective practices. I am interested in unravelling which imaginaries and socio-economic and political structures mediate those constructions. Moreover, I also aim at analyzing the political implications of celebrating an alternative-provisioning strategy for social change before critically assessing the way power and privilege come into play in such a strategy.

c. The alternative strategy for change

I consider that the strategy of providing alternatives to bring about socio-environmental change has different phases. The process of alternative creation is not different from other reformist social mobilizations, in which incremental changes in society's rationales and actions change policies, regulations and social norms. The process starts with the creation or emergence of a practice, initiative or space. Often, the practices are not brand new and existed before; the emergence refers to the attachment of that practice to an alternative status, that is a differential element from the mainstream with the potential of prompting socio-environmental change. For example, organic food as we know it emerged from a more marginal pesticide-free agriculture as an alternative to mainstream or conventional food.

The second phase is the expansion of the alternative. This is the moment in which the alternative gets socially accepted as such and is made available to more people. The practice gets public acceptance and public media coverage, portrayed as a solution or alternative to certain existing socio-environmental

problems. In the case of organic food, this stage took place when the demand for organic foods increased, farmers' markets embedded it, more farmers adopt organic techniques and started to be more appealing to a wide set of people, who saw organic foods a way to counterbalance the power of the agri-food system.

Lastly, there is or there might be an institutionalization of the alternatives. This refers to the acceptance, adoption, support and regulation by the state or other institutions with regulatory power. Here, the values, the language and the imaginaries that form the alternative are increasingly incorporated into society. In the case of organic foods, this moment is illustrated by the emergence of the first organic certifications and their increased traction within the U.S. Department of Agriculture, a number of social and environmental NGOs, etc.

Throughout this three-phase process, alternatives are re-shaped and re-worked through the evolution of ideas, rationales and material realities that influence how they are represented as alternatives and how their potential for socio-environmental change is understood and enacted (Figure 2).

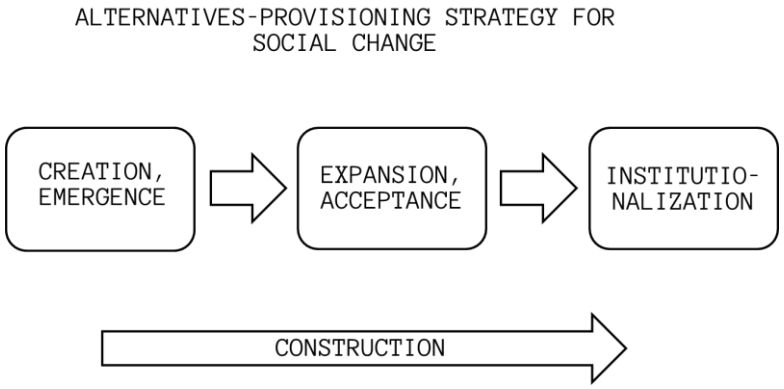


**Figure 2: Phases of the alternative-provisioning strategy**

Practices and initiatives are constructed as alternatives (meaning understood as different from and with the potential to change the mainstream Other) and are constantly re-defined in interaction with emergent ideas, rationales and events, but also with the interaction of capitalist and neoliberal forces (see Figure 3). For example, part of the organic food industry is now part of the agri-food industry, but it started as a very small and very grassroots project. It is also linked to gastronomy and quality food. Of course, the socio-economic and political system is also transformed in interaction with these alternatives (which is seen as a resistance or reworking), requiring further adaptation by alternatives. This feedback loop between alternatives' resistance and reworking and the system's co-optation and dominance is represented in Figure 3.

While power and privilege exist throughout this process, my overarching research question looks specifically at the construction and institutionalization stages. Specifically, the research question interrogates the influence of power and privilege in the construction and subsequent institutionalization of certain sustainability-oriented initiatives under the alterity quest.

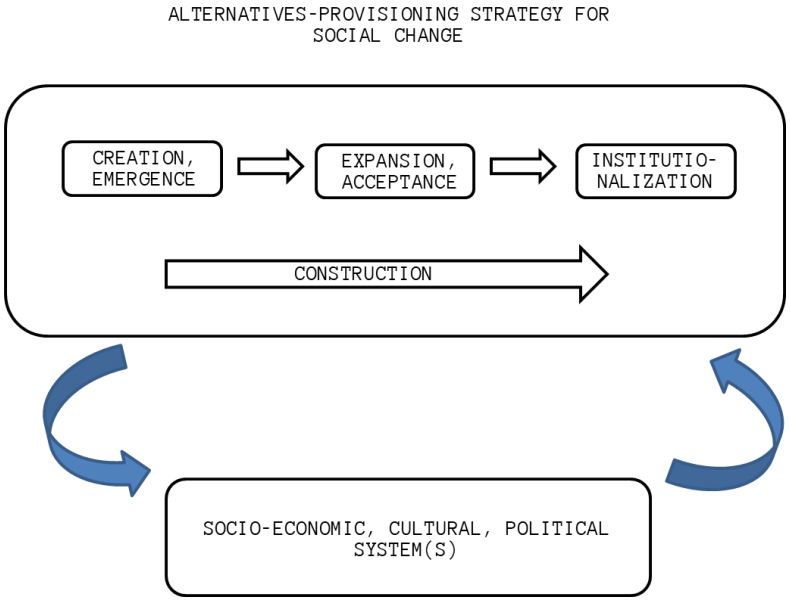


**Figure 3: Construction of alternatives' feedback loop (inspired by Leitner et al., 2007)**

d. Research Strategy

*Theoretical approach*

I approach the research question from a Political Ecology (PE) lens (Bryant, 2017; Heynen, 2006; McCarthy, 2002; Peet and Watts, 2010; Perreault et al., 2015; Robbins, 2004). In providing an analysis and a critique of existing ecologies, PE seeks to overturn depoliticize understandings of socio-environmental processes (Forsyth, 2008; Robbins, 2004), including the efforts and practices of mainstream environmentalism, proposing its own ecologies (Allen, 2004; Jepson et al., 2012; Martínez-Alier, 1995; Park and Pellow, 2011). A PE approach to alternatives can bring important insights to their politics. For example, in order to discern whose alternatives are being represented, narrated, and publicized, and why, requires contesting the environmental identity which often shapes those alternatives. The way environmental management and governance become normalized within communities, forming new kinds of people, has been a major theme of PE research and is a key aspect of this dissertation (Agrawal, 2005; Li, 2007; Robbins, 2007).

I also engage with PE in my attempt to understand the production of environmental knowledge, crises and solutions at play in alternatives (Forsyth, 2008; Guthman, 2011; Robbins, 2006; Swyngedouw, 2017, 2010). PE has laid emphasis on the links of truth, knowledge and power, in particular around current environmental politics (climate change, etc), with an acknowledgment that the way we frame environmental problems preclude the solutions – or alternatives - that can be imagined (Otero et al., 2011). PE seeks also to unravel the political forces at work in environmental access, management and transformation including the forms of managing the environment as proposed by activists and civic movements. By choosing a PE lens, I put a focus on how these alternatives are entangled with broader processes and networks of power and capital. Above all, "political ecology stories are stories of justice and injustice", of winners and losers, which is a major aspect of the empirical chapters of this dissertation (Robbins, 2004, p. 87).

With this roadmap in consideration, and acknowledging the amplitude of the variables included in my research question, I take a particular approach using three concepts or frameworks as analytical tools. Although my analysis is not exclusively guided by these three conceptual underpinnings, they represent the three lines of thought predominant throughout the dissertation.

- Neoliberalism, and in particular neoliberal governance is my proxy for power. Neoliberalism is the dominant political and economic system which arguably the alternatives try to overcome, but at the same time are inextricably linked to. Based on my overarching research question, I will try to understand how neoliberalism influences the constitution and expansion of alternative practices. This analysis will shed new light on how neoliberalism is articulated vis-à-vis its contestations – and vice versa (Alkon and Guthman, 2017; Ferguson, 2010; Guthman, 2008a; Larner, 2015; Leitner et al., 2007a; McCarthy, 2006a; Murphy, 2012). Theoretically, I consider neoliberalism as a governing structure and a set of rationales. My approach to power is post-structural as I locate power outside alternatives but also consider these alternatives as sites of power creation and exercising, in their ability to legitimize themselves and dictate new truths (Dean, 1999; Lemke, 2001; Rose, 1999).

- Environmental privilege is the lens I use for studying the privilege aspect within the expansion of an alternative strategy for social change. I do so because the alternatives I study have an important environmental dimension (part of their motives, rationales and practices are imprinted by an environmentalist ethos), are attached to particular visions of nature and express desired sustainable futures. Yes, all of those are generally imagined by a particular privileged socio-economic and cultural class and race. Environmental privilege scholarship has put the focus on privileged access to environmental goods amenities or services, but also on privileged narratives and discourses around nature and human-nature relations that shape environmental politics and create dominant practices and discourse

(Finney, 2014; Park and Pellow, 2011; Pulido, 2015, 1996). Thus, environmental privilege is a suitable framework for the study of environmental enclaves (what alternative systems of production and consumption are becoming) and understanding how the most celebrated visions of nature and environment (which are present in alternatives) can further social inequalities and exclusion.

- Last, I engage with the idea of imaginaries, as primary forces that influence the construction and acceptance of alternatives, as well as defining alternatives' relation with issues of power and privilege. I argue that the assessment of power and privilege embedded in the construction and institutionalization of alternatives needs further research on imaginaries, logics, aspirations, narratives and rationalities that form, sustain, influence, and also contest, these initiatives and their role in society. Hence, I focus on more immaterial aspects of the alternatives although I am also interested in the understanding of how those immaterial aspects connect with more material ones such as funding arrangements, forms of governance or economic structures. Imaginaries are collective understandings that facilitate future action (Cidell, 2017), which encode collective visions of the good society (Jasanoff and Kim, 2009). Their role in the construction of alternatives emerges as fundamental, as imaginaries relate to the capacity of imagining futures but also to the creative forces in the actual making of worlds (Castoriadis, 1997). Sustainability-led alternatives, alternative systems of consumption and production, alternatives to development, or alternative economy, all are made and carry their own imaginaries around social change and strategies. I am particularly interested in seeing to what extent certain imaginaries around alternatives become dominant and the implications for the politics of discourse and values as well as for the distribution of material goods and bads (Burnham et al., 2017).

I further develop each of these three conceptual frameworks within my theoretical chapter (Chapter 2)

*Study Objectives*

First, I explore the creation of an alternative imaginary of change and its relation with neoliberal rationalities and how these imprint a privileged character to alternatives. I seek to theoretically and empirically elucidate how the strategy of providing alternatives to bring about socio-environmental change is framed by different members of different alternative production-consumption systems, with a special focus on issues of justice and equity. I aim to understand how the engagement with neoliberal rationalities might influence the outcomes of the alternative practices.

Second, I unravel how imaginaries and their links with political-economic structures mediate the construction of particular alternatives as a solution to social problems. This objective seeks to unpack the construction of alternatives through the voices and experiences of people involved in such spaces, contrasting those visions with the main narratives from institutional actors and media. By doing this, I aim

to shed light on the privileged imaginaries and structures that determine what is seen as a change-enabling alternative, and the contradictions, tensions and possibilities that such arrangements bring to the alterity quest.

Third, I analyze how the institutionalization of the alternative strategy for social change (as the deployment of certain programs and schemes to advance alternative systems) intersects with the needs and lived experiences of people who are external to the dominant alternative discourse and rationale. This objective seeks to shed light on the biased and privileged dimensions on which alterity is constructed and to highlight how overseen politics (such as urban-rural power imbalances) play a role in the definition and implementation of alternatives.

Each of these objectives corresponds to a particular research question addressed in the different sub-studies which are unfolded respectively in chapters 3, 4 and 5. Figure 4 situates the key variables of these objectives within the alternative strategy.

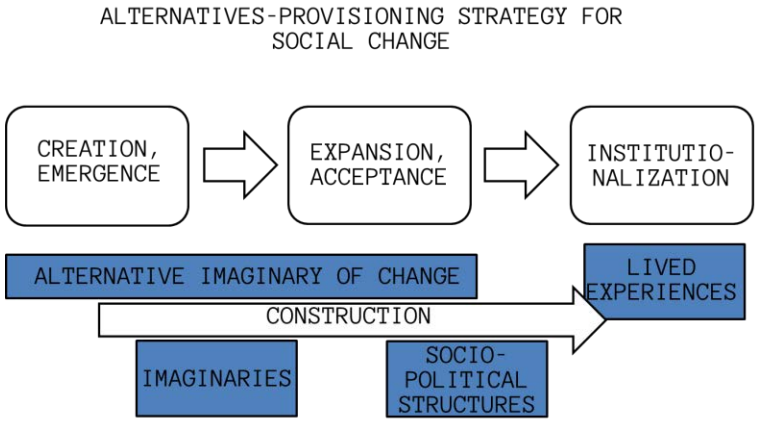


**Figure 4: Key variables developed in the sub-studies, located in the alternative strategy**

*Acknowledging partiality*

By focusing on the power and privilege embedded in alternatives and the alternative strategy, I do not aim to obscure or neglect other dimensions or dynamics as part of their trajectory (aspects that are considered "positive"). Indeed I have acknowledged them elsewhere (Pinker et al., 2018; Sekulova et al., 2017). These other aspects are simply not within the scope and focus of this dissertation. My aim here is to analyze and shed light on some more uncomfortable dynamics, which tend to be overseen both in scholarship and, especially so, in the public discourses embracing alterity. I draw here on Marisol de la Cadena's conceptual tool "Yes, but not only" (de la Cadena, 2015) for examining histories, stories and knowledges beyond unique categories and unidimensional frameworks. The idea of "not only" has been

very present throughout my engagement with alternatives. I adapted this tool to the spaces, initiatives and individuals I engaged with. To the question "Are alternatives positive? Do they enact social change? Do they contest hegemonic powers?" I answer "Yes, But not only". To the question "Are alternatives privileged? Might they reproduce power structures?" I answer with the same statement. In other words, my point is not to deny that alternative provisioning is a hopeful and needed element in the strategy for social change, but to suggest different ways of looking at the quest for alterity.

## 3. Research Design

The analysis of the alternative-provisioning strategy for social change and the politics of alternatives is a recent and understudied topic. In this dissertation, I thus explore and describe the entanglements of power and privilege within the construction, expansion and institutionalization of sustainability-led alternatives as a strategy for social change. To achieve the aforementioned aims, I develop three different sub-studies in which, using qualitative research techniques, I am able to analyze different ways in which power and privilege are embedded in the alternative strategy for social change. In order to provide an explanation of why and how the discourse and praxis around alternatives-provisioning is linked to power and privilege structures (and why it is relevant to highlight this relation), I explore and describe the lived experiences, imaginaries and rationales of individuals engaged in alternatives, as well as the material realities and political-economic structures that support these initiatives. Accordingly, this dissertation comprises three distinct empirical studies (presented in chapters 3, 4, and 5).

### a. Case study selection

This dissertation uses CBEs and AFNs as critical cases of the alternatives-provisioning strategy for social change. I consider both of them as paradigmatic examples of grassroots practices that have been socially accepted, expanded and adopted by public institutions. Importantly, when talking about CBEs and AFNs, both academic literature and popular portrayals have developed an articulated discourse around alterity. There is an overall consensus about their positive effects on society based on the idea that they represent an "alternative" to/are different from the mainstream systems of production and consumption.

On the one hand, the community economy, which is often referred to as alternative economy, solidarity economy, social economy interchangeably (with small nuances), is constituted by a diverse array of practices, mostly including initiatives that have different forms of organizing (i.e. cooperatives), that provide more ethical and sustainable goods and services (i.e. renewable energy only instead the national electricity mix) or both. In particular, the case examples included in the first sub-study (chapter 3) includes food cooperatives and community-supported agriculture groups, energy cooperatives, barter groups, bike repair workshops, development trusts, organic and fair food cafes and food recycling groups.

In Spain and other Southern European countries, the popularity of CBEs has increased in the context of the financial crisis, getting more media coverage and more users (Arampatzi, 2017; Calvário and Kallis, 2016; Conill et al., 2012; Stavrides, 2014). Governments at different scales also recognize their important role in mitigating the effects of the crisis on residents and local economies. CBEs have at times become part of the political program of governments at different scales. In Barcelona, the government of Ada Colau created a sub-department within the Economy Office of Social and Solidarity Economy. In the U.K., alternative currencies are being adopted by local governments, with the paradigmatic case of Bristol, where taxes can be paid in Bristol Pounds, but also elsewhere (North, 2006). Theoretically, community economies have been studied extensively, with special attention and success by the Community Economies Research Network (CERN). Indeed, community economy is also a theory developed by this scholarship, particularly by Gibson-Graham, which provides a strong framework not only for analysis but also for an academic praxis directed to recognize and enact diverse economies (Gibson-Graham, 2008, 2006). Hence, I direct one of my sub-studies (chapter 3) to examining community economy as an example of the alterity quest pursued both in activism and scholarship.

On the other hand, AFNs often refer to organic, sustainable, small scale local food production and embedded forms of consumption (Goodman et al., 2014). Similarly to CBEs, food is an area of academic thinking and activism praxis which has been replete with ideas of alterity. Born out of environmentalist circles in California, Germany and other environmentalism epicenters almost five decades ago, organic agriculture (as we know it today in Western countries) has stepped from an ideological and almost philosophical current to a major political agenda with rapidly increasing markets. Over time, the regulation of organic farming practices – through a policy, funding, and legal binary framework that differentiates Organic vs. Conventional practice (instead of a continuum) – has facilitated the production of discourse around alterity attached to organic agriculture and to their related networks. Interestingly, sustainability in farming was originally constructed as a matter of chemical inputs usage, while different types of land management practices, carbon emission reduction, or soil quality preservation were excluded from this framework.

Importantly, the promotion of environmentally and socially embedded forms of consumption created important networks of consumption and production. Two of my sub-studies focus on two defining elements of these networks: first, the differentiation of food by quality standards – illustrated by Quality Food Schemes (QFSs) -, and second, the revitalization of the small-scale farm sector and repopulation of rural landscapes by socially and environmentally diversified farms – represented in a case study on Farmer Training Programs (FTPs). While the most iconic alternatives from these networks are generally spaces of consumption (farmers' markets, CSAs or food coops), I choose to look at two under-researched

components that belong more to the production side (at least more predominantly). From the point of view of farmers, alternatives are most of the times are as much a source of livelihood as a source of performative action towards socio-environmental change. This duality creates an interesting tension between the imaginaries around alterity and the realities of daily work they face as business. While many of the most celebrated AFNs have a grassroots character, many elements of these networks are being supported and performed by farmers of different scales and kinds and promoted by governments. This second trend is often overlooked in research arenas. The cases of QFSs and FTPs I study in chapters 4 and 5 allow me to further delve into the institutionalization aspect.

b. Site selection and research process

I chose to develop the studies of these different alternatives (CBEs and AFNs) at multiple sites involving different actors (i.e. different initiatives, different countries, and cases involving different governance scales). The dissertation focuses on different locations in the Global North as sites embodying the rise, acceptance and regulation of sustainable alternatives and displaying similar patterns or dynamics of grassroots' activism, environmental consciousness or state control (due to a relatively cultural, economic and political likeness). Each sub-study is also located in a different region within the E.U. and North America and involves different actors. I describe below my research process together with the different situated sources of knowledge (Haraway, 1988).

*First sub-study: Community economies*

The first sub-study, examining CBEs, focuses on initiatives from five regions of five E.U. countries (Spain, Finland, Italy, Scotland and Germany). This sub-study was part of an E.U.-FP7 funded project (Towards European Societal Sustainability - TESS) which analyzed the trajectories, impacts, and governance of community economies in Europe. I engaged with a multidisciplinary research network with which I worked collaboratively for more than two years, in a rich and fruitful process. As part of this project, I co-planned and coordinated data collection; collected systematic data on the trajectory of these initiatives; and later developed a focused analysis on questions of power and privilege.

The selection of cases of CBEs derived from a systematic and partially randomized selection process designed by project members. Fieldwork for this sub-study was conducted from November 2014 to June 2015, as part of a broad qualitative analysis of CBEs regarding their motivations, visions, internal dynamics, organizing forms, governance, and funding, among others. In the general interview instrument, which I helped develop and which served as a roadmap for partners, I introduced a sub-section with questions related to power and privilege. Other questions of use for my study included motivations and vision of CBEs' members.

The large data set of 50 interviews (and fieldnotes) across 11 initiatives in the food, energy, waste, and mobility domains, allowed me to conduct a grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser and Strauss, 1967) through which I unraveled similar trends and patterns across countries regarding imaginaries of sustainability transitions articulated by CBE members. Grounded theory consists in coding text systematically in order to avoid the application of only pre-defined concepts upon the data. This work involved completing two layers of line-by-line and paragraph coding – fragmenting, sorting, and separating the entire textual data systematically into categories – using NVivo software. Data from interviews was complemented with field-notes derived from observation and participant observation (Kearns, 2016). Although differences among countries obviously existed (economic contexts, political systems and governing parties, cultural aspects over the environment, etc.) these differences did not interfere with the definition of an "alternative imaginary of change" that emerged from the members of the initiatives studied. More aspects of the case and interviewees' selection and data analysis phases are explained in chapter 3.

Beyond the fieldwork conducted for this study and project, that is interviewing and surveying members of communities or communities themselves, I attended several project meetings and events that allowed me to observe and participate in diverse conversations and debates around community economies among researchers, regulators, and members of the communities. I also attended two meetings gathering different research projects. At the time TESS was running, there were at least four E.U.-funded projects analyzing community economies (framed differently and focusing on different aspects) which illustrated the research and policy interest on CBEs at the EU level. These projects were: ARTS, Pathways, Transit and ECOLISE. In these events around research projects, I observed the common lack of reflection on issues of power and privilege related to these initiatives among researchers, policy-makers, activists, and related stakeholders, who tended to emphasize the positive social, economic and environmental effects that CBEs have in society.

*Second sub-study: Farmer trainings*

The second sub-study (which was the third chronologically), located in the United States, looks at an institutional program and funding source based on the idea of producing new "sustainable" farmers for counteracting the power and effects of the agro-industry and the impacts of the federal agri-food policy on the social and environmental realms. In this case I looked at a U.S. national-level initiative to promote sustainability-oriented farmer trainings for emergent farmers. The sub-study looks at the rationales and conflicts embedded in this agenda by analyzing four trainings located in the Central Coast of California (San Francisco Area and Salinas Valley). California is one of the States where more farmer trainings are located (National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, 2017) and is, in general, one of the States where

sustainable agriculture is, relatively, more extended. Organic foods have been popular in California for over 5 decades. The State political progressiveness, its economic history, and the physical geography make California the cradle of organic agriculture (as we know it today) (Fairfax, 2012; Guthman, 2014), through a consumer frenzy around the organic/healthy/good/super foods (illustrated by the amount of books related to food in bookshops, as shown in Figure 5). The peculiarity of the Central Coast of California is also that, being one of the wealthiest localities in the world, the market for these foods is particularly high, and so are the opportunities for farmers (at least it might seem so). My study region is located in the proximity of Silicon Valley and San Francisco, which brought together sustainable small-scale farming, capital accumulation, philanthropy and elite consumerism.

The second reason to locate one of the sub-studies in the U.S. is because the alternative food movement can be considered more diverse than in E.U., and, is, at least, more conscious of the need to integrate issues of racial equity through pressures from the food justice movement (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011a; Anguelovski, 2015b; Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010). The context provides an interesting setting to analyze power and privilege dilemmas within communities of alternative food practice. Moreover, due to the extreme prevalence of racial and class aspects in the U.S. over E.U., power and privilege dynamics differ from those in the E.U.; these are more visible, more settled and more openly contested.


**Figure 5: Dozens of food-related books in a book store in San Francisco**

The fieldwork for this sub-study was conducted during a five-month research stay at the Sociology Department of UC Santa Cruz (from March to August 2017). The case-study method mobilized in this study serves as a means for grasping the world focusing on human activity, with a patient attention to particularity. Case studies allow for the in-depth examination of the "many features of a few cases over a duration of time with very detailed, varied, and extensive data, often in qualitative form" (Neuman, 2004, page 20) – approach I used in the context of farming training programs in the U.S.. Case studies also provide a systematic and holistic understanding of real-life events embedded in context and hence are often used to answer the "why" and "how" questions and to build theory (Yin, 2003).

This sub-study was driven by an empirical observation related to a dissonance in the organizations conducting training programs, between a more optimistic narrative and a more sceptical counterpart. This dissonance drove me to a "why" question that the case study approach helped me answer. I selected four trainings programs and developed in-depth qualitative interviews with staff members, current apprentices and alumni. I further justify the selection of cases and research design for this sub-study in chapter 4. This sub-study included the collection of extensive qualitative data based primarily on direct observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews and informal interviews, content analysis of trainings' material as well as recent media coverage on farmer trainings and emergent farmers with four cases of farming training programs/organizations.

During my field work, the research stay at UC Santa Cruz and my personal relation with some residents in the area allowed me a vibrant social life and many interesting spaces of engagement with food and farming. I was able to develop rich participant observation and live different food and farming-related experiences beyond the fieldwork on the farmer trainings. Some were academic-related or on-campus activities (seminars, food fairs, festivities, even eating at the cafeterias) but most of them occurred as a consumer of alternative food and experiences outside the campus. I purchased food at farmers' markets, but also at Costco and in many supermarkets (ideologically) in between those two (realizing I was not the only one doing that). I tried to taste the alternative foods as much as I could. I ate a pizza at Cheesboard, a long-stablished cooperatively-organized pizza place located right in front of Alice Waters´ Chez Panisse, in which I checked the (expensive) menu but did not enter. Nevertheless, I had the opportunity to eat Water´s food in other occasion, as I explain in chapter 4.

*Third sub-study: Quality Food Schemes*

The third sub-study, a study of Quality Food Schemes (QFSs), was located in an agricultural region in the province of Barcelona. The proximity to a large city such as Barcelona creates demand for so-called quality foods and more embedded food markets, boosting more sustainable and small scale production in the peripheries of the city. Together with the attempts to revitalize the economy of rural areas across Europe, a strategy of creating and highlighting "quality" (that is to re-valorize certain food products and practices) for certain forms of sustainable agriculture expanded greatly, partially propelled by government institutions. In Catalonia, the popularity of quality schemes and products is sustained by a large consumer population (7.5 million inhabitants, about half of them living in Barcelona metropolitan area), relatively wealthy, living in cities but connected with the Catalonian rurality (Benítez and Cabrera, 2011).

In particular, I examined two districts where five quality food schemes led by different levels within Catalan Government overlapped (the national, the provincial, the metropolitan): Baix Llobregat and

Garraf. After interviewing policy officials and consumers involved in these schemes, I became interested in the perceptions of the farmers. My initial scoping field work had indeed revealed that farmers hold a very different vision of what quality means, and face several structural barriers in order to continue to farm as a form of livelihood (which many struggle with). While they were integrated in and compliant with the schemes, they were also critical of the institutional programs that foster farmers' markets and other forms of direct marketing. I made this contradiction the focus of the second sub-study. In this sub-study, I use in-depth qualitative interviews and observation for data collection, and a grounded theory approach for data analysis. The research design, data collection and data analysis phases are further explained in chapter 5.

At the time I was conducting fieldwork for this sub-study, from Nov 2015 and March 2016, I also regularly attended meetings organized by the municipality of Barcelona to launch a Food Sovereignty agenda for the city of Barcelona. This plan was called "Llaurant Barcelona" [2] (Tilling Barcelona) and was led by activists with support of city officials. The participatory process consisted of a number of meetings where different stakeholders from the local small scale organic food networks were invited, including regional and urban planners and public officials. One of the official meetings took place in Can Masdeu, a squatted social house and sustainable food production space. This context, and others, imprinted the way the process took form. The agenda was discussed among people who agreed on mostly every aspect of how to envision a food sovereign Barcelona. Meetings were attended mostly by consumers and researchers. Early in the process, participants realized the difficulty to bring producers to the table. One of the main debates in these meetings was whether to officially request the Municipality of Barcelona to support an agroecological space at the provincial wholesale market (Mercabarna). Farmers themselves organized a couple of side meetings led by networks of agroecological farmers. Here, tensions between organic and non-organic practices, between the decision of upscaling vs. remaining small, and between the need to please engaged consumers while disagreeing with their imaginaries became very visible. They ultimately led to a failure to organize the agroecological movement although unexpected and more limited positive outcomes also emerged from the process, such as social and political capital construction or exchange of ideas for enhancing production and distribution schemes.

Lastly, my long term engagement (living, working, eating) with an organic farm in the outskirts of Barcelona became an important situated source of knowledge and participant observation for this dissertation and greatly contributed to my situated understanding about alternatives. Aurora del Camp (on Figure 6) is the place where many of my ideas around alternatives have been reflected, grounded and discussed. Transversal to the three sub-studies, this unintended and unstructured lived ethnography

[2] http://llaurantbarcelona.info/es/

provided a unique opportunity to sell in farmer´s markets, meet and talk with many organic and non-organic farmers as well as consumers, and visit many farms in Catalonia and beyond. This context, together with my interest on and engagement with different community economies and food networks (different cooperatives or initiatives which I am member of or I consume in) led me to different individuals, events, spaces, and conversations, that inspired, pinpointed, contrasted and validated many arguments which emerged from the more structured fieldwork.

**Figure 6: A party for friends and clients in Aurora del Camp**

c. Positionality and research challenges

I recognize this research as situated, partial and limited. Critical reflexivity and feminist approaches to research acknowledge that that we always occupy multiple subject positions—either as an observer, participant, or something in between these categories (Katz, 1994; Kearns, 2016; Nast, 1994; Rose, 1999) – and that we continually co-construct reality and meaning in our fieldsites and daily lives (Geertz, 2006). For that, the use of qualitative methods that try to understand and make sense of people's thoughts and realities, require openness and flexibility, as well as reflecting on each own positionality as researchers (Gibson-Graham, 1994; Moss, 2002; Neely and Nguse, 2015).

*Research situated and influenced by my positionality*

The positionality is multidimensional and partially determined by pre-existing conditions on the sites of research, the established relation with research subjects beyond common hierarchies, also by global power relations (class, race, gender, geography). In addition, "all scholars have autobiographical connections to their research, although the connection does not always matter" (Guthman, 2011, p. 1). It matters for some researchers, who have made this relation explicit (Finney, 2014; Guthman, 2011 to cite some works used in this dissertation) and it matters for me as well.

My position as a white, educated person of relatively poor family from a small provincial city influenced my initial approach to alternatives and to this research project. My sensibility to social justice issues raised

my interest to study the privilege aspect of sustainability-led alternatives. Nevertheless, positionality is dynamic and my experiences, ideas and subject position evolved together with the research project, as my engagement with alternative practices developed. I am more involved in alternative initiatives now than how I was at the beginning and I have had, over the course of my thesis, different opportunities to debate and engage in conversations about alternatives, which have influenced the way I think about them. At the end of her ethnography on alternative food practices, Begueria Muñoz found herself becoming an alternative food consumer. She includes her own story in her work because she thinks "it was worthy to reflect about the thin line between empathy and distance, especially in an ethnography done in the same society than the person belongs to, with participants very similar to oneself (…)" (Begueria Muñoz, 2016, p. 214). In a similar way, I have experienced a personal change on the way I think on and engage with alternatives derived partially from the realization that I share more with the interviewees (of all kinds) than what I recognized at the beginning.

*Research limited and challenged by methodological aspects*

My position in the field has been very ambivalent, from a sceptic to an ally, from an outsider to an insider. More generally, I approach alternative practices as a researcher but not completely external, since I am engaged to some well-known communities and I am relatively familiar with farming and alternative distribution networks (aspects that food-related interviewees could note).

I am interested in alternative practices but at the same time I take a critical stand on them. This position was often revealed by the type of questions I was asking, and whenever interviewees asked me about my research, I was sincere with my stand and objectives (although not going too deep in my explanations). This tension was especially pertinent for the sub-studies on community economies and farmer trainings. The fact that in some cases I was asking about a "difficult" topic (such as privilege) influenced the way people engaged with my research and shaped their answers to my questions. Some people felt attacked by my questions and became disappointed with the fact that I was "criticizing" the initiatives. These were few. On other hand, many interviewees shared my concerns as they had experienced similar thoughts and anxieties about their role in and engagement with alterity rationales, as well as about their own privilege. This created a more comfortable context for dialogue.

Other methodological challenges come from the fact that people value very differently the role of researchers (especially from social sciences). My study was considered differently by different interviewees. In the case of quality schemes from Barcelona, I was interviewing generally old male farmers after having interviewed people from local institutions. Farmers were hesitant about my position (whether I was aligned or not with the institutional programs that I was analyzing), and that might have

influenced their perceptions of my research and the depth of their answers (also very limited by their time availability). Very different is the case of community economies and farmer trainings, when I was interviewing often highly-educated and committed activists, among who were a number of researchers. On the other hand, these type of community initiatives tend to be interviewed for research often times (that is the case of Barcelona, where communities talk about research burnout), while that is not the case for the farmers from Baix Llobregat and Garraf. The answers of the farmers might have been more genuine and less "formatted".

In the sub-study about community economies in the E.U., different researchers from the TESS project collected the data in their respective countries, in many cases in their native languages. Each researcher followed a rigorous collection and analysis protocol, which I developed and monitored. This way, I was able to homogenize data interpretation and coding as much as possible, and thus grant rigor and comparability in the final data memos that researchers developed and translated to English. Hence, I worked with extensive reports translated to English, not with the original interview transcripts. Although the process was systematized, and the group discussed several times emerging issues and doubts along the process, some nuances from the data relevant to the research question might have been missed.

Lastly, the changes in my positionality and the continuous movement from the particular to the conceptual, from empirics to theory, resulted in a changing research design, that has evolved along these four years.

e. Guide to the dissertation

This dissertation is composed of three sub-studies that reveal the relationship between alterity and power and the privilege inherent to alternative-provisioning strategy for social change deployed by sustainability-led initiatives in the Global North. In chapter 2, I explain the theoretical grounding for these sub-studies, and hence for this dissertation. Specifically, I review the literature on Neoliberalism and its Contestations (2.1.), Environment and Privilege (2.2.) and Imaginaries (2.3.). Chapters 3, 4 and 5 correspond to the empirical sub-studies. Table 1 presents the three empirical chapters with their corresponding research questions, type of alternatives and location, data sources and methods. Chapter 6 is dedicated to discussion and concluding remarks.

**Table 1: Summary of research questions and methods for the three empirical sub-studies**

| Study | Alternative and geographical scope | Research questions | Data collection | Analysis Methods |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Imaginaries of change and embedded rationalities of CBEs' members | **Community economies** in the domains of food, energy and transport in 5 different E.U. countries | Which are the collective imaginaries of CBEs' members about the possible societal change they can achieve and the strategies they can use to achieve change? | 50 in-depth semi-structured interviews from 11 CBEs<br>Fieldnotes<br>Participant Observation | Systematic coding and analysis of data using grounded theory techniques |
| Imaginaries and structures at play in the construction of farming trainings as the solution to the agrarian crisis | **Sustainability-oriented farming trainings** (as part of AFNs) in San Francisco area and Central Coast in California, U.S. | How do imaginaries and political economic structures around sustainable farming situate FTPs as viable solutions to the farming crisis? | 34 in-depth semi-structured interviews and fieldnotes<br>Participant Observation<br>Secondary data (Trainings´ materials and websites)<br>Related popular media | Systematic coding and thematic analysis of data<br>Content analysis of media |
| Urban-rural politics at play within the institutional plan to promote quality food schemes in the Baix Llobregat, Barcelona | **Quality food schemes** (as part of AFNs) implemented in an agricultural region in the province of Barcelona | How do quality food schemes influence farmers' lived experiences and their perceptions of questions of rule and power? | 25 in-depth semi-structured interviews and fieldnotes<br>Secondary data (program description, reports)<br>Related popular media | Systematic coding and analysis of data using grounded theory techniques<br>Content analysis of program's documents and web materials |

f. Main contributions

I situate this research in the critical geography arena. The sub-studies that compose the dissertation have been or are in the process to be published in top-reference journals in the field (Geoforum, Journal of Rural Studies and Antipode). The first one was awarded the Geoforum Student Paper Competition 2017, evidencing the novelty of the research, the relevance of its question and research, and the academic interest around the topic. This interest is also illustrated by the diversity of conferences in which I have presented work derived from this dissertation (as shown in Table 2).

In addition to the articles gathered in this dissertation, I have co-authored three more academic articles directly related to alternatives which are not part of this dissertation for theoretical and structural coherence reasons. One is published[3], and other two are on the final stages of writing[4,5] (I presented one of those already in a conference[6]).

The main contribution of this dissertation is to propose a critical analysis of the alterity quest deployed by sustainability-led community economies and alternative food networks and of existing scholarship on these sorts of initiatives. I do so by incorporating a perspective on power and privilege embedded in the construction of alternatives and in the expansion of an alternative-provision strategy for social change.

I engage with theories of diverse economies, neoliberal governance and its resistances, environmental privilege and social imaginaries, which I aim at discussing and advancing. I also contribute to the emerging but yet underdeveloped field of the politics of alternatives – moving beyond single case studies or single alternatives to bring the "alterity quest" as a subject. I bring to the analysis of alternative practices and alterity a lens on subjectivities and other immaterial aspects, developing in-depth qualitative research on three case studies in the field of alternatives.

[3] Sekulova F., Anguelovski I., Argüelles L., Conill J. (2017): A 'fertile soil' for sustainability-related community initiatives: A new analytical framework. Environment and Planning A., p. 1-21.
[4] Pinker et al, 2018.: Energy initiatives, regulatory processes, and socio-political change. Manuscript. Target journal: Antipode
[5] Arguelles, L. and O'Connor, K.: Alterity and political mobilization. Between Alternatopias and Alterlife. Target journal: Transactions
[6] Culture Knowledge Ecologies Conf. in Santiago de Chile. Nov 2017. Presentation "Alterity and political mobilization"

**Table 2: Publication and dissemination of the sub-studies**

| Study (chapter) | Key concepts | Publication stage | Presentations in seminars / conferences |
|---|---|---|---|
| Imaginaries of change of community economies (3) | Alternative imaginary of change<br>Imaginaries of justice<br>Neoliberal rationalities | Published, Geoforum[7]<br>*Best student paper 2017 | - Royal Geographical Society RGS-IBG conf., Exeter 2015<br>- ENTITLE final conf., Stockholm 2016<br>- ICTA eco-eco seminars, 2016 |
| Alternative entanglements within farmer trainings (4) | Lack of farmers imaginary<br>Farming heroes<br>NGOization of farming<br>Entanglements | Review and resubmit, Antipode | - Political Ecology Network POLLEN conf., Oslo 2018<br>- ICTA eco-eco seminars, 2018 |
| Urban-rural politics and forms of rule for farmers in quality schemes (5) | Lived experiences<br>Perceptions of power<br>Urban/rural politics<br>Artificial quality | Published, Journal of Rural Studies[8] | - Global Conf. in Economic Geography, Köln 2018 |

[7] Argüelles L,. Anguelovski, I, Dinnie, L. (2017): Power and privilege in alternative civic practices: Examining imaginaries of change and embedded rationalities in community economies. Geoforum, 86, 30-41.
[8] Argüelles L., Anguelovski I., Sekulova F. (2018): How to survive: Artificial quality food schemes and new forms of rule for farmers in direct marketing strategies. Journal of Rural Studies. 62, 10-20.

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# CHAPTER 2

## Theoretical groundings

***"How can the growth of capabilities be disconnected from the intensification of power relations?"***

Foucault

In chapter 2, I introduce the three main bodies of literature upon which this dissertation is built. These are: neoliberalism and its contestations, environmental privilege and social imaginaries. These three bodies have been developed by and debated in extensively in geography, sociology and political economy. While in the empirical chapters (chapters 3, 4 and 5) I focus most of the theoretical discussion around the scholarship on the politics of alternatives, these three theoretical elements are transversal to the three sub-studies and constitute the theoretical groundings that shape my analysis. Hence they deserve a further examination. In chapter 2, I introduce each of the theories and how and why I apply them to the study of the alterity quest.

1. Neoliberalism and its contestations

I use neoliberalism as a proxy for the economic and political power influencing the construction and expansion of the alternative strategy for social change. While pointing at the relation of neoliberal trends with the rise of grassroots' empowerment and the production of responsible individuals is not new, in this dissertation I examine such dynamics in the particular case of the alterity quest pursued by sustainability-led initiatives. Among different types of activism (Leitner et al., 2007) the study of the expansion and institutionalization of consumption and production systems under the alterity quest (as the ones I analyze in the empirical chapters) provides an example of the form of individualized form of collective action that has remained overlooked in neoliberalism studies (Barnett, 2005).

I draw upon the scholarship that has studied neoliberalism as a source of power from structural and post-structural standpoints (sub-section a) as well as the literature on articulation of neoliberalism with its contestations (sub-section b). I also explain how neoliberalism is connected with the production of sustainable alternatives (sub-section c).

a. Neoliberalism

"Neoliberalism" stands for a complex assemblage of ideologies, discourses and practices related to social, political and economic organization. Among those, I take two definitions that are particularly pertinent in this dissertation. First, neoliberalism is a macroeconomic doctrine, whose key elements include a valorization of private enterprise and suspicion of the state, along with free market fetishism (Harvey, 2005; Jessop, 2002; Peck, 2004; Peck and Tickell, 2002). Neoliberalism refers as well to the regime of policies and practices associated with or claiming fealty to the doctrine. However, scholars insist that neoliberal policies are often much more complicated than a direct translation of the neoliberal doctrine. The regime of practice is different from the doctrine itself, because the neoliberal doctrine implies a world that could never exist, it is a Utopia, as Harvey claims (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberalism in this sense has become the name for a set of highly interested public policies that have vastly enriched the holders of

capital, while leading to increasing inequality, insecurity, loss of public services, among others (e.g. Harvey, 2005, 2003; Heynen et al., 2007; Springer, 2016).

Second, neoliberalism is also indexed to a political rationality in the Foucauldian sense (Dean, 1999; Peters, 2007). This political rationality is linked less to economic dogmas or class projects than to specific mechanisms of government and recognizable modes of creating subjects. The emergent neoliberal subjectivity seeks to "free" subjects from collective forms of social provision from welfarism and "normalizes the logics of individualism and entrepreneurialism, equating individual freedom with self-interested choices, making individuals responsible for their own well-being, and redefining citizens as consumers and clients" (Leitner et al., 2007, p. 2). To this respect, the lens of governmentality, the "conduct of conducts", has offered promising analytical terrain to geographers interrogating "the intersections between nature, power and society" (Rutherford, 2007, p. 292). Studies have applied governmentality to neoliberal rationality, decentering the state as a seat of power and dispersing the neoliberal project and rejecting it as a completed project applied to a passive population (Dean, 1999; Lemke, 2001).

The distinct usages of the term have raised some methodological questions about the utility of neoliberalism as an analytical tool (Barnett, 2005; Castree, 2006; Clarke, 2004; Larner, 2003). Such questions translate into the need of "using neoliberalism" considering its multiple complexities and empirical variabilities (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Ferguson, 2010; Holmes and Cavanagh, 2016; McCarthy, 2006; Peck, 2004; Tickell and Peck, 2003). Here, I position myself close to what Ferguson argues -- that "there is utility in words that bring together more than one meaning – as the word can be an occasion for reflecting on how the rather different things to which it refers may be related" (Ferguson, 2010, p. 172). For example, neoliberalism helps us understanding how the new political and socio-economic governmental rationalities and the constructions of active and responsible citizens and communities are deployed to produce certain governmental results which favor power devolution and free market.

The deployment of neoliberal economic policies started during the 1970s-1980s and it has evolved from an initial phase of roll-back of the state, which dismantled established Keynsian welfarist arrangements, and a subsequent roll-out stage, which shifted regulatory and welfare responsibility away from the state, down and out (referred to as the "hollowing out" of the state), shifting greater responsibility to non-state actors as private companies or the third sector (Peck and Tickell, 2002). These processes are often seen as incomplete and heterogeneously deployed, and hence, neoliberalism is portrayed as hybrid, situated and having multiple forms in multiple spaces. Since its beginnings, neoliberalism has had a wide variety of others (from neoconservationism, Chinese socialism, social democracy, etc.). Until today, neoliberalism

always exists in a highly variegated landscape of institutional, economic and political forms. These remarks show that the enactment of neoliberal agendas does not entails the seamless imposition of a uniform, hegemonic template, but rather dynamic and contingent processes that occur in uneven and contested ways in highly carried contexts. It thus always produces unique, contingent variants, or actually-existing-neoliberalisms (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Peck et al., 2009).

If neoliberalism does not exist as a homogeneous project but only as an hybrid or imperfect project, "the question of identifying neoliberal components of particular empirical ensembles becomes quite difficult" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 87). The challenge is then to trace "the connections between the operations of top-down projects emanating from formal arenas of governance and the intricacies of everyday lives and subjectivities" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 87), an exercise carried out by many neoliberalism scholars in different domains (see, for example, Andreucci and Kallis, 2017; Guthman, 2014, 2011, 2008a; Holmes and Cavanagh, 2016; Mitchell, 2003; Pudup, 2008; Robbins, 2007; Rosol, 2012). Yet, these complexities have motivated scholars to argue that "there is no such thing as neoliberalism" (Barnett, 2005), or to suggest "fuck neoliberalism!" (Springer, 2016). With an acknowledgment of the hybridity and imperfection, scholars have recently called for a better understanding of how this particular political project has been able to interact with others, and what happens to these projects as a result of that interaction (Larner, 2015).

b. Neoliberalism and activism

My study of the articulations of neoliberalism with its contestations responds to this urge. Some scholars acknowledge that neoliberalism has never been fully outside of apparently different projects, including its political opponents and radical social movements, a perspective which has fostered debates on whether certain contestations to neoliberalism might be unintentionally advancing neoliberal agendas (Bondi and Laurie, 2005; Guthman, 2008a; Harris, 2009; Hilbrandt and Richter, 2015; Leitner et al., 2007; Pudup, 2008; Rosol, 2012). For example, the professionalization of activism through the Third Sector, especially so in the U.S., is pointed as central to the neoliberalization process and at the same time to the production of neoliberal subjectivities within neoliberal opponents (Bondi and Laurie, 2005). Third sector workers and activists are recruited into professionalized roles, as one of the few remaining ways to advance social justice - or environmental – concerns (Creamer, 2015; Dauvergne and LeBaron, 2014; Dinnie and Holstead, 2017; Dolhinow, 2005; Parr, 2009). The condition for this is often having acquired particular skills and education; in exchange, they get inserted in the labor market. On the other hand, philanthropic and other funding arrangements move governance decisions (e.g. what to protect, what to support) to foundations and the private sector who owns the money, but also to NGOs and social groups who perform

the work and might influence communities´ identities and aspirations (Dinnie and Holstead, 2017; Dolhinow, 2005; Guthman, 2008b).

Activism is then institutionalized and normalized, brought up to regulated and "formal" arenas. As both a symptom and a consequence, the actions and discourses of some social movements are imprinted within familiar ideas around community resilience, local economies, and social enterprise, that are increasingly de-politicized and at the same time shape mainstream economic development agendas (Buijs et al., 2016; Bulkeley et al., 2012; Cote and Nightingale, 2012; MacKinnon and Derickson, 2013). As a result, instead of engaging in oppositional forms of resistance and social activism, these groups are often actively building relationships with mainstream organisations and institutions, favoring technologies of government that privilege partnership, consensus and agreement over debate, disagreement, dissensus (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2015), and resistance. In addition, social movements might form particular subjectivities through their emphases on proper selfhood, citizenship or entrepreneurialism (Bondi and Laurie, 2005; Dean, 1999; Guthman, 2008a; Rose, 1999). Such subjectivities form and reproduce through, for example, trainings and educational programs (Guthman, 2008b; Pudup, 2008) or by developing and showcasing particularly languages and behaviors around the nature and the environment (for example forging the leisure dimension of natural parks).

More optimistic perspectives about activism and opposition to neoliberalism start from the recognition that radical social movements have shaped neoliberalism itself, for example, by increasingly imposing more strict environmental regulations (Ferguson, 2010; Larner, 2015; Larner and Craig, 2005; Leitner et al., 2007). This perspective opposes the idea that neoliberalism has "undone" the gains of social movements, that social movements are the unwitting co-conspirators, grassroots opponents are co-opted, and counterculture is underpinning more successful and subtle ways of exploitation (Eisenstein, 2006; Gibson-Graham, 2006; Larner, 2015). Rather than seeing neoliberalism as an homogeneous ideology imposed by elites, they perceive neoliberalism and social movements as more actively articulated than is often acknowledged, and reflect on what does this mean for the analysis of the possibilities of activism and social change (Galt et al., 2014; Harris, 2009; Larner, 2015).

The representation of neoliberalism as a "big Leviathan" instead of a "same size" opponent of social transformation movements (Collier, 2012) has motivated debates on the effects of such discursive victory that academics tend to award to neoliberalism. Gibson-Graham, as a major proponent of a "politics of refusal" (Simon Springer, 2016), are critical of studies of "neoliberal this and that" and see them as a politically counterproductive and disempowering form of "strong theory", inadvertently reproducing the same dominant order that it seeks to critique (Gibson-Graham, 2008). Their second concern is that seeing neoliberalism everywhere can "dampen and discourage" emergent alternatives and transformative

initiatives (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 615). Subjugating alternatives to neoliberalism, they argue, make it more difficult to imagine and cultivate alternative ways of being.

In a related vein, governance subjects might inhabit and sometimes subvert the opportunities neoliberalization opens up (Bondi and Laurie, 2005), for example, by reappropiating neoliberal techniques for more progressive purposes (Ferguson, 2010). Larner rightfully asks how is it that concepts such as self-reliance, self-help and empowerment have become part of the taken-for-granted vocabulary of neoliberalism, while she argues that scholarship should look hard at such phenomena, rather than dismissing them as ironic, paradoxes and co-option (Larner, 2015). Many of the techniques of the so-called new governance are indeed not all that new and even not fundamentally neoliberal. However, in a context of neoliberal governance, "they are deployed to be performative and ultimately depoliticizing of social life" (Guthman, 2008b after Barry, 2002), making the forms they take today as neoliberal. Under neoliberalism, expressions of self-help, participation, individualized responsibility and information exchange (e.g. Feminist Groups seizing the means of reproduction) become no longer forms of counter conduct, but conventional requirements for access to health-care infrastructure (Murphy, 2012), healthy food (Guthman, 2011) or renewable energies (Raven et al., 2008; Walker, 2008).

c. Neoliberalism and its "sustainable alternatives"

The connections between neoliberalism, environmental change and environmental politics are all deeply if not inextricably interwoven (Heynen et al., 2007; Heynen and Robbins, 2005; McCarthy and Prudham, 2004). In fact, "neoliberalism and modern environmentalism have emerged together as the most serious and ideological foundations of post-Fordist social regulation" and at the same time, "environmental concerns also represent the most powerful source of political opposition to neoliberalism" (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004, p. 275). It is not surprising then that any proposed political and socio-economic alternative to neoliberalism needs to be necessarily sustainable. Indeed sustainability is one of the dimensions alterity is commonly built on (see the environmental ideas behind organic, quality, renewable, local and so on).

Despite the fundamental oppositional character that environmentalism articulates vis-à-vis the system that dictates expected social relations with biophysical nature, current environmental politics have adopted a neoliberal pattern (Heynen et al., 2007; McCarthy and Prudham, 2004). Current environmental activism tends to be mostly centered on concerns about lifestyle, in realms such as food, transport, energy and the way we produce and (over)consume those (saving energy at home, driving less, etc.). Less attention is given to interrogating and improving the way we understand nature or make use of resources broadly. Moreover, much of contemporary environmental activism does not directly spells out or challenge

actually existing neoliberalizations of the environment in the current economic and political system (de-regulation, corporatization, commodification, marketization of natural resources). Instead it has, paradoxically, called for and supported, for example, new green markets and commodities (such as organics foods or electric cars), and transnational and corporate-like environmental organizations (Greenpeace and the like) (MacDonald, 2009; Parr, 2009).

In particular, (sustainable) food activism, such as calls for organic foods or localism, has become so predominantly market-based that is referred to as "market-as-movement", in which supporters "vote with their forks" for the kind of food system they aim to see (Pollan, 2006., cited in Alkon and Guthman, 2017). While this is often believed to be a positive development, this strategy situates individual entrepreneurialism and consumer choice as the primary pathways to social change and elides and eclipses long-standing social movement attempts to promote state-mandated protections for labor, the environment, and the rights and needs of the most disadvantaged populations (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011; Alkon and Guthman, 2017b). In contrast to the market-based strategies most commonly advocated by food activists with an environmentalism ethos, other food-related struggles suggest that the terrain of the environment can be more politicized, strategic and confrontational, illustrated by food workers' organizations claiming for labor rights, farmworkers' struggles against the use of pesticides or urban struggles against food gentrification, all these being fundamental to the food system (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011; Alkon and Guthman, 2017b; Anguelovski, 2015a).

The transformation of the environmental movements into market-based strategies has run in parallel to the restructuring of environmental governance. Current environmental governance is often performed through the development of non-binding forms of regulation in which actors agree to abide by a set of standards, best practices, or other codes of conduct (Brown and Getz, 2008; Guthman, 2007; Perkins, 2009; Robertson, 2004; Rosol, 2015; Rosol et al., 2017). One of neoliberalism´s prominent strategies has been the selective appeal to "community" and non-market values as "flanking mechanism" for advancing neoliberal projects (Holifield, 2004; Jessop, 2002; Levitas, 2001; Peck and Tickell, 2002). This has translated in the promotion of collaborative governance models encouraging citizen participation and volunteerism to solve environmental problems, and has implied the transferring of welfare responsibilities to the voluntary sector through partnership, participation, and good governance initiatives. Under this view, community participation in public service provisioning, looks less as an emancipatory call than a distinct neoliberal political rationality aiming at passing on state responsibilities to civil society (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014; Rosol, 2012). This is the case, for example, of municipal programs fomenting urban gardening, community clean-up, restoration of vacant lots, or stewardship of trees and parks (Certomà and Notteboom, 2017; Connolly et al., 2014; Magrinyà, 2015; Rosol, 2012).

Consequently, community economies and food networks as the ones I analyze in this dissertation are often seen as examples of the important role of civil society in enacting sustainability transitions, a position which is especially visible in the transition scholarship (Seyfang et al., 2013; Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012; Smith and Seyfang, 2013; Hopkins, 2009; Burch, 2010; Markard et al., 2012). This approach has been recently promoted by the E.U. through the funding of specific research agendas and the support of policy programs that focus on the success of grassroots initiatives', their difficulties and their outcomes in relation to a sustainable development agenda (see for example European Commission, 2014; TESS, 2017). Here, the normal take on civil society groups is that they are needed to complement traditional forms of governance, which are seen as "ineffective" and "insufficient" (Frantzeskaki et al., 2016) while NGOs and grassroots associations are seen as innovators and transition agents. This brings a quite managerial perspective, in which grassroots initiatives are often equated with technologies or the profit-driven private sector as actors driving socio-technical transitions (Geels, 2002; Hargreaves et al., 2013; Seyfang et al., 2014; Seyfang and Longhurst, 2013). Civil society is seen here as having multiple roles on the (urban) sustainability action and to "have the potential to showcase the feasibility of legitimate sustainability alternatives" (Frantzeskaki et al., 2016, p. 46). This scholarship has generally neglected the politics embedded on and the diverse aspirations within the grassroots initiatives (which generally see themselves far from "innovators" or "niches markets"). While these accounts describe the reality partially, they promote and validate the pressure, economization, business-orientation, normalization and evaluation of alternatives (Feola and Nunes, 2014; Nevens et al., 2013; Nicolosi and Feola, 2016; Walker et al., 2007), and project a vision of alternatives in which the civil society, rather than the state, takes responsibility.

To sum up, neoliberalism emerges as a key force influencing politics, the environment and civic organization, all these merging in the creation of sustainability-oriented initiatives. Within scholarly circles, some have objected that the use of neoliberalism is used to describe both the problems and the solutions activists put forward. This argument resonates with critiques stating that the term has become so loose as to mean both everything and nothing (Brenner et al., 2010; Castree, 2006; Larner, 2003; Simon Springer, 2016). In this dissertation I use neoliberalism as an analytical framework for power because it helps to identify which rationalities, behaviours and practices, if not fully neoliberal, align with neoliberal rationales and might help to advance oppressive and unequal governance forms.

If I use neoliberalism as a framework for analyzing power dynamics embedded in the alterity quest, I draw on a different theoretical framework for the analysis of privilege. In the next section I turn to Environmental Privilege to explain the inequity and inequality dynamics of current environmentalism.

2. Environment and Privilege

In this dissertation, one of my core assumptions is that sustainability-oriented consumption and production initiatives can be considered yet another variant of the mainstream environmentalist project, influenced by the environmental identities and subjectivities of the white educated middle or upper class milieus that populate or support such initiatives. I see the types of initiatives I am focusing on as an expression of the mainstream environmental movement among more progressive and radical circles. The sustainability character of these initiatives relates particularly to some domains such as food, transport or energy, in which members of these groups work to develop low-carbon, low-impact and socially-sustainable practices, programs or products though means and discourses of re-localization, efficiency, consumption reduction, etc. Yet, their exclusivity and their attached environmental and health benefits, make them small-scale environmental enclaves.

Hence, I use the conceptual framework of environmental privilege to elucidate how privilege pervades the creation and expansion of sustainability-led or -inspired alternatives, which seem to benefit from the innocent of environmentalism (Rutherford, 2007). I respond here to calls for linking scholarship on social, economic and environmental justice with transition research (Eames and Hunt 2013), in food studies (Allen, 2010; Allen et al., 2003; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Guthman, 2008c) and community economy (Bialski et al., 2015; Hilbrandt and Richter, 2015). Although the AFNs literature in particular has further advanced the study of exclusivity and privilege, these have rarely been linked to wider Environmental Privilege trends.

In this section I review the literature around environment and privilege, describing the traditional scholarship on Environmental Privilege and Environmental Justice (sub-section a) and then introduce salient issues on environmental identity and representation, particularly around the mainstream environmental movement (sub-section b).

a. Environmental Privilege and Environmental Justice

The concept of Environmental Privilege (EP herein after) is a prominent field in the study of inequalities, inequities, power, and justice in environmental politics. Privilege here is defined as "the experience of being a part of a social group that benefits from inequality, even if socially invisible" (Park and Pellow, 2011, p. 204). Typically, EP has been defined from a distributive perspective, as the privilege resulting "from the exercise of economic, political and cultural power that some groups enjoy, which enables them exclusive access to coveted environmental amenities such as forests, parks, mountains, rivers, coastal property, open lands and elite neighborhoods" (Park and Pellow, 2011, p. 4). Then, EP is embodied in the fact that some groups can access spaces and resources, which are protected from the kinds of ecological

harm that other groups are forced to contend with everyday. Typical advantages given by EP include organic and pesticide-free foods, neighbourhoods with healthier air quality and greater amounts of green spaces, energy-efficient buildings and amenities, and other products siphoned from the living environments of other peoples.

This idea has been prominently developed by Environmental Justice (EJ) scholars, who see EP as the complementing angle to uncover the scope and manifestations of environmental inequities (either in the access to environmental goods and amenities or exposure to environmental hazards) because "environmental privilege exists whenever environmental injustice occurs" (Park and Pellow, 2011, p. 5). The field of EJ emerged as a means to consider the historical and contemporary occurrences and drivers of environmental inequalities, its many angles, and as a vehicle to address inequities and inequalities through research, action, and policy (Agyeman, 2013; Anguelovski, 2015b, 2014; Anguelovski and Martínez Alier, 2014; Bryant and Mohai, 1992; Bullard, 1990; Gottlieb, 2009; Martinez-Alier et al., 2014; Pellow and Brulle, 2005; Sze, 2007). Theoretically, EJ has pushed for changing the notion of environment and for challenging the construction of injustice beyond inequity by pushing for pluralistic conceptions of social justice (Schlosberg, 2013, 2007). Historically, EJ scholarship organized the research along the three most common understandings of justice as distribution, participation and recognition (Schlosberg, 2003), to which a capabilities approach was added later (Schlosberg, 2013; Schlosberg and Carruthers, 2010). Although EJ has been developed extensively, both theoretically and empirically, EP has received far less scholarly attention (a common variable of EP comes as white privilege), and has rarely been reflected in empirical geography (few exceptions are Anguelovski, 2015a; Norgaard, 2012.; Park and Pellow, 2011; Pulido, 2017b, 2000)

EP adds an important dimension to EJ scholarship by highlighting "the importance of understanding poverty and environmental inequality by getting out of the ghetto and into places where racial and economic privileged are enjoyed" (Park and Pellow, 2011, p. 6). Park and Pellow use the case of Aspen, CO, a nature and ski city-resort where wealthy and white residents are able to enjoy - an imaginary of - pristine nature thanks to the migrant workers that invisibly maintain houses, gardens and skiing infrastructure. The preservation of environmental privilege is enabled by residents' support to nativist policies that should keep – in their views -- migrants away from wilderness and natural parks in order to preserve American nature (Park and Pellow, 2011).

EP remarks the importance of studying environmental private enclaves "because they exhibit social forces and cultural experiences similar to those that exist elsewhere" (Dolgon, 2005, p. 3, cited in Park and Pellow, 2011). It is important to carefully elucidate the dynamics unfolding in such enclaves, which define how EP manifests and reproduces. For example, those living in wealthy enclaves might believe they have

earned the right to these privileges, and they even might claim victim status (Park and Pellow, 2011). This puts evidence on the profound disconnect in society between the way of living of wealthy residents and the social and environmental relationships that make that lifestyle possible (migrant workers, Global South extraction, etc.) (Park and Pellow, 2011; Sayer, 2015).

Most recently, green or environmental privilege also takes place in urban environments through the deployment of urban green interventions and amenities, such as parks, greenways, urban farms, or climate-resilient green infrastructure, among others, safeguarding the health of those who benefit from them (Chiesura, 2004; Goodling et al., 2015; Groenewegen et al., 2006). The green gentrification scholarship shows the relation between the construction of new green areas and the displacement of marginalized populations due to, among others, increasing housing prices as a result of such greening (Anguelovski et al., 2018a, 2018b; Pearsall, 2010). "Gentrifiers" are attracted to these areas by claims of healthy or green living. Meanwhile, real estate developers and privileged residents harness profit from the increasingly extended global greening project (Connolly, 2018). In response, long-term residents and EJ activists have developed several resistance strategies, including demands for "just green enough" redevelopment projects or urban interventions, as a way to prevent possible displacement effects (Curran and Hamilton, 2012).

Yet, despite its ability to successfully create awareness about the social embeddedness of environmental politics in a form of glocalized movement, EJ activism has been criticized for its primary focus on changing things from within the institutions, which has implied a toning down of the movement's claims (Pulido, 2017b; Pulido et al., 2016). The "Principles of EJ" from 1991 were however more radical, recognizing the violent injustices embedded in capitalism, and included issues of multispecies justice, anti-imperialism or gender justice (First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, 1991). Recent scholarship on the EJ movement argues that it has become too state-centered and warns that the institutionalization of EJ claims as mostly a problem over the distribution of resources produces policies that eventually advanced the neoliberal agenda of communitarianism (Holifield, 2004; Pellow and Brulle, 2005; Pulido, 2017b) because the demands of EJ practitioners have been reduced to addressing a distributional issue, without considering (in a real way) the representation and the discursive aspects behind the environmental injustice in question. As a result, the scientific/regulatory discourse and legal strategies of "EJ 1.0" (Carter, 2016) actually risks incorporating EJ into an existing hegemonic order, rather than subverting it (Benford, 2005; Holifield, 2004; Pulido et al., 2016)

Beyond the "regulatory route", traditionally EJ advocacy is constrained by the rather simplistic "census view" of race (Carter, 2016), issue that has also been prominently present in the type of EJ scholarship that traditionally accompanies and supports the movement. In addition, with an often focus on exposure,

EJ has often failed to connect environmental racism as a constituent element of racial capitalism (Pulido, 2017a, 2016), which has raised calls for an emphasis on "raw class politics" to be merged with the often focus on racism (Harvey, 1996). One more pertinent shortcoming associated with the EJ framework´s focus on race comes from the observation that "quickly anything related to African Americans and the environment gets designated as an "environmental justice" concern (Finney, 2014, p. 108). In other words, EJ has established certain constrained and predefined roles for people of color, whose work and position on environmental issues has been reduced to issues of EJ.

b. Environmental identity and representation

Scholarship problematizing the relation of environmental issues with privilege is not limited to the field of EJ. Rather, the claims of EJ – both as a movement and as body of scholarship – are shared/combined/incorporated in other fields such as political ecology, cultural studies, black studies, critical race studies, and so on, expanding the borders of environment-and-privilege research.

Scholarship from different fields has looked at the way race or class shapes environmental experience and practices and highlighted the privilege of those able to generate and accepted environmental discourse and knowledge (e.g. sustainable development) (Finney, 2014; Glave, 2010; Savoy, 2015; Teelucksingh, 2007). From the 70s to the present, the "mainstream environmentalism" movement continues to be defined from a white middle class perspective, giving the misleading impression that environmental protection is the domain of white people. This overrepresentation is based on and reproduces at the same time the imaginary of white is clean-black is dirty that has supported a history of environmental racism in the U.S (Zimring, 2015). In the E.U., due to different racial and ethnic history and dynamics, the class aspect remains more visible in the struggles for differential exposures (Anguelovski, 2014). Despite advances in advocacy and consciousness regarding issues of environment and race-class, participation in environmental organizations is predominantly white and educated (Gosine, 2003; Taylor, 2014). This is not surprising, because "how the environmental narrative is portrayed will be an indicator of who is actually being engaged in the larger conversation" (Finney, 2014, p. 2).

To this respect, scholars have questioned who is entitled to generate environmental discourse and to identify themselves as environmentalists. Martínez Alier (2002) shed light onto the existence of an "environmentalism of the poor", that is, the environmentalism of those who have a material interest in the environment as a source and a requirement for livelihood (see also Nixon, 2013). For Martínez Alier, this stream contrasts with the other two currents of environmentalism: "the cult of wilderness" and "the gospel of eco-efficiency." Yet, we should not take these categories as absolute or closed, as people's relationships

to nature might be diverse and difficult to categorize, hence a categorization risks to promote biased ideas of who belongs where.

Perceptions of and relationships to nature are determined by certain socio-environmental imaginaries which depend on culture, identity, experiences, etc. (Carter, 2016; Finney, 2014; Gibson-Wood and Wakefield, 2013; Pulido, 1996a). In LA, Latino communities are reinventing EJ activism: moving away from a rather narrow conceptualization of race/ethnicity that might lead to statistical claims about disproportionate outcomes (the traditional EJ take), these Latino environmental activists propose a distinctive Latino environmental ethic. "This ethic has a basis in Hispanic and indigenous cultural traditions and values, in a transnational field, which offer a sustainable alternative to values and practices that are endemic to Westernized capitalist societies" (Carter, 2016, see also Pulido, 1996). Contrary to the widespread ideas that situate Latinos in the US indifferent to environmental concerns, current Latino environmentalists use a discursive practice of "strategic essentialism" (Pulido, 1996b), situating Latinos as not only interested in environmentalism but as having special knowledge about how to protect and restore nature (Peña, 1998; Pulido, 1996b).

Prominent views of nature, while not unified, draw from the experiences of those in a position to influence and establish legitimacy for their ideas institutionally and culturally. These narratives, which contribute to the dominant American or Western European environmental imaginaries, are grounded in the values, beliefs, and attitudes of the individuals who construct them. In the U.S, while the current most prominent or accepted visions of nature (that of natural parks, for example) has been predominantly institutionalized through policies and schemes developed by a white ideology, the African Americans' experiences (and any other minorities') has been systematically obscured and overlooked, situating people of color "at the back of the proverbial green bus" (Finney, 2014). Finney has focused on showing how the representation of wild lands and other green spaces in the U.S. remain largely focused on a Euro-American experience of the environment – creating a racialized outdoor leisure identity and keeping minorities out of the outdoors. The vision of nature as something pristine that needed to be emptied from humans and preserved is on which the environmentalist movement in the US constructed its basis. Today, privileged logics of nature and environment are dependent upon the continued practices of racism and other forms of social domination (Brahinsky et al., 2014; Park and Pellow, 2011; Pulido, 2017a, 2000) but the environmental movement is largely blind to these realities (Agyeman et al., 2003; Sandler and Pezzullo, 2007). The movement is covered by "the innocence of whiteness" (Park and Pellow, 2011, page 199), and at the same time, by the innocence of environmentalism, which assures that "the saving of nature is often taken for granted as an innocent endeavor, never implicated in relations of power and a noble exercise for the good

of all life" (Rutherford, 2007, p. 295, see also, for example, Finney, 2014; Park and Pellow, 2011; Sandler and Pezzullo, 2007).

Hence, the discourse of environmentalism, even that of EJ, might only fit for certain people and still get powerful due to the powers of dominant environmental imaginaries which recognize them as legitimate. Yet, these stories are not universal, but "history and present do not always recognize or acknowledge other ways of seeing and encountering the world" (de la Cadena, 2015). As a result, some historically marginalized groups might at times adapt to this vision to play the politics of getting what you want (Ferguson, 2010). For example, Quechua communities might strategically join EJ claims to protect mountains, even if the framing of the problem does not fit their conceptions of environment-nature (de la Cadena, 2015). The sort of epistemological encounters raise the question of whether what is generally referred to as an environmental conflict is really environmental and if so, for whom (Di Chiro, 2008). In the same way, some views or practices around alternative sustainability practices get predominance (e.g. eating in certain ways), while others might have to take a back seat.

The more community-oriented, place-making and demand-based activism of EJ differs from the individualized responsibilization of the more mainstream environmental movement articulated around global environmental concerns and individual behaviour (Bailey, 2007; Busa and Garder, 2015; Dauvergne, 2016; Maniates, 2001; Parr, 2009; Richey and Ponte, 2011). Mainstream environmentalism is currently mostly centered on consumerism of green products and experiences and the change of personal behaviours in the everyday. Few activists see the possibility of taking more relevant long-term decisions, more confrontational (e.g. ecowarriors) or engaging in more radical public debate challenging institutional actions and decisions. Environmental issues are, after all, quite depoliticized (Swyngedouw, 2010; Swyngedouw, 2009), and ecology has become the new "opium of the masses" (Swyngedouw, 2010; Žižek, 2008). The widely accepted and celebrated mainstream environmentalism invites certain types of people, while leaving many excluded (Finney, 2014; Gibson-Wood and Wakefield, 2013; Sandler and Pezzullo, 2007). Environmentalism is today a source for the consumer elitism and the conspicuous consumption linked to green products is blatant, being particularly visible in the case of organic foods, and maybe more paradigmatically, in the case of Tesla electric vehicles (Dauvergne, 2016; Johnston and Baumann, 2010; Veblen, 2005).

Currently, mainstream environmentalism mostly steers away from social justice issues, and it pays little historic attention to EJ concerns (Gauna, 2008; Sandler and Pezzullo, 2007), allowing environmental privilege to become a social norm – by not challenging it directly. The reality is that even among progressive milieus, the mistreatment of / denial of access to resources to the majority of the world's population is accepted or at least assumed as something immovable. In this environmentalism, "discourses

of wild pristine nature, conservable or wasteable space are constructed alongside notions in which human impact is racially coded. Access to property, healthy food, land, and affordable housing are marked as resources allocated along lines of systematic inequality shaped by the categories of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and other markers of difference" (Brahinsky et al., 2014, p. 1148). This is sustained by often subtle ideas of "selective entitlement" (Park and Pellow, 2011, p. 198), which award certain people the privilege to deserve these all, at the same time as feeling the capacity and power to solve the world problems including injustice.

To sum up, this section has paid attention to some of the tensions between environmental and social concerns in the mainstream environmental movement and different calls for environmental protection. Scholarship has related how different perceptions and relationships to nature come to be represented in environmental politics and activism and how others might sometimes be erased or fought over. I have paid attention to issues of identity and representation, as well as how privilege gets accepted, borne or justified and hence reproduced within environmental politics.

In this dissertation, I try to elucidate which of the dynamics explained here – privilege, domination, discursive power, representation, identities – apply to the case of community initiatives and how. With the case of the alterity quest of sustainability-led alternatives, representing a much celebrated space of subtle privilege, I aim to understand dynamics in environmental governance that favour inequality. In the following chapters, I pay attention to the privilege embedded in being able to access to environmental amenities, services as well as recognition for being able to frame the environmental crisis and craft solutions. I am particularly interested in the role of imaginaries in legitimizing such privilege. This is what I focus on next.

3. Imaginaries

Beyond economic, environmental and social materialities, work on the rationales, logics, emotions and other empirical realities within alternatives has been developed, for example, to understand the genuine difference of alternatives in relation to the mainstream Other or to assess their emancipatory potential (Begueria Muñoz, 2016; Di Masso and Zografos, 2015; Feola and Jaworska, 2018; Fischer et al., 2017; Sekulova et al., 2017). It is fundamental to carefully analyze the attempts to change the world by alternative practices "in order to improve our understanding of what they are trying to achieve, how they seek to achieve it, and what the intended and unintended consequences of those efforts are" (Watts et al., 2018).

In this dissertation I consider the potential of the notion of imaginaries by exploring their role in the construction of the alternative-provision strategy for social change. I am particularly interested in how imaginaries define and enable alternatives as well as their relation with issues of power and privilege.

In this section I define social imaginaries and describe their uses (sub-section a) to eventually connect those to the imagination of different futures through the construction of alternatives (sub-section b).

a. Understanding and making the world trough imaginaries

Imaginaries are the "selective and simplified understandings of reality by which we live" (Watts et al., 2018). Cornelius Castoriadis, as the most prominent scholar in the contemporary elaboration of social imaginaries, argues that social imaginaries exist as an enabling but not fully explainable symbolic frame within which people imagine and act (Adams et al., 2015; Castoriadis, 1987; Gaonkar, 2002). Castrodiadis sees imaginaries as the creative force in the making of social-historical worlds (Castoriadis, 1987). Imagination is not understood as simply residing in individual minds in the form of aesthetic considerations. Rather, imagination helps produce systems of meaning that enable collective interpretations of social reality (Castoriadis, 1987) and collective action. In other words, the proverb "that is the way it is" is itself an imaginary that can be subverted (Cidell, 2017). Without the collective taken-for-grantedness that the imaginary represents, we would not be able to understand the problems we currently face (the "actual" imaginary, according to Castoriardis) or envision ways to solve them (the "radical" imaginary).

The concept of imaginaries builds partially on the increasing recognition that "the capacity to imagine futures is a crucial constitutive element in social and political life" (Jasanoff and Kim, 2009, p. 122). The importance of imaginaries resides partially in their encapsulation of three time periods at once: "the past, or how things got to be the way they are, the present, or how the world works here and now, and the future, or how the things should be and what we should do to get there" (Castoriadis, 1987 cited in Cidell, 2017, p. 170). However, an imaginary goes beyond a narrative explanation of how things got to be this way or how they should be different. Imaginaries are "the source of the problem AND the solution" (Cidell, 2017, p. 170), meaning that they enable, through making sense of, the practices of a society (Castoriadis, 1987) – including how civil society actors mobilize and fight for a specific socio-environmental agenda, for instance.

Such social imaginations are inherently political, since understandings of the world (e.g. what social justice is and should be, how public institutions work and should work, etc.) are based on experiences, knowledges, cultures, etc. lived at a collective and individual level. The diversity of such elements creates infinite understandings of how the world works and what should be done to improve it. Imaginaries are

place-specific, partial and incomplete (Cidell, 2017; Peet and Watts, 1996). This means that "imaginaries are often if not always contested" (Cidell, 2017, see also Cowell and Thomas, 2002; Nesbitt and Weiner, 2001; Peet and Watts, 1996; Smith and Tidwell, 2016) and importantly, they involve power relations. Burnham et al. define the "politics of imaginaries" as ongoing political struggles unfolding between actors holding or promoting different imaginaries (such as rival imagined futures or economic development staregies) (Burnham et al., 2017). Consequently, imaginaries are not always emancipatory or just and the politics of imaginaries produce winners and losers (Burnham et al., 2017; Cidell, 2017).

Power is also embedded in the capacity of being able to advance certain imaginaries based on specific ideas on how the world should look like (Bond et al., 2015; Burnham et al., 2017; Cidell, 2017). Among a diversity of visions, "whose imaginary 'wins'—that is, becomes manifest in technology infrastructure, policy, and standards— has implications for both politics of discourse and values and the distribution of material goods and bads (e.g. financial resources and environmental burdens)" (Burnham et al., 2017, p. 67). As an example of a winning imaginary, Cidell has explained the construction of a green roof on top of the Chicago´s City Hall as the victory of the imaginary of green plants cooling the building and providing a natural oasis in the middle of the city over other imaginaries of fire hazards, structural weakness, and building code violations. The political power behind the green roof meant that the imaginary around re-naturalizing and greening was strong enough to overcome those concerns, even if a great deal of negotiation had to be carried out (Cidell, 2017).

In fact, the environment gathers its own – powerful - imaginaries. How people understand nature, global socio-environmental change, and local effects of human intervention on the environment - is mediated by certain imaginaries. In Liberation Ecologies, Peet and Watts introduced the concept of an 'environmental imaginary', bringing a more post-structural focus into the growing literature of political ecology. They define environmental imaginaries as the ways in which a society commonly imagines nature, or how the raw material of existence is transformed, interpreted and conceptualized within the collective (un)consciousness of society (Peet and Watts, 1996). Environmental imaginaries, since then, have been analyzed and used in different contexts and conflicts over natural resources (Asara, 2018; Bond et al., 2015; Cowell and Thomas, 2002; Nesbitt and Weiner, 2001; Pellegrini, 2018; Smith and Tidwell, 2016).

Beyond the mere description of different (conflicting) imaginaries, scholarship has extensively used imaginaries as analytical tools, in fields such as political ecology, STS or environmental sociology to work on diverse issues from nuclear energy to organics'consumption. For example, imaginaries are used for discerning consumers' choices and participation in different production systems (Bryant and Goodman, 2004; Goodman and Goodman, 2001; Watts et al., 2018) or for illuminating discourses and practices through which privilege becomes ingrained in certain consumption options (Alkon and McCullen, 2011)

through, for example, "imaginaries of quality" (Parga-Dans and Alonso González, 2017). In addition, imaginaries are utilized to better understand the possibilities and limitations of a political moment in relation to the mainstream against it struggles (Bond et al., 2015) and how these imaginaries produce local politics of nature and natural resources conflicts (Nesbitt and Weiner, 2001; Peet and Watts, 1996).

Imaginaries have been particularly analyzed in relation to policy-making, where the focus lies on the imaginaries constructed and/or used by state entities (i.e. policy makers, legislators, etc) to enact certain regulations, policies, and public programs. For example, the "imaginative resources" deployed by the state have been analyzed for exploring the sources of long-term cross-national variations in policy (Jasanoff and Kim, 2009), as well as "a way to understand the contexts in which environmental decisions are made and new environments result" (Cidell, 2017). The idea of "sociotechnical imaginaries" developed by Jasanoff and Kim has been particularly illustrative in the study of the advance of particular sciences and technologies from remote sensing to artic geoengineering (Buck, 2018; Burnham et al., 2017; Jasanoff and Kim, 2009; Shim, 2014) or to understand how these technologies enhance or reinforce particular imaginaries about the world (Paul, 2018).

b. Imaginaries and alternatives

In this dissertation I argue that alternatives are one site in which imaginaries become particularly apparent, deployed, and sustained– as other sites more typically researched such as conflicts or policy making. If imaginaries are "collective understandings that facilitate future action" (Cidell, 2017, p. 171) which encode collective visions of the good society (Jasanoff and Kim, 2009), then their role in the construction and institutionalization of alternatives emerges as fundamental. The linkages are obvious: Alternatives are transformational and performative, while imaginaries themselves are considered a strong source of transformation (Castoriadis, 1987; Cowell and Thomas, 2002; Peet and Watts, 1996). Imaginaries, as alternatives, are instrumental and futuristic: they project visions on what is good, desirable and worth attaining for a political community (e.g. in sustainability-led initiatives, sustainable implies a future dimension). Moreover, alternatives attempt to decolonize existing imaginaries (e.g. the degrowth movement tries to decolonize the growth imaginary).

Although in the aforementioned scholarship on imaginaries, imagination, as the aesthetical and creative dreaming, is differentiated from the formation of the collective understandings of the world, this imagination often gets more prominence in the study of alternative practices. Alternatives in the field of sustainability and community empowerment have often been linked with imagination, in particular, as actors that might bring the political imagination that the neoliberal era has enclosed (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014; Harvey and Haraway, 1995; Smith, 2010). Imagination or novel imaginaries are

required tools in the revolutionary imperative (James, 1993, cited in Smith, 2010). This imagination component of alternatives is important in order to change established imaginaries about the worlds' rules (Asara, 2018; Kaika and Karaliotas, 2016), by working on the "politics of the possible" (Guthman, 2008a; Harris, 2009). Not surprisingly, alternative consumption and production practices are often seen as utopias - or nowtopias - attached to a transformational potential (Carlsson, 2008; Kallis and March, 2014; Wright, 2010). In this line, geographers have called for the revitalization of utopianism "to think the possibility of real alternatives (…) and galvanize socioecological changes" (Harvey, 2000, p. 156, cited in Kallis and March, 2014).

Yet, current research on alternatives has put less emphasis on the conflicting or constraining roles (McGregor, 2004) that imaginaries might play with the deployment of such alternative projects (Alkon and McCullen, 2011; Guthman, 2011; Watts et al., 2018). Imaginaries shape the politics that emerge in any particular place, including the politics around the construction and expansion of given alternatives. In relation to environmental imaginaries McGregor has argued that whilst the most extended environmental imaginary (i.e. sustainable development) might legitimize a range of activities, it simultaneously de-legitimises and ostracises different personal-political actions and behaviors that do not fit this imaginary (2004). In addition, alternative food and alternative food systems are constructed as such by particular imaginaries on what this food means and how it acts in bodies and society while strongly rejecting divergent and often dichotomized imaginaries (Begueria Muñoz, 2016; Hayes-Conroy, 2014; Johnston and Baumann, 2010; Watts et al., 2018).

To sum up, scholars have revealed the importance of discerning the aspirations, rationales, lived contradictions and tensions to show the immaterial complexity within alternative practices (Begueria Muñoz, 2016; Sekulova et al., 2017). Imaginaries have been questioned as analytical tools for being "simultaneously deep and vague" (Mayes, 2014, p. 271). However, they serve, as I aim to prove, as a powerful tool to bring together rationales, ideals and practices as well as structural realities within realms of praxis, in particular, groups aiming at changing society in certain way providing particular types of solutions. In this way, imaginaries can complement the more often used, but rather limited, idea of "agency" (Middlemiss and Parrish, 2010; Newman and Dale, 2005) in grassroots action.

In my empirical chapters, I will consider that imaginaries influence the construction and expansion of alternatives in two different ways: i. The imaginaries that define the meaning and impact of a strategy for social change based on providing alternatives; ii. The imaginaries that project how an alternative looks like. In other words, how alterity is being imagined, under which parameters and circumstances (McCarthy). These different imaginaries define or imprint, at the same time, the alternatives' relation with issues of power and privilege and hence are the ones I will be looking at. The idea of the politics of

imaginaries will serve to illustrate different politics embedded in the creation and expansion of particular narratives around alternatives and futures, including those around epistemological and discursive powers.

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Using the theoretical threads described in this chapter - neoliberalism, environmental privilege and imaginaries - I will respond next to my core research question: What roles do power and privilege play in the construction and expansion of an alternative-provisioning strategy for social change? Over the next three chapters, I develop the three empirical sub-studies of my dissertation in which I examine how power and privilege unfold along the construction and expansion of the alterity quest. These studies relate to the alternative imaginary of change within community economies in E.U. (chapter 3), the construction of farmer trainings in the U.S. (chapter 4), and the institutionalization of quality schemes in Barcelona (chapter 5).

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# CHAPTER 3

## Imaginaries of change and embedded rationalities in community economies

***"Shifts in affective atmosphere are not equal to changing the world"***

Laurent Berlant in Cruel Optimism

1. Introduction

In the Global North, community economy practices are often initiatives committed to a transition towards a low-carbon and more localized economy, and built around principles that distance themselves from traditional capitalist forms of economic organization. In this study, I refer to initiatives such as barter groups, community gardens and farms, consumer cooperatives, bike repair workshops, community energy projects, waste recycling and transformation groups, land trusts, and other forms of community economy.

The scholarship on community economy is positioned within two opposite political and discursive perspectives: an uncritical celebration of its practice and effects or an equally uncritical condemnation of its limitations (Bialski et al., 2015). From a more nuanced perspective these community-based economies (CBEs herein after) can be seen as examples of diverse economies growing outside common capitalist logics, recognizing their potential to bypass or even reconfigure dominant global trends. Such a posture also increasingly recognizes that CBEs fit quite well under a neoliberal program in which responsibilities are shifting downwards towards civil society, favoring multi-level governance over government intervention (e.g. Rosol, 2012; Guthman, 2008a; Pudup, 2008; Busa and Garder, 2015; Hilbrandt and Richter, 2015). It therefore calls for a more open and critical discussion of the development and role of community initiatives.

In line with the more critical line of thought, Guthman and others have asked how activist groups "seem to produce and reproduce neoliberal forms and spaces of governance [and] at the same time […] oppose neoliberalism writ large" (Guthman, 2008b, p. 1172). From a definitional standpoint, neoliberal discourses promote community development as an essential channel of political engagement and as a compensatory mechanism for the inadequacies of the market (Holifield, 2004; Jessop, 2002; Levitas, 2001; Peck and Tickell, 2002), which in turn helps to produce neoliberal subjects and mentalities (Pudup, 2008; Slocum, 2004). Other studies have shown how neoliberalism constrains activism by limiting "the arguable, the fundable, the organizable, and the scale of effective action" (Guthman, 2008b, p. 1180), and how it creates a mental block that prevents individuals from imagining a more fundamental social change (Žižek, 2009), and addressing, among others, deeply-rooted privileges and power relationships (Anguelovski, 2015a).

In this study, I embed the discussion around the sort of articulations between neoliberalism and its contestation on the ground ( as, for example, Guthman, 2008b; Larner, 2015; Leitner et al., 2007), specifically looking at community-based economies. I also aim here to contribute to the analysis of the "parallels and tensions between neoliberalism and environmentalism" (McCarthy and Prudham,

2004, p. 275, or Bailey, 2007; Rutherford, 2007; Swaffield, 2016). Additionally, a number of scholars have pointed to the need for more extensive qualitative work to fully understand the behaviors and motivations of citizens engaging in alternative ethical consumption choices (Begueria Muñoz, 2016; Fischer et al., 2017; Johnston et al., 2011 among others), examining "not just what people buy, but also how they connect purchasing with citizenship or social engagement" (Busa and Garder, 2015, p. 340). In this study I seek to answer the following questions: Which are the collective imaginaries of initiative's members about the possible societal change they can achieve and the strategies they can use to achieve change? What are the implications for the initiatives if its collective imaginary of change embraces certain neoliberal rationalities?

By imaginaries of change, I refer to preconceived ideas, visions, and discourses framed by individuals about what societal change should look like and the role that communities have in the transition to a more sustainable, low-carbon and socially just economy. In this study, I examine how such imaginaries influence the actions that individuals undertake and how, when these individuals are part of a movement, they imprint the collective discourse of the group (Cowell and Thomas, 2002; McGregor, 2004). Imaginaries underwrite different responses to shock and challenges, normatively prescribe the types of futures that should be attained and influence in the translation from ideas into practices (Castoriadis, 1987; Jasanoff and Kim, 2009). In other words, they influence what is possible and what is desirable - and apparently, they make CBEs a preferred solution for a number of contemporary social and environmental problems over other possible strategies (see the plans of progressive European cities to promote and support the community economy).

The analysis builds on in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted among the members of 11 CBEs in 5 E.U. countries and on direct participant observation. My work reveals a common trend among CBEs where the development and articulation of an imaginary of change has been seemingly imprinted by core neoliberal rationalities. Those rationalities are linked to questions of individual responsibility, the role of the state, and civil participation and equity. It is an imaginary related to the construction of CBEs to by-pass existing socio-political and economic configurations. I refer to this imaginary as the "alternative imaginary" throughout the document. I argue that this imaginary might cause unexpected or undesirable outcomes related to the reproduction of existing power and privilege. Though couched in terms of social transformation, the imaginary put forward by CBEs' members may inadvertently serve to support the hegemony of neoliberal conditions and forms of governance. Although the collective imaginary presented here might not be the only one embedded in CBEs, it is a recurrent imaginary throughout many of the interviews. I also recognize

that different and even contradictory imaginaries might be combined within a social movement or even within individuals (Begueria Muñoz, 2016; Di Masso and Zografos, 2015; Fischer et al., 2017; Sekulova et al., 2017).

The chapter proceeds as follows; I first examine how the literature on neoliberalism and neoliberal subjectivities offers a new perspective on the development and internal dynamics of CBEs. Upon the presentation of the research design, I analyze the members' imaginaries of change of and how certain neoliberal subjectivities are influencing CBEs' actions and strategies hindering CBEs' more radical possibilities. Finally, I discuss the relevance of my study for scholarship on the politics of alternatives.

## 2. Placing community economies in the framework of neoliberalization

### a. Community economies between spaces of resistance and neoliberal rationale

In this study, I refer to community economies as grassroots groups or organizations working in the field of sustainability which in general use bottom-up solutions for providing certain goods or services in a way that reflects the needs of the community. By gathering people from a geographic area (a community of place) or around a particular idea (community of project) or (as frequently occurs) both, CBEs can take diverse forms, including: DIY workshops, food consumers' cooperatives, social enterprises of low carbon courier services, community supported agriculture projects, and community energy projects. CBEs are seen as "liminal social spaces of possibility" (Harvey, 2012), as nowtopias (Kallis and March, 2014; Wright, 2010) as experiences that organize differently, bringing new shared rules and practices (Raven et al., 2008) and aiming to create an urban environment of more local, self-organized, autonomous and resource efficient forms of organization.

Since the 2007-2008 financial and economic crises, these initiatives have become more visible and have at times even become part of the political program of governments at different scales. Examples of this burgeon are "new municipalisms'" attempts to favor activists groups or national governments' austerity policies (Hancock et al., 2012; Hilbrandt and Richter, 2015; Magrinyà, 2015). CBEs are widely recognized as sites of grassroots participation and place-based community development (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014), as forms of enhancing social interactions (Conill et al., 2012), as drivers of a low-carbon economy (Burch, 2010; Seyfang, 2010), as economic relocalization agents (Bailey et al., 2010; Hopkins, 2009), and as tools for alleviating poverty (Stockton and Campbell, 2011; Walker, 2008). Furthermore, they are also praised for challenging hegemonic ideologies, resisting capitalistic logics, and empowering society (Ghose and Pettygrove,

2014). Many also recognize community economy initiatives as enactors of politics of possibilities, that is as groups that operate in diverse ways within the current socio-political regime and economic system and challenge the discursive domination of the capitalist system (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Lee et al., 2008). By doing so, these groups might help to recover "the imagination of what a world that isn't capitalist could look like" (Harvey and Haraway, 1995, p. 519).

Although these diverse economies represent real variations of the globalized and profit-seeking capitalist economy, they operate within a broader political and economic regime: the neoliberal program. Neoliberalism can be described as "a near-global project […] to reconfigure economic and political governance in line with many of the founding precepts of liberal theory" (McCarthy, 2006a, p. 87). Its main pillars are self-regulating markets, double separation of the state from the economy and from civil society, and promotion of "community" (or a plurality of self-organizing communities) as a "flanking, compensatory mechanism for the inadequacies of the market" (Jessop, 2002, p. 455, see also Levitas, 2001; McCarthy, 2006a). Political restructuring within the neoliberal regime involves the establishment of new forms and rules of governance able to support such pillars.

Scholars have argued that the top-down neoliberalization regime is inseparably linked to "the production of neoliberal mentalities of rule – specifically attempts to enforce market-logics, to create conditions in which competition can flourish, to shift caring responsibilities from public sphere to personal spheres, and to depoliticize or render futile various social struggles over resources and rights" (Guthman, 2008b, p. 1243). In this regard, Foucault's concept of governmentality, although not unique to neoliberalism, is highly relevant to explain the everyday reproduction of mentalities in regards to community action (Boelens et al., 2015; Pudup, 2008; Schofield, 2002). The new governance of the neoliberal era is precisely linked to the deployment of a "common sense of the times" (Peck and Tickell, 2002), one that embeds belief-structures into mentalities, directs interpretations and rationalities around class, gender, institutional structures, and advocates for a prescribed way of life (Peet, 2007). In that regard, governing becomes the construction of certain truths and their articulation, via normalizing "discourses and practices that go beyond the state and stretch across the social body" (Rutherford, 2007, p. 293, after Foucault, 1990). In the case of nature management and sustainability planning, this form of rule is exemplified by "the ways in which the environment is constructed as in crisis, how knowledge about it is formed, and who then is authorized to save it" (Rutherford, 2007, p. 295).

The promotion of collaborative governance models encouraging citizen participation and volunteerism (to solve environmental problems among others) has indeed been a key neoliberal strategy, one that helps to organize civil society with compensatory mechanisms for the inadequacies of the market (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014; Jessop, 2002; Perkins, 2009). This implementation of such strategies was based on the regulation of the third sector that characterized the roll-back neoliberalization of the 1980s, which slowly faded to privilege more grassroots organizations and groups organized around the social, alternative or community economy in the roll-out era (Peck and Tickell, 2002). With the purpose of driving this change, neoliberal policies are now centered on "responsibilizing" citizens, enforcing moral values with discourses of community and self-help, and shifting responsibility for well-being and social justice away from the state to individuals. This redirectioning is well illustrated by the discourse of neo-communitarianism, which aims at transferring welfare responsibilities to the voluntary sector through partnership, participation, and good governance initiatives (Fyfe, 2005; Levitas, 2001).

b. The community economy in neoliberal times

Thus, neoliberal governance is based upon the creation of a favorable environment in which self-governing, responsible communities, as one of the defining articulations of the neoliberal rule, can flourish (Watts, 2004). Such visions do not include uncivil or disruptive self-governing communities and grassroots projects (D'Alisa et al., 2013), but rather organizations managing resources or providing services (social services, environmental protection…) to society. The case of CBEs is relevant because they might be seen as positioned in the middle: between a resistance project (and to some degree disobedient) and an outsourced socio-environmental service provider for consumers engaged in ethical purchases. They therefore serve as a good example for examining the challenge of balancing competing ideologies of self-interest and collective responsibility in a consumer-oriented society (Johnston et al., 2011).

The central role given to consumer citizens as transformative subjects within current social movements – predominantly from the Global North - illustrates the rise of more individual-based political action (Di Masso et al., 2014; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Lipschutz and Rowe, 2005). However, though community economies have the capacity to challenge the increasing individualization of the environmental cause, the increasing individualization of the community economy itself (Busa and Garder, 2015) has raised concerns about the danger of creating another "creative class bubble". One that reinforces neoliberal mechanisms of individual survival rather

than exploiting the organizational potential of community experiences (Gandini, 2015) to ensure redistributive access and broader societal benefits.

As a result, while some typically see community projects as tools to produce empowered, self-sufficient subjects making demands on the state (Anguelovski 2014, 2015) and as spaces where rights and obligations are accrued, civic participation in the context of neoliberalism within certain community projects "may not be inherently transformative or empowering" (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014, p. 1092, see also Mostafanezhad et al., 2015). Community projects might also (re)produce – intentionally or otherwise - neoliberal practices and subjectivities that serve to maintain an emergent social order (e.g. Pudup, 2008; Slocum, 2004; Staeheli, 2008). In the case of CBEs, the "responsibilized" subjects internalize a neoliberal win-win argument: individuals-consumers can do and/or purchase something they will enjoy, and at the same time they benefit some general societal cause, such as sustainability, community cohesion, or local development (Busa and Garder, 2015). The strong commitment to self-improvement is a premise for the overtly neoliberal process of shifting responsibilities downwards, and from moving from a welfare state to an activating (or shadow) state. Here, the state would not provide services but rather encourage others to be self-entrepreneurial (Perkins, 2009; Rosol, 2012) and create regulations and incentives to foster the emergence and consolidation of community initiatives. In this view, such things as community gardens, for example, can be seen as outsourcing local state responsibilities for the provision of public services and urban infrastructure to residents (creating and maintaining public green areas apart from other well-being functions) (Rosol, 2012). Similarly, fostering community energy projects has been a key strategy for governments to meet renewable energy objectives (Walker et al., 2007). Moreover, as CBEs develop work in certain areas also being widely popularized within neoliberal sustainability agendas (i.e., sustainable mobility, clean energy, livable cities), they might be helping to settle certain neoliberal types of techno-fixes (Swyngedouw, 2009; Wetzstein, 2016).

The emergence of CBEs might also be legitimizing a form of conditional services – through which only those individuals able and willing to voluntarily work or self-organize might be entitled to certain rights or benefits, while those who are not able to participate in this new type of governance might be cast as un-deserving those rights. This dynamic thus turns these services into privileges – in this case environmental privileges (Park and Pellow, 2011) – under the pretense of initiatives working towards a low-carbon economy. Such an exclusionary dynamic has also been explained using the concept of privileged "citizenship": Neoliberal citizenship carries some moral and ethical responsibilities of participation in certain prescribed ways, from which the right to be a member of society is granted. These responsibilities are applied through the community as a non-state form of

regulation and rationalization of behavior (Dean, 1999; Rose, 2000). In addition, the often exclusionary character of CBEs reflects "monoculture" visions and ideas that perpetuate patterns of exclusion and privilege (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011a).

In this study, I aim to contribute to the literature about the expansion of neoliberal rationalities and forms of governance by community initiatives. I focus here on the discourses and practices through which these conditions become ingrained in the particular case of CBEs. Specifically, I look at how the process of neoliberal reproduction is manifested within the imaginaries about possible changes and strategies developed by CBEs. It is under these imaginaries that certain rationalities are hailed and strategies of change are taken (Jasanoff and Kim, 2009). In particular, I focus on the imaginary of change that sees and proposes CBEs as alternatives outside the existing socio-political and economic configuration. I examine how this alternative imaginary embrace three recurrent issues of neoliberal governmentality: responsibilization, state alienation, and naturalization of inequity. Ultimately, I aim to critically analyze the set of social relations associated to those alternative-perceived spaces (as Bialski et al., 2015; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Fuller et al., 2010; Slocum, 2007 among others).

## 3. Methods

*Research design/case justification*

This study is based on a qualitative study that was the result of a collaborative research process between researchers based in five different E.U. countries. It builds on in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with members of 11 CBEs in Finland, Germany, Italy, Scotland and Spain. With a team of collaborators, we conducted 50 interviews in 2014 and 2015 as part of the FP7 E.U.-funded TESS project (Towards European Societal Sustainability). Respondents occupied different positions within the community initiatives I focused my research on: volunteers, employees, and managers. We also interviewed outside stakeholders (network organizers, policy-makers) whose work or activism has had an influence on the development of community initiatives. This second set of interviews helped us understand how the discourses and ideas of CBEs are perceived and reproduced in different spaces and by different types of people.

Our initial selection of initiatives followed a random selection process from a larger database of CBEs, which was constructed through snow-ball sampling using these main criteria: Initiatives had to i. Be initiated and managed by communities (not by public bodies or private enterprises); ii. Be organized around the provision of certain products or services to their beneficiaries. iii. Be both

non-profit or for profit, but with overall objectives of serving the community; and iv. Have an environmental dimension. Most of the communities are formed by a group of users or beneficiaries together with individuals who work/volunteer to provide goods or services to the group. Exceptions include those initiatives defined at the site of production (FIN2, SP1) or formed both by producers and consumers (FIN2). These communities are formed by a common interest and project, although not necessarily homogeneous objectives or ideologies (Fischer et al., 2017; Sekulova et al., 2017).

The selected CBEs mostly operate in the domain of food, energy, recycling/reusing and transport, although many of them are multi-domain and might also develop tasks in other domains such as education, urban planning, housing etc. Initiatives such as public urban agriculture projects, NGOs foundations, and assistance projects were not included in the sample since they cannot be considered to be managed by a community. Advocacy groups, political parties, Right to the City activists groups, etc. are not part of the database because they cannot be considered as "economies" per se. From the final database of grassroots projects, two initiatives per country were randomly selected, except in Spain where one of the initiatives has a double component (producing farm and consumer group), which led us to a total of 11 CBEs. These can be considered as critical, visible, and emblematic grassroots initiatives in their respective regions. A brief description of the initiatives is presented in Table 3 below.

For the interviews themselves, we selected interviewees by snowball sampling, after contacting one person from the initiative – generally the representative, the manager or one of the most active persons in the group. We selected people with different roles and positions in the communities -- from managers to volunteers, veterans and newcomers -- in order to have a variety of discourses, stories and perspectives related to imaginaries of change. People generally join these communities for a combination of diverse and often combined motivations: a pragmatic decision about an interest in purchasing certain goods or services, as a form of engaging in fruitful social relations they build with each, hedonistic desires of consuming differently (Soper, 2008) environmental concerns, and commitment to political change, among others.

*Data collection and analysis*

Researchers from each partner conducted the interviews in their respective countries, most of them in their original languages. The interview questions were related to communities' objectives, their trajectory, their ideas of success, their visions of the future of the communities, their inclusivity, their relation with institutions, and their visions about the contribution of the initiatives to the broader transition towards societal change. Additionally, during this period, we engaged in

**Table 3: Description of community-based initiatives analyzed**

| Country (NAME) | Type of project | Brief description of activities | Types of members and beneficiaries |
|---|---|---|---|
| Finland (FIN1) | Community supported agriculture | Consumers' Cooperative started in 2010 near Helsinki. This bio-dynamic agriculture project manages 3 hectares of land to produce vegetables for its members. Work is distributed between two employees, interns, work-camps and members of the cooperative. It is managed by a board. | 200 households as client-members who pay a yearly fee for the food and commit to certain amount of work |
| Finland (FIN2) | Heat provisioning from local wood | Cooperative formed with municipal support in 1999. It is one of the 310 small-medium "heat enterprises" in Finland. A group of forest owners provides inexpensive heat from local (left-over) wood for the local community with the aim of decreasing reliance on imported oil. Wood sellers are provided with a fixed price so that money is retained in the local economy and jobs are created, while reducing carbon emissions. | The 52 members of the cooperative, who are local forest-owners. A local community of 2000 people gets the energy produced |
| Germany (GER1) | Consumers' energy coop | Energy consumers' cooperative aiming to acquire the energy grid of a city and change the energy mix towards renewable energy. Members buy shares of the cooperative for purchasing a grid worth €2 billion. As of 2015, it has raised €11 million from over 1200 stockholders. A share costs €500. The initiative is formed by 600 members, who pay €100 but not necessarily own a share. The initiative raises awareness on public participation in energy politics and on the necessity of changing the electricity mix in the city. They are partly professionalized and partly based on volunteer work. | 1200 stockholders have bought stakes of the cooperative. Members pay €100 to join and participates in the initiative, but does not necessarily own a share |
| Germany (GER2) | Food recycling group | Network of individuals and retail shops working to reduce food waste organized around an association. It originally started with individuals doing "dumpster diving" who intended to legalize the act of saving food which had been thrown away by supermarkets. It is now organized through online platforms, where members can share food that would otherwise be wasted. Unwanted food can also be brought to openly accessible shelves or refrigerators. The platform is available to retailers that are willing to donate the food they would otherwise throw away. They are organized as a hierarchical volunteer-based group. | The organization has more than 11000 members and 2000 cooperating retailers. |
| Italy (IT1) | Bikes repair workshop | Association running a volunteer-based bike repair shop and working towards sustainable mobility through the promotion of a cycling culture in an urban context. Their primary objective links closely with their political vision for a more sustainable, livable and just city. It can be considered as a spin-off of the Critical Mass movement, initiated by bicycle activists gathering once a month to reclaim "the right to be the traffic". Over time, members of these groups realized they needed physical spaces for meetings, bicycle maintenance and creating sustainable mobility actions. Having its roots in squatted social centers for bicycle repair and activism, over time the community obtained a rented space from the Municipality of Rome where they are based. | Members-users pay a low yearly fee to use the workshop services. Volunteers collect used or broken bikes from waste or donors and manage the repairing services. |

| Country (NAME) | Type of project | Brief description of activities | Types of members and beneficiaries |
|---|---|---|---|
| Italy (IT2) | Social center managing gardens, a basket scheme and a restaurant | Non-profit association established in 1993 in a peripheral area of Rome. It manages an old country side building, a library and some fields on behalf of the local municipality. In over 20 years of existence, it has developed a wide network of activities with the aim of protecting the natural environment, supporting social and workers' rights, and promoting a life-style based on better/lower consumption. Activities include a solidary purchasing group, an educational botanic garden, urban garden plots, a bi-monthly farmers market, an organic restaurant and energy production through solar panels. | Approx. 1100 people enrolled, paying a small yearly fee. 10 employees and 15 volunteers actively manage the initiative. 100 people have an assigned garden |
| Scotland (SCO1) | Organic and fair food cafe | Volunteer-based group comprising a café, a vegetable bag scheme and small food retail 'shop'. It is part of a student-led food and energy initiative of the Students Association of a Scottish University. Shared Planet is headed up by the President of the Environment and Ethics Committee, a sabbatical position for a student within the student association, who is elected and serves for 1 year. | 30 volunteers, one sabbatical officer. Serves around 100 meals per week to students & staff, 30 veg bags per week |
| Scotland (SCO2) | Development Trust | Community enterprise group operating in a Scottish town of about 4,500 people. It has a broad range of activities to benefit the community, such as a renewable energy project (a wind-mill) and a sustainable transport hub. In the past, the group has done different activities such as community consultations for the Local Authority, setting up a farmers market, and developing a footpath to connect with other towns. There are 4 employees who manage the everyday running of the Trust, plus a board of directors. They are highly reliant on volunteers. It is also a beneficiary of different UK national funding schemes. | There are 4 employees who manage the everyday running of the Trust. Around 400 members who participate in the Trust's activities with different levels of engagement. |
| Spain (SP1) | Food producers | Peri-urban small business managing a 5ha. farm located 20 km. from Barcelona. They distribute up to 200 weekly baskets with organic vegetables for food cooperatives in Barcelona and serve to a number of individuals, restaurants and schools. They also distribute organic fruit from local farmers. Initiated 5 years ago, the owners initiated a network of organic producers in the region where they are located. | The farm is run by 2 owners and 3-5 additional workers. Some volunteer sporadically. More than 200 weekly clients. |
| Spain (SP2) | Food consumers' coop | Consumers' cooperative formed by 23 households which organize and commit themselves to purchasing seasonal fruits and vegetables from SP1 on a weekly basis all year long. They buy "closed" baskets (customers select products for the basket but the producer ultimately decides which products to include based on products' availability). Members try to engage in the neighborhood activities and participate in different social events. | The members are 20-25 family units purchasing baskets every week. There is a small fee of admission and monthly volunteering time required. |
| Spain (SP3) | Renewable energy producers-consumers coop | Energy consumers' cooperative with more than 25000 members across Spain, who jointly purchase energy with green certificate and are gradually starting to invest in generating their own renewable electricity. It is managed by 3 groups with different functions: a professional technical team (18 employees including the funder-manager), a board (5 people, work on a voluntary basis) and more than 30 local groups distributed across Spain, which work towards the dissemination/communication | The cooperative has now over 25500 members, who have paid €100 to the cooperative's social capital. The technical team has 18 workers. |

participant observation of communities during assemblies, meetings, open days, celebrations, working days, etc. Researchers took field notes that allow us to get a broader sense of group characteristics, dynamics and ideas, beyond the individual interviewees' perceptions.

Following data collection, I prepared a preliminary coding framework to examine more specifically issues of power and politics within the trajectories of community-based initiatives. In this stage of the analysis, several codes emerged around questions of imaginaries, reasons for joining the initiative, selection of transformation strategies, perceptions of the state, unrecognized privileges or operationalization of justice, among others. During my refined grounded theory analysis work in NVivo (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser and Strauss, 1967), I identified interview statements and field notes aligned with neoliberal rationalities and mentalities of rule as a striking transversal and common thread among the different countries and initiatives. I thus decided at this latter stage to look at the imaginaries of change in relation to neoliberal ideas about individual responsibilization, the role of the state and the perceptions of justice and equity present in the collective imaginaries of CBEs. Upon this data coding work, researchers wrote analytical memos based on an agreed upon refined coding framework, and sections of the interviews were translated into English and integrated into the memos. The memos were then sent to the main research coordinator partner and further analyzed.

The presentation of imaginaries of change reflects common patterns and trends I identified during the data analysis. While nuances and exceptions exist – and I mention them when relevant - my aim here is to understand the collective imaginaries of a wide variety of initiatives in the community economy movement, and how these intersect with neoliberal and environmental governance when disseminated through the popularity and societal acceptance of these initiatives. While I recognize that different and even contradictory imaginaries might be combined within a social movement or even within individuals (Begueria Muñoz, 2016; Di Masso and Zografos, 2015; Fischer et al., 2017; Sekulova et al., 2017) I focus here one common collective imaginary about the change that community economies might bring and the strategies to get it which embed clear forms of power and privilege. By focusing on how neoliberalism frames this imaginary, I consider this work grounded and situated, with no claims of impartiality. Others have argued that highlighting the presence – even if subdued – of neoliberal patterns within community economies might strengthen the dominance of the hegemonic program (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Harris, 2009). However, if "[neoliberalism's] anonymity is both a symptom and cause of its power" (Monbiot, 2016), negating its articulations and effects might be equally counter-productive. As McCarthy puts it: "we could

tell the story without that term, but we would be missing important linkages(…) that may affect our evaluations of them" (McCarthy, 2006a, p. 99).

4. Neoliberal subjectivities embedded in the imaginaries of change of CBEs' members

In this results section, I present the rationalities embraced by community members within the imaginaries of change they frame and develop. I also look at how these rationalities contribute to (re)producing neoliberal conditions and forms of governance. I do so by analyzing the three main neoliberal rationalities that I find are embedded in the "alternative imaginary of change" within the CBEs, that is those related to the responsibilization through individual choices, state alienation, and naturalization of inequity. I question the implications for the social change performed by CBEs. I use selective quotes throughout the section to illustrate my findings. Our analysis does not mean to ignore the importance of these heterogeneous practices as powerful models to overcome the forces of the individual profit-focused capitalist economy and as relevant agents of a more caring and localized economy (Bloemmen et al., 2015; Daya and Authar, 2012; Hopkins, 2009). I aim to look at the closures without denying the openings that these communities might enable, acknowledging "a sense of uncertainty, ambivalence and perplexity about the politics of the processes we are observing and analyzing" (Bondi and Laurie, 2005, p. 394).

a. A reliance on responsible consumers or entrepreneurs

The neoliberal ideal of promoting individual endeavors to achieve transformation is referred to as "responsibilization" (Dean, 1999; Rose, 1990). Community initiatives emerge (at least partially) from a strong sense of responsibilization and self-improvement: Their members acquire responsibility for certain issues that they see as a common good, such as environmental sustainability or improved health outcomes. This commitment is imprinted in the imaginary of change of many of the interviewees, who envision a change linked to educating "responsible citizens," building sustainable lifestyles and livable cities, and enhancing the quality of life of individuals seen as responsible enough to "spread the message within their social circles". This alternative imaginary seem to accept the responsibility for moving the economy towards more caring and more sustainable models, and share with others a win-win relation around "what is good for you and good for the others. When asked about how he/she thinks the initiative contributes to greater socio-political changes, a member from GER2 replied:

> "I think that because there are incredibly so many people working in the initiative, this awareness will be transmitted into so many minds. So that everyone works as a

person who spreads the idea within his or her social circle. And this living of an alternative model has, as I believe, often a greater influence than a political announcement from the top. Because that is more effective." Member, GER2

This quote is representative of many other experiences I gathered through the interviews and observations on the person-centered transfer of awareness as the vector for change and rejection of a top-down authority imposing certain choices upon people.

In some cases, the alternative imaginary of change is simply linked to improved consumer responsibility: community economy members see the power of society against environmental degradation or carbon dependence through individuals as conscious consumers buying from ethical producers. Here, the change the initiatives conceive seems to be reduced to the responsibilization of people changing their habits and consuming more ethically, focusing on what they see as alternative forms of consumption (collective consumption, ethical consumption, DIY, etc.) or clean production (growing organic food, selling locally, producing renewable energies). Indeed, in most of the cases, the engagement of members with the initiative requires a purchase, such as buying organic food, contracting their energy bills, or buying stakes in a cooperative. Moreover, the unifying element of the community is the good or service that people purchase.

Even the more militant initiatives (i.e. those with an articulated political discourse) tend to focus their efforts on changing attitudes and habits of citizens (eating healthy, commuting by bike, recycling food, or making the "right" choices) rather than advancing direct claims to prompt changes at the structural level. This sense of civic responsibility is translated into workshops and awareness raising activities in which CBE members attempt to extend this responsibilization to a maximum number of people. A good example of the transformation though behavioral change is the case of the bike workshop IT1, whose environmental mission of improving and facilitating bike access through the city by promoting biking and repairing bikes does not require "purchasing" to join, but rather to use bikes. In this case, the workshop only collects a voluntary fee for those using the repair service. Still, the initiative's main objective ("getting more butts on bikes") reveals an emphasis on individual attitude changes towards more sustainable habits. One of the volunteers at the biking workshop describes the important role of the initiative in increasing people's awareness to live "differently" and in promoting a more livable city – though individuals' lifestyle decisions:

"How do you think the initiative contributes to socio-political changes?" Interviewer

"(…) I would like to think that our presence in the city, the role of IT1, it helps and does good to making change happen. It's a change that we are trying to find across the ways that we grow and increase the number of people who live sustainably, living differently, bringing up a city which is more livable (…) we have this idea for longer term change." Volunteer, IT1

**Figure 7: Critical Mass event in Rome, supported by IT1. Photo credit: sustainablecommunities.eu**

CBEs' common emphasis on individual choice and consumer activism rather than on direct collective political action is often justified by the role that initiatives play in stimulating democratic learning and deliberation, and in moving beyond individualism and dependency towards collectivity and self-organization. These abilities, members argue, are acquired in the collective spaces that some of the communities create. Many members see the opportunity to engage in a community as a great experience and a way to compensate for the individualistic culture in which these initiatives are embedded. However, this perspective of collective engagement seems to omit the fact that, despite being organized around communities, it is because of individualism and individual choices that these communities exist: The choice to engage with and remain in the initiative. They exist under the "tyranny" of respecting the rights of the individual and being severely limited in what they are able to perform in terms of communitarian organizing. When asked about how the food initiative contributes to the societal change, this volunteer at SP1 highlights how individual and individualized the transition is:

"There was a campaign in Brighton saying "Eat the change you want to see in the world". I think that is exactly what transition is. I will commit to the transition that makes sense to me, and for me it´s about food… To know the producer, to eat

> ecologically... I think the transition is there. When you decide what you eat." Volunteer, SP1

Under this view, communities become a site to serve and fulfill these individual preferences and decisions.

Due to the frequent lack of more radical claims, members' imaginaries seem often more about accommodating the existing economic and political system and working within dominant structures than challenging it. As McCarthy (2006b) put it, community schemes seem to promote a less centralized capitalism, one that would be organized around smaller scales and more conscious of environmental and societal issues, but without necessarily opposing hegemonic logics. Additionally, most of the initiatives seem to agree about the market as a logical space for transformative political action. While some groups work specifically to create new niche markets, others aim to compete within conventional ones. In other cases, initiatives are able to create tailored markets (consumers´ groups with farmers), but only a few of them (community-supported agriculture and bike repair shops) avoid traditional market relations. For example, community energy initiatives work mainly to position themselves as energy producers or distributors in their national markets, with the objective of being reliable and greener alternatives to conventional profit-seeking energy companies. However, the commonly heard discourse around civic involvement, empowerment, participation, and democratization of energy is somehow incomplete or partial, since they still adopt a hierarchical company structure, benefit from relatively low levels of engagement which translate into decisions in practice being taken by the board, and offer shares for individuals to become members (GER1, SP3). In others, membership is decided based on private property rights, as is the case of FIN2 whose members are forest owners providing wood for producing energy and distributing it in their municipality. Although initiatives imagine that they work towards "wealth redistribution, a property regime shift where cooperative's members are co-owners of the cooperative, with equal rights and responsibilities, taking part of a collective project" (Member, SP3), the extent to which current structures and priorities might achieve these objectives is questionable. Our data reveals that the produced wealth is shared only among those who have the assets or capital to invest, the co-ownership means in practice to become a consumer-member, and members' participation is actually restricted to certain issues decided in a yearly assembly.


**Figure 8: Assembly in an energy consumers' cooperative. Photo credit: Som Energia**

Furthermore, influenced by an imaginary imprinted by responsibilization and individualism, the CBEs analyzed often envision an entrepreneurial way of solving societal and environmental problem, one linked to individual agency. Under this vision, societal change is meant to be brought by (like-minded and capable) people who start a project to solve some societal issues or who decide to replicate it. The way in which CBEs' members envision replication demonstrates a strong economic-centered vision linked to individual capacity and self-improvement, self-organization, and ability to acquire certain assets (land, windfarms, material, facilities, etc.). In the case of SCO2, the entrepreneurial and business perspective is explicit. The aims of the CBE are summarized by a trustee as: "To make [the village] a better place to live in, better place to work in, better place to enjoy yourself in, to entertain yourself in" (Trustee). To achieve this goal, members aim at moving away from grant-dependency to obtaining assets that they can run as a semi-commercial activity that can provide regular income. They have long attempted to develop renewable energy as a source of income through land access, feasibility studies for micro-generation of energy, and a 'community share' of a local wind farm development. In this case, the community can be considered as a social business, quite close to the traditional neoliberal conception of the third sector, encouraging an enterprise model to address community needs, some linked to energy and some broader ones linked to town center regeneration and improvement of sports and leisure facilities. Here, a member from SCO2 highlights the important role that a reliable source of income – an asset – can have to strengthen the relationship between members and beneficiaries:

> "What I was always pursuing for the communities was any form of sustainable entrepreneurial involvement, because in the same way that trade is said to stop wars, it can also be involved in building communities and building strong communities... Because if people have a... literally… a stake in something that's happening, then they literally have ownership – it's not something you have to invent, they can

> actually see it and touch it. And the more tangible that can be made, then the stronger will be the bonds for the people that are doing it." Councilor, SCO2

In sum, due to an imaginary that highly relies on the capacity of society to organize itself around community markets and to propose alternatives within this market framework, CBEs might be replicating certain neoliberal conditions promoting individual freedom and consumerism. The possible role of public bodies to regulate the delivery of environmental benefits or to promote sustainability in their territories as well as the need of initiatives to help bringing such conversations to the political arena are generally absent from the alterative imaginary of change. The acceptance of the alienation of the state from the economy and from civil society is what I focus on next.

b. Creating self-absorbed "alternatives" and favoring state retreat

With the advance of neoliberalism, state functions are often reduced to the regulation of certain sectors, and the state tends to appear as an intruder when it intervenes into the activities of otherwise free economic agents or in the free choices of particular members of civil society (Jessop, 2002). In line with this argument, civic society initiatives have been criticized by neoliberalism critics for helping to externalize certain state services, including environmental protection, beautification of public space, green mobility, social well-being, or provision of affordable energy, etc. Most of the interviewees seem to believe that CBEs should actually be taking over state responsibilities, especially because they consider state agencies as ineffective and undesirable for the delivery of specific services. As others have pointed out, the re-definition of the proper limits of the public intervention can be considered as a major achievement of the neoliberal governmentality (Lockie and Higgins, 2007; Peck and Tickell, 2002). In this context, CBEs seem more as alternatives to a weak state than to the market economy. For instance, in Germany, the energy cooperative GER1 is bidding for the control of the Berlin energy grid in response to a general distrust towards state control of the energy grid, as this respondent explains:

> "What do you think was the people's motivation to engage in the initiative?" Interviewer
>
> "(…) There are also a lot of people who don't want to see [the grid] in the hands of a private company. On the other hand, there are also a lot of people who think that letting it run by a public company is also not the best option. You could formulate it in a negative way that there is distrust. But in many ways there is also just the wish to take on responsibility." Chair, GER1

Additionally, under the alternative imaginary, many CBEs show a persistent reluctance to raising political claims to institutional local or regional structures because of their priority to make their benefits available for all and to remain as autonomous structures from the dominant socio-economic system. While the mere act of alternative modes of consumption can be regarded as a political project, especially when it supports the development of a local economy, critical scholarship on community economies reminds us that these consumption acts might be preventing larger contestation of the "mainstream" economic system and its accompanying social injustices (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Johnston, 2008; Trapese Collective, 2008; Zitcer, 2014). However, the respondents often seem to be taking for granted the separation of the state from the economy, which is one of the premises of the neoliberal program (Jessop, 2002).

This imaginary reveals indeed a limited commitment towards influencing policy. Many of the CBEs members are rarely engaged in discussions or confrontations with policy makers since they consider this strategy as ineffective (in many cases from previous experiences in these or others initiatives). As a result, some initiatives choose to remain "closed" and inward looking. While values and practices dictated by the globalized neoliberal economy are seen as the major enemy to oppose (globalization, free market, pollution, climate change), members do not often seem to connect these problems with the state – but rather with an independent and overpowering economic logic. For instance, while initiatives offering food products might articulate a clear discourse against the globalization of food markets and the large-scale conventional agriculture, their usual position is to avoid confronting the structures that create and control those markets. They often de-legitimize political institutions as a possible target for driving change. This position does not acknowledge that a more sustainable and locally-controlled food system will necessarily require new legislations and policy environments in order to protect the community model from market appropriation. In other words, in line with the neoliberal emphasis on autonomy and free choice, there is an extended belief among members that lack of regulation is a key part of the communities' freedom and autonomy – even if, in many cases, regulations could actually extend the outreach of CBEs and also protect their, activities, especially against the takeover of large firms or corporations (in the alternative food production and commercialization, for instance).

The perception that the political (in the sense of institutional politics) is negative or obsolete is often present in the imaginary of CBEs' members. Many claim that "old politics" are broken and that there is no point in trying to fix failed practices (e.g. through protest, demonstration or negotiation). Interviews reveal that members imagine indeed that everyday (micro)politics can replace institutional politics. This quote from a member of IT2, a CBE offering plots for gardening, weekly

food baskets, an organic restaurant and a self-organized library, illustrates the type of politics the initiative aims to be part of:

> "Which are your motivations for running this activity?" Interviewer
>
> "(…) What I like here is the relationship with people, which is not the typical political activity. Offering a place where youngsters in their 20s can come and study, socialize and develop ideas or offering retired people a green place where to develop some activities. I think this is a kind of political action that makes use of social presences as leverage and not of political activism, not of slogans but [of] everyday practices and the constant effort to spread the idea that to build different relationships is possible." Member, IT2

This collective strategy reflects some decisions related to the delivery of welfare services, social relations and political action taken at the individual level.

Additionally, some CBE members reject the idea of overt political activism and confrontation, which they simplify into a debate on legality vs. illegality. They view the confrontation of hegemonic political economic structures as contentious politics that would hardly be able to change regulations. Under this imaginary, these organizations choose to remain more pragmatic and less politically confrontational. Many of the interviewees see political activism as a secondary priority or as a practice that can be done by lobby or advocacy organizations. CBEs' lack of developed political activism seems to be justified by the creation of the small and sometimes leisurely spaces of engagement that communities represent. Many CBE members seem to appreciate the possibility of an easy, fun, and pleasant participation – that is a type of intermediate and comfortable activism that requires moderate commitment beyond making individual decisions regarding sustainable consumption. When asked about what she enjoys about her participation in the initiative, a member of SP3 explains "To me basically, it seems kind of funny to do things like these. Only for having fun, people should try". To this respect, there is a different imaginary, which I found specifically in a Scottish initiative offering cheap and healthy food to members of a university campus and which also using the space of the café to raise awareness on issues of injustice and inequity. This imaginary reckon the need to "create spaces of contestation and not only spaces to be happy in" (Volunteer, SCO1).

Despite the frequent reluctance to raise radical claims, some spaces and instances of interaction between CBEs and political institutions do exist. These often emerge through negotiations with

local institutions over services or product provision, or through funding schemes at local or state level. The CBEs analyzed have different levels of institutional financial support, many of them benefiting from subsidies or receiving funding from public institutions. Here, CBE members perceive municipalities or regions as "clients" (i.e., municipalities buying organic food produced by CBEs to offer it to local schools; municipalities contracting clean energy from CBE organized as alternative cooperatives, such as SCO2, FIN2, SP3 or GER1) or "funders" (offering subsidies, grants, allowing the use of public buildings, etc.) rather than targets of demands for social or political change. Yet, by restricting claims to the state to the material and technical aspects that make their initiatives able to survive and function, initiatives seem to render the impacts of the communities more self-absorbed and localized. The space/possibilities institutions open for collaboration with grassroots economies are indeed generally reduced and temporary, including funding schemes for certain activities/materials, invitations to workshops, or participation as stakeholders in decision making processes. In the case of IT1, the biking initiative in Rome benefits from an agreement with the local authority to secure a space for its activities, but the municipality has not been showing interest in the activities of the community, as a member reported:

> "Institutions have never said anything on our activity, we do not have any relation of any kind, the only exception is that we pay a rent, but we don't even know who is the person in charge for this rent (…) They have never shown any interest in what we do here." Volunteer, IT1

As a result of an imaginary based on individual responsibilization and which minimally questions the broader socio-economic conditions in which these islands of community organizations are formed, the discourses about CBEs' role in challenging existing social structures (or social stratification) might seem weak and underdeveloped. These specific discourses downplay the role of structural inequalities in ensuring a wider access to the products and services offered by CBEs. They thus also downplay the need for more radical and equitable political change, favoring communities' self-governance over state institutions' mediation for a fair and guaranteed distribution of environmental benefits. In the following subsection I focus on the imaginaries related to such social systems and the role of the initiatives in bringing a more equal and just society.

c. Naturalizing inequity and reproducing unequal access to environmental goods and benefits

In general, I observe that a common discourse around justice and equity presented by respondents seem to reproduce patterns of exclusion and privilege which characterize the socio-political and economic hegemonic system in which they indirectly or directly operate. Although often (correctly) justified by arguments related to material factors such as "not our priority", "we cannot reach

everyone," the reality is that under the alternative imaginary, CBEs might be consolidating the environmental privilege of those who are conscious and able to self-organize by accepting neoliberal rules of responsibilization, self-organization, and market-based economy.

First, the imaginaries developed by initiatives seem to reproduce neoliberal patterns of domination or exclusion through a lack of consideration of the interests, needs and capacities of groups beyond their traditional closer networks. The reliance on small autonomous communities that this imaginary assumes, seems to accept the idea of conditional services - only those with willingness and capacity to participate in the initiatives are deserving certain services (or privileges) (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014). Even though CBE members claim that the work of initiatives changes resources distribution and power relations, the way in which this distribution occurs, the rationale for it, and the selection of society members among whom it is distributed are questions that have not so far received much attention within communities. While most of the initiatives assert that they are open to everyone they fail to recognize that colorblindness can be exclusionary and reflect metaprivileges: the inability to recognize one's own privilege (Flagg, 2005; Slocum, 2007). Even though, in some cases, CBE members express solidarity and a sense of communitarianism with marginalized groups – for instance through providing training workshops, disseminating political campaigns outside their circles, or participating in neighborhood activities, – I observe that most of the activities that CBEs organize for socially vulnerable groups seem rooted in assistance and paternalistic patterns. As in the case of IT1, initiatives often favor the distinction between members who give and members who receive, rather than creating truly equal and cooperative spaces in which such distinctions would be avoided.

> "We have also helped people who used to sleep under the bridges: they wanted to use the bike but they didn't have money to pay. We always gave the same answer: don't worry, someone else for a small work will leave 20 euros, and with this money he/she will pay also for what we are now giving you." Volunteer, IT1

As others have noted, community economies are formed by a homogeneous like-minded group of people who have projected a specific vision of how the social change to achieve should look like. They have rendered other visions invisible and unheard (Guthman 2008c; Slocum 2007; Alkon and Agyeman 2011a; Trapese Collective 2008). However, discourses about "organic food", "back-to-the-land" or "livable city" might involve different connotations and meanings for certain social classes or ethnicities. Consequently, their monolithic use by CBEs might alienate some people, and discourage individuals from different social or cultural backgrounds from joining the initiatives. The interviewees often fail to recognize such differences, and tend to play "politics of conversion"

instead of "politics of respect" (Childs, 2003, in DuPuis and Goodman, 2005). Respect is present when change is focused on articulating open, continuous and reflexive processes that bring together people to explore and discuss possible futures. In contrast, most of the initiatives I studied attempt to change the world exclusively by converting others to the change they have decided, as illustrated by a stakeholder of FIN1:

> "When you start acting sustainably, in a good way, in a respectful way towards the others, then the others start wondering and look 'that is how we should act (...) There is no point to rage against, but [a need] to act with kindness." Stakeholder, FIN1

In some cases, responses from interviewees reflect victimization and villanization of the "other" (Busa and Garder, 2015), as they see those who do not participate in the initiatives as lacking resources and knowledge (victims), or as just unwilling to act in a responsible way (villains). Questions on who is entitled to solve environmental problems under this imaginary might be pertinent here. In addition, many CBEs' members I engaged with tend to take for granted that "alternative" services are naturally more expensive and that people should be willing to pay more for such services, as illustrated by this comment from a volunteer from SP1. When asked about how she envisions the community project in five years, she/he answered:

> "It´s not so clear to me [that the sales will increase] (…) The project cannot increase the prices much, because people will buy in a different place. That's what I mean by people's consciousness. How much is your life going to change if you pay that much money? People say "organic agriculture is expensive", but I think it's expensive because their priorities are buying a new car or travelling. If your priority was food, it wouldn´t be expensive. And that's a problem of general consciousness; of how much people are willing to spend" Volunteer, SP1

The lack of recognition of others' priorities and capacities, together with a paternalistic vision within CBEs, leads to the unintentional reproduction of patterns of exclusion, even when their members try to act for the benefit of marginalized populations. An example of this pattern is illustrated in GER2, which has a recognized limited ability to integrate minorities and poor residents in its scheme of food recycling. The exclusion is two-fold. First, it assumes that everyone perceives receiving food waste as a sustainable and socially accepted gesture, and not as rather something denigrating or as charity. When asked about the different members who participate in the initiative, this participant underlies the assumption that everyone would eat recycled food if they had access to the initiative:

> "Also the professions and everything gets mingled (…) and it has nothing to do with culture or ancestry or color or religion because everybody needs to eat and everybody wants food to be something valuable." Member, GER2

Additionally, when initiatives adopt a hierarchical organizational structure with management positions reserved to educated members and put in place selection procedures for new members, they open new spaces of exclusion. By adding a step to participate in an initiative, they potentially deter newcomers from joining. In GER2, the expansion of the initiative translated into the creation of a quiz for interested members, which became an exclusionary barrier for people to participate:

> "[In the quiz] there are some difficult questions and you really have to be informed and also about the ideology, if you can say so. It´s not like a doctrine or something, but really this means a comfortable and nice and sensible way of interacting" Member, GER2

Here, the selection of new members reflects choices of people with similar motivations, values, and a certain type of knowledge – and likely excludes alternative new voices. Through such rules, the members of this CBE impose a certain vision of what is "alternative" and do not offer much space for questioning or enriching it.

In several cases, CBEs might be unintentionally reproducing exclusionary practices through their focus on environmental issues over social priorities (Allen et al., 2003). Our data reveals that most CBEs have not yet made the link between environmentalism and other forms of discrimination, or that they believe that discrimination will be tackled by making changes in everyday practices. Members often imagine that CBEs' work manages to benefit the society as a whole thanks to a trickle-down or domino effect. In their views, their power as social movement and their irruption as new political actors in the socio-environmental arena will help changing power structures, which will ultimately benefit more disadvantaged populations. Some members consider that, strategically, CBEs should focus on changing the "alternative milieu" or "low hanging fruits" first, with the idea that, later, other sectors will benefit, as a member of IT1 highlights: "[Our] attention is on certain people with certain lifestyles, more eco, more savings, more sustainable [lifestyles], but then others come (…) like a domino effect" (Member, IT1). The belief in the trickle-down effect is also a common neoliberal attitude and discourse.

Furthermore, in practice, it is unclear how such a domino effect will take place and which spectrum of society will truly benefit from the expansion of the alter-economy paradigm, especially so since CBEs do not tend to develop objectives and strategies to address environmental and social

inequities. Some members justify at times the exclusivity of CBEs. They consider that they are limited by external structural constraints, such as the lack of economic resources and of environmental awareness by the large majority of the society. However, a contradiction emerges: While many interviewees are skeptical about the ability of the state to solve environmental (and other) challenges, they seem to trust the system to address issues of inequality and poverty, which many interviewees describe as "someone else's problem". A board member of SP3 explains: "At the moment SP3 cannot become a charity… The problems the system created, the energy poverty and all that are responsibility of those who created them".

In many cases, the inequitable access to these communities – and therefore to certain environmental benefits – of other members of society remains unquestioned by CBEs' members, and even naturalized. In fact, the way many of the interviewees envision change does not attempt to address distributional inequities but rather to eliminate corporate or government monopoly over decisions, resources, and profit. Many interviewees acknowledge that they are perceived as cliquey and elitist, but that they consider these perceptions as inevitable.

Whether these communities will be able to move beyond "usual suspects" and challenge current socio-political paradigms remains an open question. So far, the community economy practiced by these initiatives relies on wealth or knowledge to bypass mainstream economic rules and practices. As long as visions around equity and justice still embrace paternalistic and exclusionary patterns and do not make the connection between environmentalism and other forms of exclusion, it seems that community economy initiatives will continue to expand and consolidate a form of environmental privilege.

## 5. Discussion and concluding remarks: The neoliberal legacy within community initiatives

The literature about community or consumer activism has pointed that certain projects might be unintentionally reproducing neoliberal forms and spaces of societal and economic organization by embracing neoliberal rationalities (Guthman 2008a; Guthman 2008b; Rosol 2012; Busa and Garder 2015; Ghose and Pettygrove 2014; DuPuis and Goodman 2005; Bondi and Laurie 2005 among others). In this chapter, I have attempted to contribute to this scholarship by examining how certain imaginaries of change and justice of community economies' members might be unintentionally reproducing neoliberal rationalities of rule. I have also paid attention to the implications for the movement of developing a particular collective imaginary of change and justice, which I called the alternative imaginary of change, which more often than not responds to neoliberal promises of

individual freedom and autonomy. I have seen how the expansion of this imaginary is based on and reproduces social and environmental privileges.

My results show that members of diverse types of projects in different countries exhibit common neoliberal rationalities that permeate their imaginaries about desired social change, possible strategies to achieve it, and the role of alternatives in bringing this change. The sense of responsibilization to solve societal and environmental problems, the focus on individual endeavors, the perception of the state as an intruder, and the ideas of equity based on equal responsibilities and choice, which are all assimilated in the alternative imaginary, reveal that initiatives are shaped by a neoliberal legacy: the neoliberal mentalities of rule that decide what is possible and desirable.

By analyzing the imaginaries of change of members of the community economy, I have shown that community economies often aim to "correct" certain societal and environmental problems, but that they arguably do so while ignoring/accepting or even reproducing the structural conditions that feed these problems. I mention here three of these conditions. First, by reproducing the narrative that "we should take responsibility" for existing problems (social division, health, climate change…), they help to obscure the lack of meaningful state intervention to overcome such problems. Neoliberal conditions of consumerism, competition, market economy and inequity can feed into a counter-narrative about the causes of such problems. Under the alternative imaginary, CBEs members do not articulate a form of advocacy to fight structural factors of exclusion, for instance, and instead are determined to solve problems that are achievable by individual endeavors and desires for self-improvement.

Second, by promoting the belief that public institutions are unable to or not responsible for successfully providing goods and services, communities might help to legitimize neoliberal attempts of dispossessing the state from its economic and societal functions, which are increasingly attributed to financial institutions or public-private enterprises operating with market mechanisms. The idea that communities can survive outside the state omits the fact that it is because of a particular institutional environment that these communities exist as marginal and "alternative," navigating in a status quo that remains largely unquestioned/unchallenged.

Third, the argument about the state retreat seems to favor the privileged, who are able to exclude themselves from the public sphere and move into a private existence in which they put their efforts on improving their quality of life and protecting their "premium ecological enclaves" (Hodson and Marvin, 2010). Community economies seem to reproduce environmental and social privilege by

relying on individuals' capacities to self-organize and commit to the self-provision of certain goods and services and by advancing the argument of the trickle-down effect of their work.

If neoliberalism is impure and operates among other systems in contradictory – but arguably effective – ways (Peck and Tickell, 2002), it can be argued with no fatalism that resistance necessarily operates in contaminated and impure forms within the context it struggles against (Bondi and Laurie, 2005). Accordingly, we can argue that community economies might be better understood as hybrids of neoliberalism and resistance, but more importantly, as components of power (Crane, 2012; Rose, 2002; Saldanha, 2008). Although a selective and conscious engagement with neoliberal logics might be useful and inevitable (Bradley and Galt, 2014; Ferguson, 2010), I call for attention on the outcomes of such engagement. In this study, I observe that certain logics reproduce neoliberal conditions and forms of governance that undermine CBEs' more radical possibilities and, as the community economy gets legitimatize in society, it has the potential to obscure more diverse voices of transformation.

As a result, the outcome of these autonomous communities in regard to societal change is still open. It depends not only on the engagement with neoliberal – or other – discourses but also on questions of how far community economies are aware of this reality and critically engage in contesting the state. This involves seeking its transformation in order to change the conditions under which these communities are rendered "alternative" and under which these services have often become private goods for a few. I suggest that any potential contribution to change requires the recognition and confrontation of the privileged progressive whiteness that permeate their discourses and practices. I also call for paying attention to the risks of utopian subjectivity: one-fits-all solutions, trickle-down ideas and privileged narratives around socio-environmental relations and concerns.

There is much potential to create new political openings and to fiercely negotiate with the state using the – often – privileged position of CBEs members to create dialogues in different spaces where different perspectives of societal change can be heard. Despite their apparent lack of political engagement these initiatives are accepted in the public discourse and interest (they are recognized as agents of social change, as subject of research, they are funded, etc.), while more marginal or radical spaces or possibilities do not get such status. Although I agree with Larner that relevant political formations might arise from these experiments (2015) I believe in the power of resistances from those more affected by the neoliberal conditions which continue to emerge and confront the conditions of neoliberalism. To "insert alternatives into oppositional strategies with a transformative horizon" (Calvário and Kallis, 2016) would allow community initiatives to move from spaces to be

“happy” into critical spaces for political activism and change. Such an evolution might thus be a matter of imagining further.

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# CHAPTER 4

## Alternatives Entangled: The construction of farmer trainings in the U.S.

***"How are problems brought into perception to become actionable, to become objects and relations to be named, governed, acted on, and intervened in? Problems are in part fashioned out of the very solutions that presupposed them (…) The work of bringing a problem into being is also inevitably, as is in all work, the exercise of power on uneven conditions"***

Michelle Murphy

## 1. Introduction

Since the 80s, the industrialization and globalization of agriculture have led to a crisis in the farming sector, as illustrated by the sector's low profitability for small farmers and low farm incomes, the high levels of land concentration, the negative social impacts (i.e. the rural exodus) as well as the environmental impacts (including climate change) associated to the scale and practices of agri-food industry production and distribution models, or health risks associated to food production, among others (Lawrence et al., 2004; Magdoff et al., 2000). This crisis requires political solutions including policy changes and novel programs that tackle these challenges. A growing solution to this crisis is the promotion of sustainability-oriented farmer training programs (FTPs hereafter) that would incentivize the emergence of new, socially and environmentally engaged farmers who would eventually compensate or solve some elements of that crisis.

FTPs are one of the most recent phenomena supporting the revival of the farming profession in the United States. It is difficult to know the exact number of existing FTPs, but only in the period of 2009 to 2012, 119 such projects were awarded a Beginner Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) grant from U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Many things have converged to make farmer training programs all the rage across U.S. These include the putative decline of the American farmer, whose numbers declined 63% in the last century (Dimitri et al., n.d.); the concern with the loss of farmers of color due in a greater extent to the coloniality of U.S. agricultural policy (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011; Almaguer, 2009; Graddy-Lovelace, 2017); and finally, the romanticization of farming stemming from the recently reinvigorated sustainable agriculture movement (Guthman, n.d.). This last issue has contributed greatly to the revalorization of the farming profession and thus to a greater interest in FTPs. This trend is motivated by environmental concerns over the sustainability of corporatized industrialized global agriculture which has reinforced the figure of the local small scale or family farmer (Guthman, 2014).

Farmer trainings align with alternative food networks (Goodman et al., 2014) goals "to revitalize the small farm sector and repopulate rural landscapes with socially and environmentally diversified farms" (Calo, 2018, p. 1). Indeed, FTPs are one of the new farmer's entry point to the production side of AFNs: Since most of these courses are sustainability oriented, it is logical that the emerging farmers will be inserted in such networks. Despite the rise of FTPs in the environmental non-profit world and the (alternative) farming community, much remains to be understood about their significance in the current agrarian context, their process of institutionalization and their implications for the equity and justice in the future of farming.

Although many studies have celebrated the positive effects of these and other alternative spaces in socio-economic, political and environmental realms (Bailey et al., 2010; Conill et al., 2012; Seyfang, 2010), more critical voices have revealed the difficulty of alternative programs and initiatives to overcome the structural constraints embedded in these alternatives to achieve a more profound socio-environmental transformation (Busa and Garder, 2015; Guthman, 2008; Mostafanezhad et al., 2015). Furthermore, these initiatives have been pointed at for their lack of diversity, their inability to address inequitable access to healthy foods, or for the white cultural domination permeating them (Slocum, 2007). Despite acknowledging that alternatives might not be able to overcome some attributes generally associated with conventional-capitalist spaces, a more nuanced perspective still sees a progressive possibility in alternative practices (Calvário and Kallis, 2016; Gibson-Graham, 2006; Slocum, 2007). Here, FTPs provide an interesting case for analysis because, as education venues, food production sites, and places of connection to the land, they are often constituted by diverse members - in opposition to the more exclusive sites of consumption such as farmers markets (Alkon and McCullen, 2011) - with varied aspirations, goals, and visions for farming and the food system. They are also initiatives heavily institutionalized and funded, in contrast to more grassroots or self-organized spaces (i.e., food coops and CSAs, farmers' markets and regional quality strategies).

This study aims to contribute to the debate in political ecology on the possibilities of alternative food practices (AFNs herein after) for radical socio-environmental transformation (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011; Calvário and Kallis, 2016; Giraldo and Rosset, 2018). Political ecology has called for re-interpreting and representing ecological problems, and more recently, solutions to those problems (Cavanagh and Benjaminsen, 2017). I support here the recent shift in political ecology to expand the field's central thesis - that broader political-economical forces affect the conditions in which exploitation and degradation of natural resources occur – to the analysis of the structural forces shaping and constraining proposed alternatives to those problems (Robbins, 2004). Here, I provide an empirical account of the construction of farmer trainings as a solution to the farming crisis, as well as the possibilities, tensions and contradictions embedded in them through a qualitative analysis of FTPs in the U.S.

This study responds to the lack of empirical research on training initiatives within AFNs and on their constrained contributions to radical socio-environmental transformation. It is also driven by an empirical observation related to a dissonance in the organizations conducting training programs between, on the one hand, the main optimistic narrative constructed by the organizations themselves and the media, donors, or public agencies supporting these trainings, and, on the other hand, the

skepticism of individuals involved in the programs about their ability to bring and sustain new farmers in a challenging environment. Thus, I ask: How do imaginaries and political economic structures around sustainable farming situate FTPs as viable solutions to the farming crisis?

The chapter proceeds as follows. After situating the trainings in the broader movement of AFNs (section 2), I place the study in the current debates about alternatives, their contradictions and possibilities (section 3). In section 4 I describe the study design and methodological aspects. Then, I analyze the imaginaries and structures at play in the construction of these trainings as the solution to the farming crisis (section 5). In section 6 I present a summary of results and discuss them in view of recent advances on the politics of alternatives in political ecology.

## 2. Sustainable farmer trainings as entry points to AFNs

Farmer trainings are pedagogical hands-on-oriented courses in which the art and science of farming are taught. These are different from the formal agriculture degrees traditionally offered in land-grant Universities (i.e. agrarian engineering), as FTPs remain outside the formal education system. They are generally managed by NGOs or educational institutions (more to less formal). Commonly, the trainings consist of two parts: a more theoretical element in which farming techniques, crop planning, regulations or marketing strategies are taught in classes, and a hands-on element in which apprentices acquire practical skills in demonstration farms. Field visits to other projects are commonly included. Some FTPs include a third phase of incubation, in which organizations accompany trainees in the starting of their own businesses, often under low-price land lease agreements. Some training programs – those oriented towards young educated people - include a residential aspect in which all apprentices live in a semi-intentional community for the duration of the training. The trainings generally last for 6 months up to 1 year (or one growing season). FTPs have received direct institutional support from 2008, with the allocation of $150 million budget in the Farm Bill for the BFRDP grants, under which eligible organizations (NGOs, private institutions of higher education and land-grant Universities) receive money – up to $750,000 - to develop trainings for a number of years (often three).

Given the rapid increase in the number of trainings, it is surprising that they have so far attracted limited research interest. In particular, they have not been inserted in the scholarly debate around AFNs (Goodman et al., 2014 for an overview). Yet, FTPs align with several alternative food movement goals, including the revitalization of the small farm sector and the repopulation of rural landscapes with socially and environmentally diversified farms (Calo, 2018; Goodman and Goodman, 2001). Today's emerging farmers are likely to be influenced by the recent prominence of

AFNs, which have opened up market opportunities through direct distribution channels by revaluing local, organic and artisanal food. Prospective farmers participating in the training programs are likely to feed alternative markets in the future since a majority of the trainings are oriented towards sustainable or organic production (Niewolny and Lillard, 2010).

The generalized concerns about the decline in the number of farmers on the one hand, and the new opportunities for small local farms created by the rise of AFNs on the other, have reinforced the mostly white, back-to-the-land movement, but they have as well provided opportunities for migrants that scale-up from farmworkers to running their own operations (Guthman, 2017; Minkoff-Zern, 2018). Hence, same FTPs are directed towards migrant farmworkers who aim to start their own business. Moreover, farming and gardening are considered as bringing an array of social and health benefits to at-risk communities, including community wellbeing or employment opportunities (Pudup, 2008). Indeed, some FTPs are being oriented to historically marginalized populations.

In this study, I use sustainability-oriented farmer trainings as an illustration of the institutionalization (i.e. the acceptance, adoption, support and regulation by the state and other institutions with regulatory power, by which the values, the language and the imaginaries around FTPs are increasingly incorporated into society) of an alternative-provisioning strategy for socio-environmental change within the food production system. In this case, FTPs are aimed at shifting or compensating the effects of the conventional agri-food system. Similarly to other AFNs spaces, these trainings aspire to create more small scale sustainability-oriented farms while providing more alternatives to consumers and making possibilities of different economies and politics more visible. The way to contest or compete with the industrialized corporate agriculture model is through incremental shifts in the food system. However, in the case of FTPs, the alternative strategy might unintentionally bring individualistic and entrepreneurial logics that push farmers to the deck without necessarily questioning or fighting the conditions in which farming is performed (Beckett and Galt, 2014; Calo, 2018). Moreover, without further intervention, the benefits of the trainings are unequal, and create "a selective pressure on the types of farming and farmers that can truly enter the system" (Calo, 2018, p. 3). As a result, the institutionalization of FTPs needs to be further scrutinized as an important element of the current dynamics around AFNs.

3. The (political ecology) debate around alternatives

In the context of socio-environmental change, alternatives are sites (spaces, initiatives, organizations) to which some sort of difference is attached in relation to a mainstream Other (Fuller

et al., 2010). The capacity of these initiatives to transform society is commonly debated through a discourse of alternative vs mainstream; where mainstream represents a capitalist corporate model of commodity production and consumption and alternative symbolizes attempts to reform this dominant system by bringing examples of thriving possibilities (Wilson, 2013). The results from chapter 3 show that alternatives are often attached to an imaginary of change that sees them as able to bypass socio-political and economic configurations. Common alternatives studied in the context of socio-political and environmental change in the Global North are, beyond AFNs, barter groups, energy cooperatives, community economy initiatives, etc. Such initiatives are seen as "liminal social spaces of possibility" (Harvey, 2012), as nowtopias (Kallis and March, 2014), as experiences that organize differently, bringing new shared rules and practices (Raven et al., 2008) and aiming to create an environment of more local, self-organized, autonomous and resource efficient forms of organization. Furthermore, they are also praised for challenging hegemonic ideologies, resisting capitalistic logics, and empowering society (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014).

Alternatives are receiving scholarly attention in the field of political ecology, exploring the various ways in which these initiatives threaten to sustain or exacerbate social and economic inequalities, vulnerabilities, or injustices and power structures (e.g. Alkon and Agyeman, 2011; Allen, 2004; Anguelovski, 2015; Guthman, 2014, 2011; Hilbrandt and Richter, 2015; Slocum, 2007; Zitcer, 2014). Critical studies of the "alternative sustainabilities" in the Global North have often focused on the paradox that even "alternatives are in seeming opposition to what is bad, they work against broader transformation (…) because the creation of alternatives simultaneously produces place and people that for various reasons cannot be served by an alternative and therefore are put beyond consideration" (Guthman, 2011, p. 6). In the case of sustainability-led alternatives (such as AFNs), the paradox is reflected in the fact that the same (white educated) milieus governing with intellectual and moral leadership are behind the (socially accepted) alternatives as are those able to dictate new common senses (Rutherford, 2007). The relation of alternatives to environmental concerns –as alternatives seem to be necessarily environmentally sustainable –determines who is likely to be behind those proposed solutions, since the mainstream and accepted environmental movement is predominantly white (Finney, 2014; Zimring, 2015). Hence, contesting the environmentalist identity which often shapes alternatives requires paying attention to whose alternatives are been represented and why. Further, such 'alternative' discourses and practices also intersect with legacies of racial and class struggle (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011), demands for food and environmental justice (Agyeman and McEntee, 2014; Bradley and Herrera, 2016), and food and environmental privilege (Anguelovski, 2015).

When analyzing sustainability-led or sustainability-informed-alternatives from a political ecology perspective, an important question to bring to the conversation is how these "solutions" are entangled with broader processes and networks of power and capital (Forsyth, 2008; Perreault et al., 2015; Robbins, 2004). Some current debates are articulated around the position of these alternatives in relation to the mainstream economic wealth creation and accumulation system. Proponents of alternative economies often situate these initiatives as examples of economic diversity outside of capitalism (Gibson-Graham, 2006). Gibson-Graham use this argument to call for a strategy towards a post-capitalism consciousness, in which other forms of economic relations are highlighted against the overstated predominance of capitalist relations in discourse and episteme. In contrast, other scholars consider these alternative economies from the point of view of "entanglements," and argue that a vision of economic diversity might look optimistic and premature (Tsing, 2015). Entanglements are "attachments of material, technical, and social relations across divergent and even antagonistic terrains of politics" (Murphy, 2012, p. 12). From this perspective, political ecologist Anna Tsing proposes instead an idea of pericapitalistic (Murphy, 2012, p. 12) economies, one that recognizes the inevitable connections of capitalist and non-capitalist activities. In her views, "lives and products move back and forth from capitalistic and non-capitalistic forms, [shaping] each other" (Tsing, 2015, p. 65). Although her point is to recognize the non-capitalistic relationships on which capitalism depends, studies on alternatives' nature and potential have generally focused on the capitalistic forms on which more alternative economies depend.

From an entanglement perspective, alternative and mainstream systems are co-determined, conjoined, and mutually constituted (Goodman and DuPuis, 2002). For example, studies of AFNs have often pointed out the limited capacity of these initiatives to improve precarity itself, labor conditions for farmworkers, or farmers' self-exploitation (Allen et al., 2003; Calvário, 2017; Galt, 2013). The rise of AFNs in North America and Europe is connected to a revival of state-led rural development strategies (Goodman and Goodman, 2001). Quality certifications and other labels such as organics are assessed by private organizations and advance commodification of food and practices (Brown and Getz, 2008). Or as Johnston reminds "most food alternatives sit on shelves in conventional supermarkets, and the idea of food alternatives sits squarely with mainstream consumer discourse" (Johnston, 2017, p. 2).

Beyond economic, environmental and social materialities and tangible indicators, work on the rationales, logics, imaginaries and other empirical realities within alternatives has been developed to understand the genuine difference of alternatives in relation to the mainstream Other and to assess their emancipatory potential. In chapter 3, I have offered evidence on how the alternative imaginary

of change on community economies embraces some privileged narratives about how the world should look like as well as paternalistic ideas about those who do not envision the same outcome. Others have called to moderate the degree of alterity of these practices, questioning the subjective elements on which alterity is discussed (Fuller et al., 2010). Discerning aspirations, contradictions and tensions shows the immaterial complexity within alternative practices (Begueria Muñoz, 2016). Alternatives are often "caught in the middle" in terms of reconciling social, environmental, economic and other aspirations, not only due to the requirements of funding (as the case in Dolhinow, 2005 for NGOs) but also to internal debates and confronting imaginaries (Sekulova et al., 2017) and contradictory ideals (Johnston, 2017). The issue of exclusivity and social justice emerge critically to this respect, since alternatives tend to mobilize a selective understanding of social justice where certain issues remain absent – such as, in the case of food alternatives, labor issues, the rights of farmworkers, and more invisible effects of the rise of healthy foods (Allen et al., 2003; Anguelovski, 2015; Gray, 2013).

This recent research suggests that analyses of alternatives and alterity need further scrutiny. There is a need to better understand how alternatives are assessed as such, under which premises, which problems and which dimensions of those are tackled by them, how they interact with other systems (especially so when they are institutionalized), and what do those linkages mean for their social transformation horizon. In this study, I address these broader questions through the case of farmer trainings, an overlooked and primary element of the current forms of AFNs. Specifically, I ask: How do imaginaries and political economic structures around sustainable farming situate FTPs as viable solutions to the farming crisis?

## 4. Design and Methods

### **a.** Data collection and analysis

This article is based on the findings of a five-month fieldwork conducted in the San Francisco Bay Area and central coast of California between March and August 2017. This area is considered the cradle of the alternative food movement in the U.S, where sustainable agriculture and its associated market have been growing for over five decades (Allen et al., 2003; Guthman, 2014). The study is built upon a qualitative research using a case study approach, based primarily on participant and direct observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews and informal interviews, content analysis of trainings' material as well as recent media coverage on farmer trainings and emergent farmers. Interviews were carried out primarily with current apprentices (n= 9), alumni (n=9) and staff

members (n= 16) of four different FTPs (referred to as CESC, RUZ, OAM and SOL throughout the article to preserve their anonymity).

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and systematically coded. Observation and participant observation field work took place during advocacy events, celebrations, communal work days, classes, and volunteer farm work (as in Figure 9). Participation in such spaces led to a number of observations that I systematically recorded and coded. I held other interviews and conversations with organizations and individuals working on and around training programs, such as youth education through farming or urban farming. Evidence from the interviews, observation and participant observation was supplemented by documents and reports the organizations provided, media accounts about them, and web sources, as well as popular media and literature related to the issue of emerging farmers, whose content was analyzed. Throughout the article, I mention specific media sources in form of footnotes to illustrate my arguments. In particular, I paid special attention to the book "Letters to a Young Farmer", edited by the Stone Barns Center, a hub for emerging farmers linked to the Rockefeller Foundation. The book is sold at the farm stand of one of the trainings, featuring a contribution from the training's founders, as well as from important figures of the emerging farmers and sustainable agriculture movements.

**Figure 9: Volunteering "open day" at one of the FTPs' farms (CECS)**

**b.** Case-study description

The selection of programs was based on geography and typology. After identifying FTPs in the Santa Cruz and San Francisco areas, I contacted several of them asking whether I could conduct my research. The final four cases were selected based on criteria of diversity and representation of the

broad spectrum of trainings in this region. Three of them have a rural character while the one in the East Bay is more urban oriented. Three of them are managed by non-profits and the last one is developed by a sustainable agriculture center hosted in a public university. Three of them had been awarded a BFRDP grant while the other one hasn't (but it is considering applying in the next calls). Two of them (RUZ, CESC) have a residential component and are composed by more educated middle-class people. SOL is oriented to farmworkers mostly while OAM focuses on marginalized populations from Oakland (the first cohort was composed mostly by formerly incarcerated men, currently there are a majority of Black and Latina women). The training programs also vary in size (from 4-8 apprentices per year to 40) and trajectory (from two years to fifty). This diversity of organizations allows me to answer this study's core question about why these training programs exist and are promoted as a solution to the farming crisis despite increasing internal dissonance within them.

5. Imaginaries and structures at play in the making of farmer training programs

a. The imaginaries framing the problem: the lack of farmers

"America's heartland is graying. The average age of a farmer in the U.S. is 58.3 – and that number has been steadily ticking up upward for more than 30 years. Overall, fewer young people are choosing a life on the land" NPR news[1]

The farmer training programs are at first constructed as solutions because the farming crisis is simplified to a problem of lack of farmers, and hence, training new farmers seems to be the most natural solution. I found such imaginary present especially in USDA grant descriptions (which directly link farmer trainings with the issue of lack of farmers[2]) and in media accounts on the issue of emerging farmers. In accordance to this problem framing coming from above, the organizations running the trainings mobilize a rhetoric and imagery around lack of farmers, illustrated by slogans such as "growing farmers", "bringing the next generation of farmers" or "cultivating a movement" and the recurrent imagery of young people driving tractors, doing farm work or selling produce at farm stands in places such as organizations' websites and outreach materials[3,4].

[1] https://www.npr.org/2015/01/03/374629580/a-young-generation-sees-greener-pastures-in-agriculture

[2] https://nifa.usda.gov/program/beginning-farmer-and-rancher-development-program-bfrdp

[3] https://www.growafarmer.org/

[4] https://www.stonebarnscenter.org/engage/for-farmers/

In the U.S., the average age of farmers has steadily increased since 1982 (from 50.5 to 58.3), while the number of farms and the total farmland acreage has decreased since then (-4.3%, -0.8%) and radically in the last century (Dimitri et al., n.d.; Vilsack and Clark, 2014). The decreasing number of farms and the aging of farmers in the Western world is the effect of, among other drivers, decades of agri-food and economic policies which moved people from the rural to urban settings, changes in the economic structure around food businesses and food habits themselves (Wood, 2010). However, the lack-of-farmers imaginary situates the issue of lack of farmers at the center of the farming crisis, instead of seeing this decrease as either one of its dimensions or the consequences of a broader multi-layered problem (Beckett and Galt, 2014).

Although the problem of aging farmers and generational replacement is one of great importance, the imaginary around farmers' loss might be problematic when mobilized in the public rhetoric (often of progressive organizations) if it is not accompanied by an assessment of the structural reasons that create the decreasing number of farmers or an overall picture of the farming crisis. Remarkably, the imaginary feeds a quite depoliticizing narrative about the significance and possibilities of emerging farmers, which is installed as a social discourse in certain arenas, including popular media in U.S. Today or New York Times covering the issue of emerging farmers[5,6] and in farmer trainings themselves[7]. Often, the narrative around lack of farmers seems to suggest that the farmers have naturally gone extinct, hence risking to become an apolitical ecology (Robbins, 2004), in which a socio-ecological problem is simplified and decontextualized. It is problematic then that the lack-of-farmers imaginary feeds a meta-narrative with powerful support from different groups (from legislators, NGOs, media) that reinforce it through research and campaigning (Hajer, 2000; Roe, 2006). This meta-narrative has elevated the aging of farmers as a matter of concern, and has made this particular policy problem as politically dominant. There is a public acceptance and adoption of this narrative, illustrated by the frequent allusion to farmers' age by public institutions and organizations and public discourse as well as the growing media coverage of the topic.

Two primordial embedded imaginaries around farming seem to play a role in today's prominence of the lack-of-farmers imaginary, directly linked to the romanticization of the farming profession and the farmer figure, their moral superiority, and an underlying logic of "preserving farmers". These

[5] https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2018/02/18/musk-elons-brother-looks-revolutionize-urban-farmingurban-farm-brooklyn-parking-lot-expanding-other/314923002/

[6] https://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000003858200/the-roots-of-organic-farming-on-campus.html?playlistId=100000003772739&region=video-grid&version=video-grid-thumbnail&contentCollection=Mark+Bittman:+California+Matters&contentPlacement=0&module=recent-videos&action=click&pgType=Multimedia&eventName=video-grid-click

[7] http://www.pieranch.org/farmer-training.html

imaginaries are (a) the philosophical tradition of agrarianism (see Carlisle, 2014 for an overview) and (b) an eco-agrarian ethic in which "support for small, organic farmers is essential to environmental sustainability, community coherence and resistance to corporate power" (Alkon, 2013, p. 664). Due to an over-simplification, the imaginary is built on selected data and particular dynamics and misses some nuances. In response, the meta-narrative created around the lack of farmers sends an inaccurate message. By stating that the number of farmers is decreasing, it obscures the fact that not all the farmers are indeed disappearing: immigrant populations that eventually become farm operators or managers are indeed increasing. From 2002 to 2012 the number of Spanish, Hispanic or Latino origin farm operators in the U.S. increased 32% (Vilsack and Clark, 2014). In SOL, many of the apprentices are indeed running their own operations, and attend the training for the most part, in order to be able to participate in the incubator phase (so they can get subsidized land).

However, these numbers are not represented in the current discussions concerning agrarian transitions which seem more convinced or trapped by the overall discourse of farmers´ disappearance. For example, the majority of respondents I intervieweed do not consider that a lot of people do indeed know how to farm – farmworkers and others -and want to, but either cannot farm (due to a lack of land or good soil), do not want to be inserted in the capitalist food commodities market (as those featured in Bowens, 2015), or do it in unfair labor or market conditions. Except for the case of SOL, farmworkers are generally excluded from the picture depicted by farmer trainings, which reproduce conventional relations of farm manager - farmworker. However, if the skills, experience and assiduity of farmworkers (which are needed to become farm operator or farm owner) were recognized in the public discourse and policy-making spaces, the problem of the lack of farmers could turn into one of legalization of farmers (given the roadblocks to immigration).

The racial bias within the lack-of-farmers imaginary is also apparent in the media, where educated wealthy classes are systematically pointed at as the future of agriculture and those who can save the profession[8] (see Reynolds, 2015 for a similar observation). Recent public representations of the new farmers movement in NPR (National Public Radio) media reports show a young class of workers disenchanted with their career possibilities, or "young people choosing a life on the land"[9] neglecting that, for many immigrant farmers, farming is not what they choose to do, but rather, their only possible livelihood. The most celebrated emerging farmer class, the one with charisma, networks, access to resources and the elite, and represented by influential groups such as

[8] https://www.reuters.com/article/us-brooklyn-farm/an-urban-farm-grows-in-brooklyn-idUSKBN18X19I

[9] https://www.npr.org/2015/01/03/374629580/a-young-generation-sees-greener-pastures-in-agriculture

GreenHorns or the Stone Barns Center, benefit greatly from the extended idea that farmers are disappearing. NGOs and foundations linked to the environmental movement and sustainable agriculture (i.e. NSAC, Rural Coalition, National family Farm Coalition or Farm Beginnings Collaborative) have the ability to shape who is to be the next generation of farmers by advancing some regulations and programs mobilizing the lack of farmers imaginary, such as the BFRDP grant. Some states have even passed partial student debt forgiveness for beginning farmers (i.e. The NY State Young Farmers Loan Forgiveness[10]), which directs the future of farming towards the educated class. These regulations were often celebrated by interviewees, and claimed by popular food and farming media, such as the influential Civil Eats[11].

To sum up, the confluence of different elements constituting the lack-of-farmers' imaginary underpins a contemporary push towards the setting of FTPs. This embedded imaginary, however, seems impartial, incomplete and mostly white. It also feeds the funding apparatus that supports these trainings, which I analyze in the following subsection.

b. Privileged philanthropism and elite cultural consumption

"I am very convinced that we can [serve high quality organic food at schools and reconnecting children with food] in the next five years, because we have 50 years of organic farming in California, we have enlightened politicians (…) We have … billionaires (laughs). They help (laughs from the public). We have lots of them (laughs). I mean, wouldn't it be amazing if we could feed all of the children in California with California food? Let's keep all the money in the state. Let's keep it all here. But… what can I say? Vivre la revolution! Delicious!" Alice Waters, RUZ 50th anniversary

The construction of these trainings as feasible solutions to the farming crisis is also facilitated by mechanisms of wealth creation and reproduction, private capital and philanthropism, which the organizations are able to mobilize using narratives around lack of farmers and sustainable farming more broadly. The rise of environmental and social concerns about agriculture and the appreciation of local and small scale food projects among white educated middle class milieu coalesce around training programs for young sustainable farmers. Funding organizations or individuals compelled

[10] https://www.hesc.ny.gov/pay-for-college/financial-aid/types-of-financial-aid/nys-grants-scholarships-awards/new-york-state-young-farmers-loan-forgiveness-incentive-program.html

[11] https://civileats.com/2017/03/06/want-to-revitalize-rural-america-forgive-student-loan-debt-for-young-farmers/

by this vision and with enough capital stimulate their support by donating money to training programs[12]. In the current food frenzy, emergent farmers become a new target of philanthropism.

Private donors, holdings such as Bon Appétit, foundations such as Rockefeller, or businessmen like Kimbal Musk[13] (brother of Tesla's CEO) are helping young people boost the sustainable farming business. For example, OAM received a $600,000 loan from the Slow Money Institute, a "non-profit organization dedicated to catalyzing the flow of capital to local food systems"[14], among other donations from a myriad of sources. This case of an NGO working with a disenfranchised population of apprentices from West Oakland -- mostly Latina and Black women – benefiting from access to private funding, which the organization's educated progressive founders were able to harness, can create some tensions, awkwardness, and inequities within the organization. For example, during a class session in which one of the NGO funders explained to the apprentices the different sources of funding they were able to mobilize at the start of the project (including foundations, private donors, or loans from relatives or big organizations), it became obvious that the apprentices themselves do not have the same access to funding. The chances of these entrepreneurs of being able to succeed in the food or agriculture sector are limited. Under the philanthropic arrangement for capital, those who are able to mobilize more money are those who are entitled to solve the world's problems. This type of environmental privilege that operates in the AFNs - by which certain classes and races are disproportionally able to enjoy environmental amenities or recognition (Park and Pellow, 2011) - also contributes to the making of the trainings.

The other indirect funding source operating in these trainings - the selling of demonstration farms' produce at premium prices through common "alternative" venues such are farmer's markets, farm stands and weekly basket schemes - has naturalized social hierarchies in relationship to food access (Johnston and Baumann, 2010) and reproduced them over time. The fact that these trainings are located in the SF Bay Area, a major market for organic and other good foods, means that the demonstration farms have easy access to such markets. Although organizations try to combine those venues with less privileged ones (i.e. RUZ also distributes the produce in university cafeterias and among low income students), such a practice is not always easy to implement. In that regard, while SOL producers attempt to sell produce in Salinas, a predominantly Latino city where their training is based, they are in reality mostly selling to distributors linked to big organic supermarket chains (such as Trader Joe's, Whole Foods, etc.) (Figure 10). Some farmers from the SOL incubator are

[12] http://www.pieranch.org/2016-annual-report.html, page 9, Alex and Deb Fitz quote

[13] https://squarerootsgrow.com/

[14] https://slowmoney.org/about

inspired by food sovereignty ideals, but they are resigned to sell to those distributors for the sake of economic survival. Another hub for distributing "good food" is the nearby Silicon Valley, where tech companies (i.e. Airbnb, Google) buy food from another program – CESC, – which is then served in the employee cafeteria and offered to employees as optional weekly food baskets (like in the CSA model). Training organizations seem to accept that part of their work is funded by wealthy people attracted by popular imaginaries around land, farming and good food. The introductory quote above from Alice Waters, the guest speaker at the main event of RUZ's anniversary, a dinner with 500 attendees, sent a message revealing of the organization's strategies. This message conflicts with the parallel social justice claims of the organization which are mostly driven by a network of alumni of color and some staff members, who have struggled over the years against the whiteness of the training programs.

**Figure 10: Apprentices at SOL incubator phase harvesting for a big distributor**

A certain tension exists within these trainings between the desire to advance a more just food system and the need for wealthy money to sustain farm operations. I observe that this tension is especially hard or uncomfortable for apprentices and staff members coming from marginalized classes or races across trainings, who acknowledge that "if organizations stay white and socially acceptable within the bounds of white supremacy then yes, they could garner more money" (Staff member and former apprentice at CESC). Moreover, the issue of accountability to funding sources

creates the need for organizations to comply with the objectives or rationales of their donors. Money is directed to those able to mobilize the right sentiment or imaginaries among their donors, so organizations must be strategical about their message (e.g. include messages to satisfy the lack-of-farmers imaginary, even if not fully in agreement with it). For example, at CESC, Latino and Black apprentices and staff members reported some discomfort in a meeting held at the headquarter of the organization, in which a donor helped the farm team find reporting measures and indicators to make results attractive to other donors, for example, quantitative indicators to measure the impact of the organizations (e.g. number of farmers "created", visitors, and attendance to educational projects, among others).

In sum, as a vivid illustration of the contradictions in the politics of empowerment (Murphy, 2012), FTPs are constructed as solutions to the farming crisis by an existing funding apparatus (philanthropism and consumption elitism) based on particular imaginaries (i.e. romanticization of farming) as well as socially accepted norms (i.e. environmental privilege). In a capitalist system where wealthy money has the power to decide what deserves to be promoted, saved and funded, the cause of emerging farmers, as producers of healthy foods and sustainable futures, becomes a target of philanthropic ventures. Last, the broader governance processes in which FTPs are made deserves further attention when understanding the construction and popularity of these trainings.

**c.** NGOization of sustainable farming and responsibilization of the "farming hero"

"Each year, we embrace a group of new apprentices and interns involving them in every aspect of farming to help propel them forward as successful, organic farmers committed to social justice. Through directional and experimental learning, we build confidence in our new farmers to farm independently, responsibly and locally." CESC Annual Report 2016

In this last section, I argue that the making of FTPs as an intervention to solve the farming crisis is determined by neoliberal governance structures that promote the devolution of power into the NGO sector and responsibilization of individuals, that is, the "concomitant faith in civil society and its components, including NGOs and communities" to solve or compensate socio-environmental problems (McCarthy, 2006, p. 87).

FTPs can be seen as a strategy of the USDA and other public institutions to promote sustainable agriculture and domestic production and help reverse market failures associated with the more productivist-oriented agriculture (Buller and Morris, 2004). This strategy towards a post-productivist agriculture is often planned through the NGO complex, as illustrated by the BFRDP

(the most prominent funding program for FTPs), which assigns NGOs the task of solving the problem of the lack of farmers. Farming then becomes an object of the third sector – just as the environment, wildlife, childhood, etc. – and is hence susceptible to donations, evaluation, accounting and normalized visions of farming and farmers. It is this devolution of power from the state downwards and outwards which makes certain solutions or interventions possible, especially those which allow forms of "governing at a distance" (Rose and Miller, 1992). Moreover, the elevation of emerging farmers as a political concern constitutes a form of policy ambivalence – with rural depopulation being driven both by technological changes in the production system and deliberate policy goals aimed at reducing the number of farmers in the U.S. (Beale, 1964; Wood, 2010). In return, this ambiguity might further help the USDA to legitimize the current policy status quo, that is, an agricultural policy system geared towards the agri-food complex. At the same time, the existence, mission and programs of the non-profit fundraising and financing complex is reinforced and legitimized by the running of FTPs as a strategy for solving the farming crisis. It is a win-win solution for both the NGOs and the state.

The NGOization of the sustainable farming sector itself contributes to the construction and institutionalization of FTPs. As the imaginaries, visions and rationales around what food production means and what it entails in the U.S. context has changed, sustainable agriculture has become inserted in the non-profit and third sector domains (examples in Guthman, 2008d; Pudup, 2008; Rosol, 2010). One can argue that the sustainable food production sector is commonly seen and treated as a social and not a productive economic sector (which is what the conventional agri-food business come to represent). That is the case of the farms and demonstrative gardens at schools and Universities, which have a more social rather than a productive function, or of the thousands of urban community gardens in the U.S. Farming and gardening are linked to individual and social benefits and thought as able "to change people and places" and hence often deployed in prisons, schools and other spaces of at-risk populations (Pudup, 2008, p. 1228). In the case of the FTPs at BFRDP, targeted populations include refugees, migrant and other historically marginalized groups. As a working theme, training farmers gives legitimacy to education institutions or to NGOs, as indicated by several interviewees from different FTPs. Hence, farming and growing food are increasingly inserted into the imaginaries and structures of the third sector and the social services they deliver.

The NGOization of sustainable farming transforms the types of jobs that the sector offers, as farming increasingly requires providing services instead of, or in addition to, producing food (with the exception of large scale organic farms). As a consequence, a myriad of farming and food

organizations have emerged over the last decade or so, as well as demonstration gardens or FTPs themselves, whose mission is educating, training, or advancing social or food justice, instead of producing food in an cost effective and technically viable way. These social-oriented organizations target more educated employees to hire, with very different skills than those required for food production and distribution. A paradox then occurs: the prospective farmer attending the trainings is hired for food-related education and social work. Indeed, that is the intention of many apprentices in the first place and what the overall trend of the alumni's trajectories in the four organizations seems to indicate. In contrast, the number of apprentices working on or starting farm businesses is limited. Many trainees from a more educated milieu (RUZ and CESC) or urban settings (OAM) aspire to/work on/start NGOs or educational programs (i.e. food justice groups, school gardens, advocacy groups and others). In contrast, farmworkers themselves (from SOL) continue working on farms (either as more skilled workers or running their own businesses). In addition, some apprentices start or collaborate with other FTPs since the programs themselves create job positions for former apprentices, directly contributing to the further NGOization of sustainable agriculture. Yet, the NGOization of the sector does a disservice to sustainable farming businesses since the trainings often represent a subsidized non-profit form of farming that competes in unequal conditions (of funding, resources, labor) with other farms for market share. This contradiction was highlighted by some interviewees, who see the farms where the trainings take place as an inaccurate farming simulation, where the scale, the funding structure and the amount of free labor distorts what real for-profit farm work entails.

The strong commitment to self-improvement is a required premise for the overtly neoliberal process of shifting responsibilities downwards, and from moving from a welfare state to an activating (or shadow) state. Here, the state does not provide services but rather encourages the creation of a favorable environment in which self-governing, responsible communities and individuals can flourish (Watts, 2004). In the case of FTPs, the combination of the agrarian and the sustainable agriculture imaginaries has elevated farming as "the most important work to be done", and farmers "on the front lives in the struggle for survival"[15]. This rhetoric, within an artificial of lack of farmers, pushes the responsibilization of farmers towards a renewed imaginary of the farmer figure: The future of farming resides in self-entrepreneurial willing hard working farmers who take on the profession despite unfavorable conditions. The emerging farmer becomes then a "farming hero"[16], morally superior and laudable for his/her connection with land (agrarianism), for his/her

[15] Quotes from the book "Letters to a Young Farmer"

[16] http://www.letterstoayoungfarmer.org/

environmental and social function (eco-agrarian ethic) and for his/her willingness and capacity to work in precarious conditions. The farming hero comes to solve the farming crisis, adjust behavior to certain social and environmental norms and take responsibility: he-she assumes, even seems to enjoy, the very precarious conditions (portrayed often as simplicity), and works hard to survive, to farm environmentally, and to establish an improved relationship with consumers. Farmers, under this logic, are "supposed to solve all the world's problems" (former apprentice, RUZ). FTPs themselves promote such responsibilization by encouraging the creation of new farmers leaving the structural dimensions mostly unaddressed[17].

This responsibilization of the farming hero answers Guthman's question on "what exactly about farmwork is so attractive to these young people (…) How has this demanding, painful, and historically demeaning work apparently become a source of pleasure, reward, and even status?" (Guthman, 2017, p. 15). In my interviews with CESC and RUZ members predominantly, but also with SOL and OAM in a lesser extent, farming hero logics were repeatedly present when interviewees explained their reasons for engaging in farming. The presupposition and even the embracing of precarity was commonly brought up, as well as the romantization of the farming profession and the assumption that society (at least part of it) greatly values the profession as highly moral and honourable. Less common were critiques of the system that makes the survival in this same profession highly challenging and capital-intensive. Field observations also revealed the high responsibilization that apprentices, former or emerging farmers, embrace in many dimensions of their work despite the huge barriers they face (in terms of social, environmental, political commitments). Similarly, media accounts replicate such logic by portraying the work of farmers nowadays as "fulfilling noble work"[18] while often dismissing or leaving unquestioned the hard conditions that farmers and farmworkers face[19].

To sum up, FTPs are situated as a solution to the farming crisis in a particular governance context that promote individualistic and market-based solutions that hardly challenge structural conditions in which farming is performed. Attending to those structural aspects, FTPs could be situated as an outcome of the increased devolution of power to the NGO complex, and the NGOization of sustainable farming itself. Moreover, the trainings are also constructed by a farming hero logic -

[17] http://www.pieranch.org/farmer-training.html

[18] https://www.npr.org/2015/01/03/374629580/a-young-generation-sees-greener-pastures-in-agriculture

[19] https://www.usatoday.com/picture-gallery/money/business/2014/10/08/young-farmers-aim-to-revitalize-industry/16921699/

under which farmers are responsible for their success and elevated to heroes for their willingness to work in unfavourable conditions.

## 6. Discussion and concluding remarks

"So the question is, do you teach it, do you recognize there is a phenomenon of the depreciation of the occupation, there is no farmers left, decreasing farmers, in the face of the structural issues and the environment (…) Do you teach it anyway? Regardless of where people go. And for me, yes, absolutely, you are not going to give up on it, because you never know what's gonna happen in the future, and even if it doesn´t work out for how many generations… but at some point you imagine this pathetic ridiculous corrupted insane cannibalism that is modern imperialism is going to fall, and then what? Nobody knows how to farm? You have to grow a seed of, like, culture somewhere!"

Staff member and former apprentice, RUZ

Scholarship on alternatives has urged to consider the context, the connections, and the processes in which alternative practices are formed to assess the alterity of these practices and their transformative potential (Fuller et al., 2010). In this study I pay attention to the imaginaries and political-economic structures that construct farmer trainings oriented to sustainable agriculture as a solution to the farming crisis, despite the internal skepticism that I found within the organizations themselves. I argue that the imaginaries framing the problem in the public-institutional discourse (namely the logics behind the production of a lack of farmers) and the political-economic structures that support such imaginaries (a capitalist funding apparatus and different forms of neoliberal governance) are entangled in these trainings. These entanglements become strengthened as a result of the FTPs institutionalization, which modify individuals' subjectivities, collective discourses, and the structural conditions of the organizations towards calculative, instrumental and managerial practices (Dinnie and Holstead, 2017). I also show that the production of these trainings, as a proposed alternative to industrialized conventional agriculture, is highly mediated by privilege. The entanglements create possibilities and self-reflection but also internal tensions and skepticism within organizations.

The recurrent discourse around farmers' loss, and around FTPs as a solution to tackle it embeds privileged white imaginaries about food and farming that romanticize the farming profession and dictate a selective understanding of the farming problem, portrayed as an apolitical ecology (Robbins, 2004). The rhetoric of growing farmers that the trainings adopt responds to an imaginary that represents the farming crisis as one of lack of knowledgeable people willing to dedicate themselves to farming. I have problematized the lack-of-farmers imaginary as incomplete and

biased (by race) and linked to misleading narratives that greatly affect the way the background problem (a corporate-led agri-business sustained by a capitalist and neoliberal system) is (un)framed and thus (un)addressed. In view of these results, researchers should pay greater attention to how the imaginaries and knowledge that create a scarcity of farmers are constructed and interpreted (Bakker, 2009; Otero et al., 2011).

The privileged imaginaries that converge in the lack of farmers credo make the issue of emergent farmers particularly attractive to donors who share the widespread agrarian dream (Guthman, 2014). The trainings, as the most accepted solution to the problem of farmers' loss, rely heavily on philanthropism and wealthy money, both directly funding the trainings and also indirectly subsidizing the alternative food market, recreating forms of environmental privilege. The need for wealthy money to run the trainings creates tensions within participants and staff members, especially those of Black, Latin or Asian origin, as well as issues of accountability to donors that are problematic and often internally contested.

Certain governance structures and mentalities have also facilitated the rise of FTPs. The activity of growing farmers needs to be situated in the broader governance context where these trainings operate. I point at the devolution of power and its materialization on the NGOization of agriculture as being linked to the production of the trainings. I problematize the increasing portrayal of farming, and of sustainable farming in particular, as a non-profit business (increasing the binary with the profitable Big Ag). I have also argued that a pervasive logic of farming hero forges the trainings. This logic pushes the promotion of emergent farmers in the most precarious conditions. When farming is "the most important work to be done" regardless of challenging conditions – farmers adopt a farming hero halo, tied to elements of responsibilization, sacrifice, and self-help.

In the existing debate about the role of alternative food networks and alternatives more broadly in bringing about social change, critiques argue that celebrated alternatives, mostly voting with your fork solutions, promote ideals of individual responsibility and choice promoting neoliberal forms of governance (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011; Busa and Garder, 2015; Guthman, 2008). Proponents claim that these economies and initiatives represent emancipatory solutions and are performative examples of other worlds (Gibson-Graham, 2006). In this study I bring a primary aspect to this debate: the consideration of how alternatives are produced and sustained. I propose to look at how the problems are framed and which solutions or alternatives, among the possible and impossible ones, are selected, by whom and for whom.The field of political ecology has questioned the production, interpretation and representation of socio-ecological problems and more recently developed new research on "alternative sustainabilities", including how broader political forces

shape the conditions in which problems are framed and solutions proposed. According to Forsyth, "the point of a critical political ecology approach is not to falsify myths – or even necessarily to reveal another certain explanation, rather it is to illuminate problems in new and meaningful ways that might lead to other types of policy intervention"(Forsyth, 2008 cited in Guthman, 2011, p. 16). To do so requires a reconsideration of the problem's definition (lack of farmers in this case), as well as paying attention to the broader political and economic environments that support certain types of solutions – and that allow farmers to thrive or let them die (Guthman, 2017; Li, 2010).

This analysis does not aim to dismiss the work and importance of FTPs in the struggle to shift the agri-food system. A political ecology approach to alternatives helps acknowledge material and immaterial linkages to power and capital. Avoiding to see these linkages as necessarily contradictions, and moving beyond binary thinking and good/bad dichotomies, I argue that the attention to the issue of emergent farmers by these organizations is entangled in broader social, cultural, economic and political processes and structures such as one of ambivalent policies and regulations, privileged imaginaries about food and farming, and neoliberal structures sustaining the trainings (Beckett and Galt, 2014; Calo, 2018), even as farming, and the training of beginner farmers in particular, is promised as a source of potential transformation and a relevant field on the alternative politics (Calvário, 2017). Teaching people how to farm and produce food is of extreme importance in the current political context, and is an exercise that creates different possibilities for reconnection with the land and re-organizing production structures among others. My aim is not to dismiss the importance of training people how to farm as a crucial dimension of politics and knowledge making and as a hopeful task striving for a different future. Nor do I wish to merely reduce it to a damaging or misleading strategy or action. Instead, following Murphy, I suggest "a coalescence of appropriation and appropriations, of antagonistic and yet enabling relations" (Murphy, 2012, p. 93), of countercultures and progressive social work entangled with emergent neoliberalizing processes. My point is to show that constructing these trainings as a response to the farming crisis, represented often by the rampant decrease in the number of farmers, is irremediably linked to processes of capital, privilege and universalized precarity (Tsing, 2015). The case of FTPs throws light into the particular governmentalities, forms of governing at-a-distance, and racist dynamics associated with sustainable farming and agriculture, and the way society thinks of it.

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# CHAPTER 5

## How to survive: Artificial quality food and the new forms of rule for farmers emerging from direct marketing strategies

***"It matters which stories tell stories. It matters which stories normalize other stories and which build the power in recursive retellings and reworkings to gnaw at the established order of things in vexed worlds"***

Donna Haraway

1. Introduction

Current agri-food policy and programs highlight the need to move towards more sustainable agriculture – socially and environmentally. In this respect, new policies are often based on market-led models that add value to certain distinctive products or practices. In this context, "quality food schemes" (QFSs herein after) emerge – those in which particular products or characteristics from small scale food production are ascribed a certain superiority that allows the producers to obtain premium prices. These schemes take the form of territorial management or economic planning strategies that link quality to the production from certain districts or regions (Marsden and Smith, 2005). These mechanisms have also helped to re-localize the food industry and to create a new paradigm of rural development granting greater autonomy to rural farmers and entrepreneurs (Marsden and Smith, 2005; Murdoch et al., 2009). Generally such QFSs are characterized by direct marketing venues, such as farmers' markets, farm-to-table initiatives, or food basket schemes, by direct connections with the restaurant sector, or by a re-connection between consumers and producers via, for instance, on-site farm visits.

However, the implementation of such quality schemes is a multi-level process that does not necessarily offer win-win solutions to all sides involved (Allen, 2004; Allen et al., 2003). For example, alternative marketing (i.e. direct, local) requires a strong education of consumers about food choices – who are advised to change purchasing habits and buy seasonal and often more expensive products (Guthman, 2003; Hinrichs, 2000; Hinrichs and Allen, 2008). Programs are usually designed around convincing consumers through awareness-raising campaigns and through new venues that can facilitate behavioral shift – i.e. offering new experiences around food provisioning. On other hand, the exclusivity of certain direct marketing channels, which are often only accessible to a certain spectrum of convinced consumers, makes it difficult for farmers to rely on and remain exclusively in such alternative markets (Gray, 2013; Jarosz, 2008).

Additionally, food justice scholars have pointed to the social inequalities, exclusionary discourses, and the relations of power more broadly at work in these initiatives (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011; Goodman, 2003; Guthman, 2008; Slocum, 2007). They call for moving beyond an overly benign analysis of economic relations and processes embedded in direct marketing and other "alternative" food market venues (Sayer, 2001; Wilson, 2013), and show the need for different activism engagements rather than consumption in niche spaces (Alkon and Guthman, 2017). In those views, the social embeddedness assumed in the agricultural direct markets should be not idealized because marketness and instrumentalism are part of local food systems as well (Goodman, 2003; Hinrichs, 2000). Trust and civic engagement between producers and consumers can also abruptly dissolve. In

this direction, others have suggested that urban and rural politics might play a role in the reproduction of inequalities (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005), while calling for the re-politicization of the local and the alternative, for a better understanding of the urban–rural politics and social relations uniting producers and consumers, and for an in-depth examination of alternative food networks as a politics of place (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Hinrichs, 2000).

In response, the objective of this study is to examine how farmers navigate these externally-created QFSs, and how these strategies influence farmers' lived experiences and their perceptions of questions of rule and power in the agricultural cycle of production and consumption. I do so by analyzing experiences of farmers integrated into QFSs within a peri-urban agricultural area of Barcelona. Ultimately, I aim to understand the extent to which this particular form of governing food and farming are contributing to a more equitable and sustainable food systems. This study contributes to broader debates on urban rural politics and on the politics of alternatives in the context of a transition towards agricultural sustainability.

The chapter proceeds as follows. In section 2 I present some theoretical insights about agri-food policy and QFSs, and direct marketing. In section 3 I explain my methods. In section 4 I describe the case study area, and the programs promoted by the regional institutional government to support QFSs. In section 5 I present farmers' lived experiences when embedded in such schemes. In section 6 I reflect on the urban-rural politics of my case study, and discuss implications for a broader debate on governance and politics of the alternative food networks.

## 2. Agri-food policy, the quality turn and the politics of the direct marketing for a socio-economic agricultural transition

### a. The rationales behind the creation of quality food and their implications

Over the last fifty years, the industrialization and globalization of agriculture has led to important environmental and social impacts, including rural exodus, disconnection with nature, soil contamination, and climate change (Lawrence et al., 2004; Magdoff et al., 2000; McMichael, 2017). More recently, the need to maintain a productivist-oriented form of agriculture while compensating for associated market failures has fostered a correspondingly more post-productivist agriculture focused on meeting both social and environmental objectives (Buller and Morris, 2004; Renting et al., 2003). The post-productivist agriculture turn attempts to shift both production processes and consumption choices (Renting et al., 2003) by developing tools such as labels and voluntary certifications, value-added marketing, cataloguing, and consumer awareness campaigns (see analysis of this strategies in, for example, Goodman, 2004; Guthman, 2007). Such tools "re-qualify"

foods in relation to either their production processes or their region (with *distinctiveness*), in order to create new market benefits for the producers (and other agri-food chain actors) and address social and environmental externalities. Market benefits, on paper, contribute to both a relatively more secure access to an increasingly competitive market and higher revenues for farmers through value added processes (Buller and Morris, 2004).

The quality food rhetoric built as a response to the plethora of environmental and social claims, including increasing public demands for higher food quality, has been accompanied by a more intense communication of quality in production through local and regional brand building (Goodman et al., 2014; Moragues-Faus and Sonnino, 2012; Renting et al., 2003). In this context, "quality food schemes" emerged as local/regional solutions to the decline of rural economies. They encompass both the production of specialty foods together with "institutional innovations, direct marketing, short food supply chains, local food systems, and the renewed legitimization of artisanal food practices and regional cuisine" (Goodman, 2003, p. 2). Thus, QFSs involve areas or regions in which such a strategy is deployed: where particular products or particular characteristics from food production are ascribed certain superiority that allows the producers to obtain premium prices or access exclusive markets. Quality food is also a strategy adopted by public institutions in order to sustain small scale and sustainable farming (i.e. the normalization of organic food).

The Alternative Food Networks literature (AFNs), which describes oppositional, more socially sustainable, or simply more ethical, spaces of food production and distribution (Goodman et al., 2014) has generally overlooked the fact that the qualifications or characteristics upon which difference, or alternativeness, is assigned are sometimes abstract or subjective (Johnston, 2017; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006). By focusing on highlighting and building difference, AFNs have generally excluded or erased the wide continuum between the two extremes in the agri-food spectrum. In QFSs, quality is what produces difference from the "other". Somehow different from other qualifiers (local, organic, community-based, cooperative), "quality" is abstract and becomes an elastic term. Yet, it comes as quite handy to study production sites where the differentiation alternative VS mainstream is not clear-cut. As a framework, it has been often used to analyze orchestrated strategies for supporting sustainable farming and rural development. On the ground, with a more depoliticized discourse and more marketed-based approach than the one around AFNs, QFSs has been used as a strategy by public institutions working with a broad spectrum of food producers (that might not be called alternative nor agri-food players). Here, critical consumers are encouraged to create and engage with quality-centered food, such as protected designation of origins schemes, in order to re-connect with the food they eat and those who produce it (Calvário

and Kallis, 2016; Cox et al., 2008; Hinrichs and Allen, 2008; Johnston et al., 2011). However, its use entails the risk of creating a binary thinking - where some sort of food is qualified, and the rest is identified as poor quality or "bad" food – a difference that is not sustained by a proper analysis of how quality is built, under which criteria quality products and practices are identified and rated and for whom.

In such regions, products are embedded in a local ecology and sold using the trademark of this newly rebranded locale (or other conditions of production) (Guthman, 2007; Johnston and Szabo, 2011; Murdoch et al., 2009). Consumers within quality schemes value such trademarks or what these suggest as new esthetics, pleasures, tastes and others, and act influenced by them, rather than by purely economic rationale. In the literature on AFNs and sustainable food production, the concept of embeddedness is often used to explain how complex the interplay between the economic and the social rationales is, posing problems for the construction and stabilization of purely economic or fully commoditized relationships (Hinrichs, 2000; Murdoch et al., 2009). This embeddedness has changed the map of the food sector, in which more marginal regions are able to reinvent themselves – and compete in the new embedded markets (Murdoch et al., 2009). Quality thus becomes a path to autonomy and a way of survival.

However, attributing too much value to the local production processes – or to other "quality" characteristics – gives rise to niche markets (Murdoch et al., 2009) and possible forms of exclusivity. For instance, these sustainable forms of agriculture might remain relatively marginal vis à vis a globalized food sector. "Qualified" characteristics might also become mainstreamed by a large agricultural corporate sector which appropriates and rebrands them (Johnston et al., 2009). For this reason, it seems desirable for the values and premises on which embeddedness is constructed to be based on carefully considered social and/or environmental criteria and consumers should be well informed about these criteria. Several critics also denounce the problems associated with the strategy of localization as a form of food activism, which comes with a very diffused, uncritical and innocent idea of what "local" is and means (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Harvey, 1996; Hinrichs, 2003). Others have pointed out that the meaning of what constitutes "sustainable" food systems deserves consideration when linking rural producers with urban consumers (Moragues-Faus, 2016; Selfa and Qazi, 2005).

In a context of neoliberal governance (Heynen and Robbins, 2005; Marsden and Franklin, 2013; McCarthy and Prudham, 2004), the quality food rhetoric can be seen as the perpetuation of a form of governance that avoids direct intervention and legislation and devolves responsibility – but not power – downwards (to regional governments first, and to farmers and consumers in a latter step)

(Higgins et al., 2008; Lawrence, 2004). This governance pushes for certifications and new rules, rather than good practices (Brown and Getz, 2008; Guthman, 2007). In turn, the creation of "quality food" as a strategy for driving socio-ecological changes is paradoxical, because it fetishizes the commodification of food, which is considered to have harmed small farming and rural livelihoods (Agyeman and McEntee, 2014). In this line, critical scholars have warned that farmers markets remain fundamentally rooted in commodity relations (Hinrichs, 2000) and in forms of exclusion and exclusivity (Alkon and McCullen, 2011). With the notions of embeddedness, networks and trust, a "softer treatment of capitalism" or eco-capitalism, might be legitimized (Sayer 2001, page 700 in Goodman 2003), without questioning fundamental hidden problems attached to market-based economic relations, such as marketness and instrumentalism (Block, 1990; Hinrichs, 2000).

b. The politics embedded in quality food

While direct agricultural markets, predicated upon face-to-face ties between producers and consumers, are often central components of more alternative, localized and qualified food systems (Hinrichs, 2000) scholars have rightfully cautioned against obscuring the social inequalities, exclusionary discourses, and relations of power more broadly at work in these activities (Goodman, 2003; Guthman, 2008; Slocum, 2007). They have also argued against inadvertently producing an overly benign view of economic relations and processes embedded in direct marketing and other "alternative" food market venues (Bowen and De Master, 2011; Sayer, 2001; Wilson, 2013), and for repoliticizing urban-rural food relations (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005). The social embeddedness assumed in direct food markets should not be idealized, because marketness and instrumentalism are also part of local food systems (Hinrichs, 2003, 2000). Furthermore, trust and civic engagement between producers and consumers are relations that can abruptly dissolve and leave producers vulnerable. Issues of power and privilege are also present in many direct distribution schemes, especially those of the more privileged and educated upper or middle class consumers over farmers and less advantaged consumers (Alkon and McCullen, 2011; Hinrichs, 2003).

Remarkably, most of the current food activism in the global North occurs at the consumption level and most of the food movements act at the urban level, as for example, the food councils, which are predominantly urban-centric (Cretella, 2015; Di Masso et al., 2014; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005). Following this direction, others have suggested that urban and rural politics might play a role in shaping alternative food systems and in (re)creating inequitable relationships between producers and consumers. In relation to food and agriculture, the subjugation of the rural world by cities has been often framed as a planning issue related to land competition (the expansion of cities at the

expense of farmland). Yet, to date, the politics between urban elites and rural hinterland food producers who participate in food relocalization projects have been largely ignored (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005) while these politics have been framed as an environmental injustice in different ambits (Kelly-Reif and Wing, 2016; Pellow, 2016). For instance, there has being little attention to the urban political interest around farmers' markets and how they might be, far from farmers' aspirations, an imposition to meet urban taste, after the so-called 'greening' of western society boosted the demand by (urban) citizens for environmental security and higher food quality (Brand, 2010).

While currently consumers play a predominant role in shaping food-related movements in the Global North, farmers tend to remain in a secondary and silenced position. In this context, Lawrence seems particularly on point when stating that, while "rural people are expected to save the planet, their ability to do so is proscribed by their liminality" (Lawrence, 2004). For example, farmers have seen their role in land management diminished to a current subordinate position (Sempere, 2005). Rural citizens are often unable to become engaged, reflexive participants in new arrangements because of social disadvantages, such as social isolation, exclusion and deprivation (Lawrence, 2004; Zografos and Martínez-Alier, 2009). This point on marginality is also present in the literature on alternative food networks, which tends to focus on consumers participating in these networks (i.e. their aspirations, motivations or status) rather than on producers and the constraints they face (Busa and Garder, 2015; Di Masso and Zografos, 2015; Moragues-Faus, 2016). In addition, in the agro-food literature, categorizations of food systems as alternative and local are shaped importantly by consumers' perceptions of food quality (Selfa and Qazi, 2005), centered usually on the production phase of the food circuits (Goodman and DuPuis, 2002)

The protagonism of the consumer, and of the more privileged consumer in particular, has at least two implications at the social level: i. the control of agri-food decisions by a number of convinced consumers and ii. the resulting elitization of quality foods (Alkon, 2008; Guthman, 2014). First, market-based initiatives aimed at creating niche markets for "distinctive" products provide consumers with the power to make "regulatory decisions about ecological and public health risk, working conditions and remuneration, and even what sort of producers of what commodities should be favored in the world market" (Guthman, 2007). Thus, how niche producers become financially compensated depends on willing and convinced consumers paying a price premium for the ascribed commodity. Second, because the value added to sustainable food comes from consumers' pockets, this system excludes many people from accessing "quality" products and thus has implications in terms of social justice (Alkon, 2008; Alkon and McCullen, 2011; Allen et al., 2003; Guthman,

2007). That is why many direct agricultural markets focus on exclusive food items and exclusive urban customers (DeLind, 1993; Selfa and Qazi, 2005), and why farmers themselves are excluded from them (Jarosz, 2008).

In sum, a rich scholarship has developed on the underlying logics and implications of QFSs for questions of integration, equity and elitization. However, to date few studies have examined the way in which these instruments intersect *in practice* with farmers' aspirations and lived experiences. In this study, I attempt to address this limitation by looking at the meanings and implications of these programs for farmers in a peri-urban agricultural area of Barcelona, where quality schemes are being promoted in order to sustain small farming by attaching a qualified *otherness* to some foods and practices. I offer here a broader understanding of the extent to which this particular form of governing food systems is contributing to a more socio-economically and genuinely sustainable food system.

## 3. Methods

This study is built upon a qualitative study based primarily on direct observation and in-depth semi-structured interviews and informal interviews with farmers, consumers, and technicians from public institutions involved in the creation of QFSs in the metropolitan area of Barcelona. In 2016, I conducted 25 in-depth interviews with different actors involved in food production (fresh products such as vegetables and fruits) (n=13), consumption (n=3), and planning (n=7), as well as independent organizations and trade unions (n=2) in Barcelona province. I also reviewed the content, rules, and guidelines of existing schemes based on publicly available program documents and websites.

I first interviewed consumers, technicians, and members of local organizations (a trade union and a social movement promoting local food), and focused my questions broadly on their perception of the role of different institutions in creating and sustaining alternative food networks. The consumers interviewed were members or organizers of consumers groups in Barcelona. The technicians belonged to different institutional levels (municipal, metropolitan and regional) and were working on different parts and aspects of the food production and distribution cycle. Some of them were managing programs supporting small farmers directly. Others were managing economic aspects in their respective areas. After a first round of interviews with them, in which many of their responses were centered on quality food and value-added strategies, I interviewed farmers to better understand their integration and experiences in these new food milieus. My focus was on one of the agricultural regions next to Barcelona – the Baix Llobregat and Garraf districts – where the quality food strategy

has been broadly deployed in the last decade. Among other crop types in the region, I have focused my study on vegetable farmers. These farmers might have a relatively small amount of fruit trees too, but they still consider themselves vegetable farmers. Vegetables are the most common crop type in these districts.

To select interviewees, I contacted farmers listed in the databases of the programs El Camp a Casa (today Producte Fresc), Parc a Taula, Xarxa Productes de la Terra, and Benvinguts a Pagès (which is part of Som Gastronomia). In particular, I contacted producers who, in the catalogues, were attached to one or few labels. Labels used in the catalogues identify direct marketing, organic or integrated production, fresh product (which is used to differentiate products from BLAP), or unique products (typical products from specific regions), among others. This decision was meant to ensure the relatively strong implication of the farmers in the QFSs. From an initial list of 42 farmers who were contacted, 13 replied. I did not notice any pattern associated with their willingness to participate. Interviewees' ages range from the early 30s to the early 60s (average age around 50 years old). Most of the farmers have been farming since their early adulthood. Ten of them come from families who farmed in the same area. My respondents are selling their crops through different channels (to the wholesale market for Barcelona, or a municipal market's stall) and have been introduced to these markets/programs in the past 4-7 years. Only two young interviewees started their business selling through "alternative" markets.

Interviews were scheduled, generally at their farms or in nearby places. The farmers can be considered to be embedded in QFSs in different degrees, influenced primarily by farm size: Larger plots generally means more need to diversify channels. Interviewees cultivate farms between 1 ha and 40 ha. Although not all of the farmers can be considered to be selling in direct marketing venues (at least not a large portion of their harvests), all of them were at some point interested in doing so. Some of them succeeded and some others did not or have not yet. Farmers were both organic (6) and non-organic (7). From the latter, three of them are practicing "integrated agriculture," that is a non-organic agriculture that aims to have low environmental impact. Technicians from the Department of Agriculture of the Government of Catalonia support farmers in the management of pests and weeds. Interview questions directed at farmers focused mostly on the farmers' production and distributions systems, their aspirations, their challenges, their trajectories, their perception about the role of public institutions and about QFSs programs in particular. Informants' names are anonymized through the document, and they are referred to with the initial letters of their names or projects.

In order to conduct data analysis, I fully transcribed the interviews and coded them in NVivo. After an initial data coding using grounded theory techniques (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser and Strauss, 1967), I identified key recurrent concepts (such as profession shift, imposed rules, fear of roads, mixed commercialization), and then developed a more refined coding book for the in-depth analysis of farmers' perceptions and experiences with the quality food programs. Upon the completion of this qualitative coding work, I wrote analytical memos around my main key research questions, which were used as the base for developing the results section. For the purpose of this study, most of my data analysis is based on my interviews with farmers, although I also integrate some of my interview data with municipal technicians and policy documents to present the broader policy context of local quality food strategies.

4. The strategy of developing QFSs in the Baix Llobregat and Garraf

The Baix Llobregat and Garraf are two adjacent districts within the Barcelona province, located southeast of Barcelona city. Together, they extend over 670 km2. Their proximity to the city of Barcelona, on the one hand, and the importance of their respective agricultural sectors, on the other hand, situate Baix Llobregat and Garraf at the intersection of urban and rural settings. Technicians working in these areas refer to the farming occurring there as "peri-urban" or "metropolitan agriculture". They can be considered hybrid areas where urban dynamics meet rural landscapes and economies. This area has been extensively studied as a place of expanding urban sprawl in planning studies or quantitative-based studies in applied geography (Paül and McKenzie, 2013; Paül and Tonts, 2005; Pirro and Anguelovski, 2017; Serra et al., 2017).

**Figure 11: Landscape in the BLAP. One of the farms visited**

The Baix Llobregat has a fertile area where the Llobregat River discharges to the sea. Vegetables and fruit production are dominant land uses. Artichoke is the most important vegetable crop. Garraf, a more mountainous area, is also a historical agricultural district, rich in vegetables and orchards (cherry trees) and vineyards. Together with the Maresme, bordering with the city in the northwest, the Garraf and Baix Llobregat are the main agricultural areas surrounding Barcelona. In 1998, in order to protect farm land from an expanding urbanization, a combination of public, private, and nonprofit organizations created the the Parc Agrari del Baix Llobregat (BLAP), as the outcome of a long dialogue between different public administrations and farmers. The agreement secured 3,000 hectares of farmland in Barcelona's fringes. The park includes more than 620 farms, and is considered, from a planning perspective, as a paradigmatic case of farmland conservation near a metropolis (Paül, 2015; Paül and McKenzie, 2013). However, the relationships between farmers (represented by the major trade union, Unió de Pagesos) with the public administration, and especially the different public institutions that are part of the BLAP, have not being always easy (Paül and McKenzie, 2013; Pirro and Anguelovski, 2017; Sempere, 2005) and the continuity of family farming in the area has not been secured (which invites to question the agrarian significance of the BLAP beyond reversible land protection).

These two districts' agricultural sectors have experienced a strong transition since the 60s, with overlapping changing socio-economic and environmental dynamics (Sempere, 2005). Farming has been severely impacted by the increase of exports in Spain and by the consolidation of the larger Barcelona wholesale market and distribution center, Mercabarna, in the 80s. Mercabarna is a private-public enterprise, owned partially by the Barcelona municipality (51%). Originally a logistics center for farmers and sellers at the Barcelona municipal markets, Mercabarna is now a large international distribution center where national farmers, international export companies, retailers, and distributors buy and sell products under a bidding system. In recent years, the power of retailers has increased and, in turn, affected farmers' income to large extent. Paradoxically (but not by accident), Mercabarna is also located in Baix Llobregat. This proximity has greatly imprinted the local farming sector, with particular dynamics (i.e. the relative ease to sell there) and with farmers' perceptions of the spatial and economic competition created by contradictory policies. The proximity to this market is perceived by farmers as an economic opportunity but also as a contributing factor in the decrease of cooperative practices (Sempere, 2005).

**Figure 12: Landscape in Garraf. Some of the farms visited**

In the Baix Llobregat and Garraf, different institutional programs supporting "quality" local agriculture overlap. They are promoted by the Barcelona Regional Government (Xarxa Productes de la Terra, Parc A Taula, Del Camp a Casa), the Catalan Government (Gastroteca), or both (Benvinguts a Pagès). This strategy has being deployed in the study area for at least 15 years (See Table 1 below for a summary of the objectives and strategies deployed by the five programs in the study area to support QFSs through direct marketing venues). The objectives of the programs are all similar: locale valorization and value creation, improved commercialization, direct connection between consumers and producers, or the reconnection of urban consumers with their hinterland. In

the particular districts of study, these programs have translated into a number of actions: the organization of at least 8 farmers markets in different municipalities in both districts; the creation of a brand/label "Producte Fresc" to identify products from the park sold without intermediaries; the publication of two printed catalogues and two online catalogues presenting the participating food producers, distributors and restaurants; two web applications for finding local farmers; the organization of meetings to connect farmers with possible customers (restaurants and/or distributors); the planning of courses to improve the capacities needed to sell in quality schemes; and the organization of programs to visit the farms and a bike tour in the BLAP.

**Table 4: Quality food schemes in Baix Llobregat and Garraf**

| Program (year) | Leading public body | Main objectives | Mechanisms to support QFSs |
|---|---|---|---|
| El camp a Casa / Producte Fresc (2002) | Barcelona Provincial council, with the support of Catalonia Government and municipalities within the BLAP | Support to the farmers at the agrarian park situated in Barcelona fringes (BLAP) by facilitating the commercialization of their products via value added strategies and direct marketing venues | • Labeling<br>• Value added marketing<br>• Gastro-tourism<br>• On-farm visits and bike tours<br>• Organization of farmers markets<br>• Link to catering and gastronomy fairs |
| Gastroteca (2007) | Catalonia Government | Regional economic development though the valorization of Catalan products and the promotion of direct marketing strategies | • Labeling<br>• Catalogue and app with food producers' contacts<br>• Supporting the marketing of regional products<br>• Gastro-tourism |
| Parc a Taula (2010) | Barcelona Provincial council | Economic development at the natural parks in Barcelona province, linked to tourism development and gastronomy | • Catalogue and app with food producers' contacts<br>• Supporting the marketing of regional products<br>• Promotion of quality foods in social media<br>• Gastro-tourism |
| Xarxa Productes de la terra (2010) | Barcelona Provincial council | Economic development of the rural areas in the Barcelona province. Support to small producers for commercializing their products through product valorization | • Labeling<br>• Catalogue with food producers' contacts<br>• Organization and support of farmers markets and food fairs<br>• Gastro-tourism<br>• Training and advisory meetings<br>• Promotion of quality foods in social media |
| Benvinguts a Pagès (part of Som Gastronomia) (2016) | Barcelona Provincial council and Catalonia Government | Development of Catalan gastronomy sector and gastro-tourism, products valorization, linked with tourism development and the invocation of Catalan cultural heritage | • On-site visits to farms<br>• Gastro-tourism<br>• Organization of food fairs and gastro-events<br>• Economic promotion of Catalan products and cuisine<br>• Promotion of quality foods in social media |

Farmers are not involved in the early stages of program implementation, and they are usually only contacted by the administration staff members to ask whether they would like to "be part" of a specific program. The programs are linked not only to food production, but also to gastronomy and catering: Many programs also promote restaurants, hotels or food fairs (for example Xarxa de Productes de la Terra, Gastroteca or Som Gastronomia) where distinctive products can be tasted or bought. These restaurants are located either next to the agricultural areas or in the city itself (the target being always urban consumers). The beneficiaries of the programs cover a wide range of actors: from small vegetable producers, wine makers, and food processors. Participation in the programs does not involve any mandatory activity, and consists in being presented in catalogues, receiving courses, or being advertised in special events. In the case of Benvinguts a Pagès, the program requires farmers to host a visit to their farms. Gastro-tourism or agro-tourism is a frequent strategy to encourage weekend trips to Catalan rural areas and enjoy traditional gastronomy (Paül and Araújo, 2012). The use of labels that "tell stories" (Guthman, 2007) is also common. I counted more than 12 different labels signaled in the programs' documents.

5. New rules for survival: how quality food schemes intersect with farmers' aspirations

In this section I analyze QFSs' meaning and implications through farmers' lived experiences. I use quotes selectively to illustrate my findings. Data reveals that farmers experience difficulties and contradictions when embedded in these schemes and in the programs aimed at supporting local small-scale producers through direct selling. I argue that, while QFSs might seem like an innovative solution in the short term in order to better connect farmers to new customers and identify new market opportunities/venues, they do not represent a long term solution for truly sustainable agriculture because i. they bring new organizational and managerial challenges to farmers and leave important structural problems unresolved ii. they involve new imposed schemes and rules on farmers with further implications related to how farmers perceive and adopt these programs.

I do not aim to deny the positive outcomes that QFSs bring to small-scale farming that have been described elsewhere (as in Verhaegen and Van Huylenbroeck, 2001). My interviews related that QFSs create new opportunities for securing farming livelihoods. They allow farmers to increase their income by opening new markets and avoiding abusive intermediaries (or simply designed for larger scale production), such as those often working in Mercabarna. They might serve as "tools" for surviving in the "war" or "marathon" (as often described) against corporatized large scaled agriculture. The farmers I interviewed value positively the awareness-raising campaigns aimed at educating consumers. As consumers increasingly become aware of the importance of buying low-impact products, the market for environmentally and socially sustainable food increases. QFSs have

also created a system of trust that was often missing in the food sector, by supporting closer relations between producers and consumers. Furthermore, farmers repeatedly state that they enjoy a direct contact with consumers because it allows them to know their preferences and gather suggestions. They also appreciate feeling esteemed as individuals (Sage 2003), as when clients appreciate their products. They also acknowledge that farming and the image of the farmers have positively changed in the last 10 or 15 years: the quality strategy has helped to raise the value of agriculture (at least a certain type) in the mind of consumers. This revalorization has spurred some young people to start farming projects, who are able to sustain them partly thanks to these more embedded structures. All these factors encourage farmers to enter quality food projects. These observations do not contradict, but complement, the results summarized below.

a. The rise of farmers' entrepreneurship and the lack of attention to unresolved socio-economic and structural agrarian challenges

Although quality schemes might have helped to economically sustain small-scale farming projects, farmers' working conditions do not seem to have improved. Most of the farmers interviewed work 7 days a week (a few 6) with working days lasting 12 to 14 hours. Working days have increased since the setup of farmers' markets on weekends. In direct marketing venues, weekends became important days for sales, in contrast with more traditional distribution outlets such as shops or intermediaries, or more alternative ones, such as food cooperatives. The distribution of many small-volume orders is frequent among people selling in farmers' markets and delivering baskets. In this new time-distribution arrangement, farmers signal transportation as a clear inefficiency and externality in food baskets and farm-to-table schemes. Due to such a grueling working routine, interviewees show tiredness and stress. They share stories of family breaks and of physical fatigue. While their farming occupation is based on hard dedication and commitment ("we love what we do, otherwise this makes no sense"), many recognize that they have difficulty making ends meet every month. As alternative channels are not big enough to provide reliable sources of income (due to fluctuant and small orders), many farmers are not able to fully rely on direct marketing sales and are forced to use intermediaries and traditional sale channels to piece different sources of revenues together (11 out of 12 of the interviewees sell to Mercabarna at least occasionally, most of them regularly). In their experience, these mixed commercialization channels mean double work and redundancy in terms of planning, organization, and delivery.

Furthermore, QFSs generally imply an often-imposed professional change from farmers to entrepreneurs. Farmers embedded in QFSs must dedicate relatively more time to distribution, selling, shipping, and marketing. This change is generally seen as undesirable and risky ("the

farmer should be a farmer," as several interviewees noted). Dedicating oneself to these multiple responsibilities entails the risk of leaving agricultural fields more unattended. The development of new capacities might also not be within the reach of all farmers, including in regard to advertising or marketing expertise. Such new responsibilities are particularly problematic as I am referring to small farmers with few employees, who end up having to fulfill too many different roles, as they highlight in interviews. This multitasking also brings new risks to the farms. In fact, two of the interviewed farmers attribute new financial problems to a poor commercial management of their farms, but not to low yields or production problems. Due to the relatively high importance of product marketing in QFSs, being able to dedicate ample attention to marketing all the products becomes an increasingly important task:

> "I think that the first thing one should do is to ensure that you can sell the product. Before planting, one should have the product sold and make the numbers, [to know] if with the price you get you can make them work. You can cultivate the best artichokes, have the best cherries in the market, but (…) if you don't have the sale guaranteed, there is no need for planting anything, I think. I think is a bit as in other businesses, a shoe maker, I don't know if he starts making shoes just because." J.P.

The importance of marketing often seems to force other family members to engage in marketing tasks, leading to a renaissance of the former agrarian model in which the whole family worked on the farm. The new division of labor is represented in the ongoing tension between the production and the marketing sides, as many of interviewees explain. In the case of F. (female) and S. (male), a couple in their early sixties, the shift to direct marketing obliged F. to step in the business about five years ago. She is now in charge of the direct marketing of products six days a week at a stall in the basement of their house and in a farmers market on Saturday. While F. aims for greater product diversity and for offering new products every season, S. acknowledges the difficulties that this new direction brings to managing the farm.


**Figure 13: The stall in the garage of F. and S., where F. works. She uses pictures of the different tomato varieties grown to make the place look nice. She emphasizes the diversity and the local aspect of their business**

In fact, this need for hyper-diversity in farm production and commercialization represents a major challenge for farmers, as vegetable and fruit crop planning and management becomes more complex. Consumers in quality schemes look for a wide diversity of products, obliging farmers to sell many different types of products, and many varieties of those, each season. Although challenging, most of the farmers accept the need for hyper-diversity. Some farmers relate hyper-diversity as an indicator of quality and they engage in hyper diverse farming in order to differentiate themselves from an agri-food industry often characterized by mass-produced monocrops and a low varieties' diversity. This need for hyper-diversity also pushes farmers to commercialize products from other farms. Even though this new practice allows farmers to bring in new products for their customers, it also pushes for different business models and (re)creates intermediaries in the system.

I recognize tensions around this practice, as well as different opinions on its validity among farmers and policy makers.

Another challenge associated with QFSs is linked to the burden caused by bureaucratic constraints. The labels helping to differentiate farm products as quality products have created a lot of paperwork and processes of control and monitoring for farmers. Although the labelling is directed to consumers, it means extra work for producers. As a result, this additional burden reinforces the "vicious circle of bureaucratic monitoring and distrust" (Eshuis and Van Woerkum, 2003 cited in Lawrence, 2004) and recreates "audit cultures" that help to sustain a neoliberal governance of agri-food (Campbell et al., 2006 cited in Higgins et al., 2008). For example, the regional organic certification (CCPAE) requires an exhaustive control and traceability, which comes at a high cost for farmers. While these controls seem appropriate for large scale farmers, they create new burdens for family farms of 4 or 5 employees which struggle to find time for administrative tasks. In addition, this process does not take into consideration the difficulty faced by farmers who produce many different products and have to conduct the traceability of all the products and parcels. As a farmer suggests, these controls incentivize the "big organic" instead of the "small organic" (Guthman, 2014; Pollan, 2001). Farmers embedded in different certification schemes claim that many farmers outside the QFSs are not controlled or inspected, and call for a more equal regulation system that would control everyone, "not only those behaving well."

Although farmers perceive QFSs as an opportunity for reaching new markets and sales, they also regret their inability to help address core agrarian issues related to land, water, training, and labor. Many farmers long for more growth opportunity, greater mechanization, innovation, of improved productivity. Some farmers enjoy "watching videos about US big fields and the machinery they use" and see those cases as examples of progress and efficiency. Yet, it seems that they are constrained, directed, or resigned to a farming structure and priority that they have not chosen, that is, to remain small and becoming a seller – rather than a farmer. They enjoy visiting other farms, learning new techniques, and they call for more technical training and support. Many of them particularly value technical support related to pest and weed control. Many claim that this is the type of support they need from public institutions, and they often complain that they have to pay for these services. Even if it is subsidized by the regional government, farmers have to pay a monthly fee, which limits the number of those who can access them.

Despite being embedded in quality programs and being able to sell the products at a fair price (one that covers costs), farmers share feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty. Most of the farmers related experiences of crop loss due to weather, animals, machinery theft, and the expropriation of

land for large infrastructure construction such as roads or railways. They claim that their cost of production is always uncertain, and so is the profitability of each crop. In that sense, QFSs are not able to solve many farmers' structural problems and challenges. All interviewees shared indeed their deep pessimism towards the future of agriculture. One of the most cited examples of this negative outlook is linked to a generational shift, which is seen as unresolved. Farmers work with the idea that there is no future and that "agriculture does not yield." In the case of the oldest farmers, there is no one to take over their business, which conditions their decisions about future investments and upgrading plans.

Indeed, most of the farmers who have switched to value-added marketing share long stories of farming tradition and have increasingly found it difficult to make a sustainable and reasonable living. They evoke the past with nostalgia, remembering the times when direct marketing was common and unregulated, and entire families could make a living by cultivating a few hectares of land. While family traditions of farming offer the benefit of inherited knowledge and, in most cases, an easier access to land, this inheritance also causes pressure and unease when farmers think they are doing worse than their forefathers. This is how P.G. expresses it:

> "I feel sorry that I inherited a profession…the land and the stalls that were from my family a long time ago, and I feel guilty that I had to close down, partly because of my [knee] illness, but also because business was consistently shrinking, every day I had more difficulties to make a living, and more recently I just couldn't keep up. I feel that I wasn't able to make a living doing what I love, what I have always done, and that is what hurts me the most. But that's life..." P.G.

Beyond the unresolved structural challenges within QFSs, these strategies also impose rules and constraints for farmers, creating additional layers of inequities and privilege at the center of urban/rural politics. These are explained in the following sub-section.

b. Urban-Rural politics or the inequities, privilege, and imposed rules in QFSs

The first of these new rules imposed upon farmers is the one dictated by consumers' power and taste preferences. When farmers shift their marketing strategy towards direct marketing, they have to accept consumer preferences in a more direct way than when selling to distributors. Niche markets for "distinctive" products provide consumers with the power to shape regulations related to ecological and public health risks, labor conditions, and even to influence the development of products in global markets (Guthman, 2007, p. 472). As a result, farmers are faced with having to please, convince, or as some say, "pamper" consumers. Farmers respond to these new requirements

as they can, by attending courses, innovating, improving product and stall aesthetics, producing greater varieties, and sharing cooking tips and recipes, among other things.

In addition, the direct relations with consumers, as required by QFSs, result in exhausting practices and cause internal tensions for farmers. I heard angry critiques of consumers as ignorant, hard to convince, demanding, and capricious. Many perceive that the work of the food producer is not valued, as illustrated by the frequent statement "Consumers should try working in the field to know what it is like." Although an important part of the institutional programs promoting QFSs is dedicated to consumer awareness, a common critique to public programs is that they have not properly educated urban consumers. These critiques refer mainly to the fact that consumers do often ask for non-seasonal products, are picky with sizes and aesthetics, and demand lower prices.

Furthermore, because the value added to "quality food" comes from consumers' budgets, QFSs strategies have not only (re)created privilege and inequity between consumers and producers but also among consumers themselves. The higher price of low-impact or organic food tends to exclude many consumers from accessing "quality" products, which has implications in terms of social and food justice (Allen et al., 2003; Anguelovski, 2015; Guthman, 2007) . This also leads to a paradoxical situation in which the farmers are excluded themselves from these quality products (Jarosz, 2008) which is very much the case here. Many interviewees recognize indeed that they buy their own food for personal consumption at local supermarkets because this practice is cheaper than buying food though local and/or organic networks. Farmers have thus to accept the exclusivity of their clients, often with much resentment towards the higher cultural and economic status of their urban clients. As many explain, most of their clients are "ironically" (as it has been described) highly educated people with some environmental or health consciousness, or ill people (specifically those who can afford organic products from QFSs). Although they tend to reject this exclusivity and regret it, they assume that the market will expand over time. In contrast, some other farmers prioritize selling "exclusive" products and target very specific markets, such as high-end restaurants. They naturally accept that their clients belong to a certain cultural and economic status, and do not acknowledge that some groups are excluded from the accessing of quality foods. They describe their customers as "courteous people" buying at neighborhood farmers' markets, and incoherently accuse those buying in supermarkets or not valuing alternative markets as "uneducated."

In that sense, the relationship between producers and consumers within QFSs can be interpreted as a form of urban-rural politics, in which privileged habits and tastes enhance power dynamics of ones (urban dwellers) over others (rural producers), even though those power relations are not directly

acknowledged by all. This power relationship is exacerbated by the fact that the programs promoting QFSs are generally designed and implemented by technicians working in public institutions without any input from farmers. There is also a difficult overlap between different institutions and institutional levels. The strategies to support farmers are discussed at offices in the city, and farmers are only asked to be part of them after they are designed, if at all, and with little information about the QFSs features. This form of governing generates distrust and a lack of engagement with the created QFSs and the technicians who sponsor them, whose roles and capacities are often questioned. Many farmers resent being excluded from agricultural policy-making, being evaluated, and being prosecuted. As it is expressed by A.F.:

> "The solution to the problem [of sustaining small-scale farming] is very difficult. Well, not so difficult: It requires that those in the public administrations, in the [Catalan] agriculture department, in the provincial council, etc. know the real difficulties. If you want to know something, or to learn something, or if you are an agrarian technician sitting in an office and you have never seen a farm… Once, during an [organic] inspection (…) we had leeks planted and the technician said, "You have really big scallions!" and I said "Those are leeks." It's pretty unbelievable. And then you have to contribute 9% of your production for paying those people [the technicians]" A.F.

Additionally, QFSs involve the imposition of new norms upon farmers, often for the benefit of urban consumers who can get a "taste" of the rural. A common activity promoted by QFSs programs is agro-tourism through visits to farms or bike tours ending up in a local restaurant serving local food. The rationale for these activities is to "help farmers to connect directly with metropolitan consumers" (Paül and Araújo, 2012, p. 1). However, most of the farmers interviewed consider these tours as an additional layer of work, and complain about sharing roads "full of bikes" and "being the gardeners of urban dwellers who come here to have fun". Feelings of hostility were often present towards the visitors/consumers as well as the institutions who promote these activities. This strategy also seems to suggest that farming projects require extra activities to be viable. Farmers are increasingly required to engage in something else than farming to attract urban consumers, increase their income, and make their business economically viable, even though it requires some organizational restructuring. As some say, "it might be the only way to compete."

Another common complaint about the way farming is managed by public institutions is related to a conflict with environmentalists. This conflict originates in local environmental organizations fighting for the protection of birds, wild boars, rabbits and other animals that destroy crops. Farmers

are resentful of the fact that environmentalists claim to protect these animals at the detriment of their impact on farmers. They also perceive that environmentalists' priorities are backed by policy makers over producers' need of protection. In this quote, J.E. highlights the difference in the management of fauna between the airport (a fair representation of modernity) and the agrarian areas (which are adjacent):

> "Regulations are not made by agrarian engineers, they are made by biologists and naturalists. Why do I have to support all the pressure from all those birds? There are no birds in the airport, but all my lettuces get eaten, strange! It is not just a coincidence. There are no trap areas in the airport, all the trap areas are in agricultural areas." J.E.

More generally, all forms of new transport infrastructure (i.e. high speed train, highways) – often designed for urban residents and by urban decision-makers are seen as an enemy. Their impacts are two-fold: They force the expropriation of land and they facilitate imports of food products. Interviewees often point at the 2012 regional government plan to build a large casino area inside the agrarian park, the Eurovegas project (Alió et al., 2017; Fundació Agroterritori, 2012; Pirro and Anguelovski, 2017), which caused massive protests in the region. Although the casino plan was stopped, several shopping malls were built in former agrarian land at the outskirts of the park and many lots are left vacant in hope of new real estate developments (Pirro and Anguelovski, 2017). This siege has exacerbated farmers' impressions of being prosecuted. Today, many of them perceive themselves as being the smallest and the last wheel in their sectors, "those who kick the bucket", "those who no one takes care of," or those whose jobs have historically been perceived as degrading. In their views, they also have to employ immigrant labor "because no Spanish person wants to do this hard work". M.G. explains how he deals with problems at the farmers' trade union.

> "Some people just live for screwing us over, people enjoy it, we farmers are guilty of everything, of pollution, of nitrates. We are guilty of everything and we are wasting our time writing statements answering to those charges, trying to explain. There is a lack of knowledge, you need to be defending yourself from these issues constantly (…) This is a big problem, society does not accept farmers." M.G. (2016)

In sum, beyond consumers, technicians, restaurants, policy-makers, and or environmentalists, farmers show an overall resentment towards the "urban" and what it represents in terms of the rules, privilege, and inequities that they are faced with in the context of new QFSs.

## 6. Discussion and final remarks

"We keep doing and we don't complain" M.G.

In previous studies of agricultural development in the Baix Llobregat and Garraf districts, researchers examined the impact of urbanization and sprawl on farmland, and the role of urban planning decisions in such equation (Callau i Berenguer and Montasell, 2017; Montasell and Callau i Berenguer, 2008; Paül and McKenzie, 2011; Paül and Tonts, 2005; Sempere, 2005; Serra et al., 2017). From a planning perspective, the creation of the BLAP agrarian park and the QFSs have promoted an "exceptional urban-rural partnership, guaranteeing farming protection and (…) a departure from the usual arrangements" (Paül and McKenzie, 2013, p. 101). Other authors highlight the possibility of these mechanisms for advancing food self-provisioning in the region (Callau i Berenguer and Montasell, 2017). However, I argue that these perspectives are somehow optimistic, as I highlight other structural and local dynamics at play in the loss of agricultural land and in the constraints perceived by farmers that have remained unexplored by former studies: the loss of rural livelihoods and prosperity. The agrarian policies and programs at different administrative scales (from the European Common Agricultural Policy to the regional or municipal level) is what makes - certain types of - agriculture more or less profitable and what determines farmers' ability to keep farming and how. Those programs affecting agrarian systems include quality schemes.

Although a rather large scholarship exists on the underlying rationale, logics and implications of QFSs, the way these instruments intersect *in practice* with farmers' aspirations and lived experiences remain unexplored. In this chapter, I have attempted to address this gap by looking at the meanings and implications of these programs for farmers in a peri-urban agricultural area of Barcelona, where quality schemes are being promoted to sustain small-scale farming. While QFSs programs often use a discourse of urban-rural reconnection, I find that top-down, unbalanced, and inequitable urban-rural politics are often embedded in these newly created quality schemes. These politics play an important role in defining how and why these schemes are designed – and for whose benefit. My data analysis also reveals the unresolved challenges faced by farmers embedded in QFSs. As a result, I argue that, in this case, despite the new opportunities for marketing and commercialization that these programs have brought, QFSs do not represent a long-term solution for sustainable agriculture because i) QFSs create new organizational and managerial barriers to farmers and leave important challenges unresolved ii) QFSs involve imposed schemes and rules on farmers and favor power and privilege dynamics between urban and rural sites. I acknowledge that some of the challenges identified in this chapter are not unique to the implementation of QFSs. QFSs are made of different components and initiatives (direct selling, retailer marketing, labels,

etc.) which have bring different advantages and problems. What I argue here is that there is an intensification of these challenges due to the addition of different duties and the overlap of quality initiatives.

While QFSs programs in theory aim to protect a sustainable form of farming by "qualifying" it and by creating new venues for direct marketing strategies, they do so without considering farmers' aspirations and capacities, nor the structural context in which these exchanges take place. The quality strategy seems imposed, and the created quality foods artificial. These schemes seem more directed at and linked to consumers' will, taste, and aesthetics than to a concern for improving farmers' socio-economic conditions. The tensions with urban dwellers (consumers, technicians, or environmentalists) reveal an overall perception that the rural – the farming – is abandoned, devalued and/or prosecuted (in line with those found in Sempere, 2005). Such an argument supports previous research suggesting that current forms of food sustainability governance are following neoliberal city logics and producing a hierarchy of places and people (Domene and Saurí, 2007; Pirro and Anguelovski, 2017; Wacquant, 2012) and privileging certain narratives or discourses at the detriment of small farmers' needs and aspirations (Bourke and Meppem, 2000; Rutherford, 2007). Despite efforts in improving commercialization channels, many challenges faced by food producers remain unresolved. Moreover, farmers acknowledge contradictory policies and (un)regulations that reinforce the polarization of agriculture. QFSs programs result often incoherent and unclear (since communication strategies often target consumers and not producers) or insufficient to farmers that have to deal with and major agrarian problems in a context where economies of scale are still central.

As a result, farmers show a partial distrust towards the implementation of programs promoting quality spaces and question the willingness and capacity of public institutions to solve their problems completing major structural aspects. Many of them seem resigned or uninterested in the creation of these schemes, which are often defined as "patches". Their deployment and the overall skepticism of farmers bring important governance challenges to the shift in the agricultural paradigm. This result aligns with the scholarship that has studied governance implications of different policy interventions intersecting rural identities (Benjaminsen and Svarstad, 2008; Cramer, 2016; Dinnie et al., 2015; McCarthy, 2006a). The striking aspect of the particular case of QFSs is that the intervention is situated in the context of alterity by the celebrated AFNs' values.

In addition, scholars have pointed at the relation between neoliberal forms of governance as a source of governmentality for farmers (Lockie and Higgins, 2007; Murdoch and Ward, 1997). There is a risk in resignation, and of not avoiding the disciplining effects of these forms of

governing at-a-distance. The politics of no-alternative linked to neoliberalism (Peck et al., 2009; Peck and Tickell, 2002) play a role in the deployment of QFSs. The fact that neoliberalism has endorsed and fostered the (self)regulation of individuals translates into an acceptance of programs, techniques and procedures that support market rule, productivism, and global competition (Lawrence, 2004). "Hoping to survive (…) farmers obey market signals and adopt the behavior required to ensure their futures in farming" (Lawrence, 2004. pg. 4). The acceptance means either enrolling in the productivist high-tech farming systems (to which Lawrence refers to), or in the alternative or sustainable one (which I discuss). Embedded in QFSs, farmers assume the responsibility of surviving and accept the "quality" rhetoric, not without doubts but with little options to move out and with little hope for direct intervention and legal changes in favor of small-scale farming. My data shows that it might be problematic to accept these schemes as the only solution towards an agricultural shift, and to not claim for changing the conditions in which these niches are created.

There are thus broader political implications emerging from the positioning of certain practices and logics as an alternative to the agri-food socio-political crisis. These results calls for a more nuanced perspective of agri-food systems, one that avoids dualisms and reflects upon the criteria on which alternativeness, or quality, are constructed (Fuller et al., 2010; Maye et al., 2007). There is a tendency of so-called alternative practices, a chiefly urban phenomena, to promote high-quality natural food to create and sustain niche markets and to support the direct marketing venues (Goodman 2003; Sonnino and Marsden 2006; Begueria Muñoz 2016). Quality, as well as alternative, "does not give any clear sense of intentions, perspectives or desires of those involved" (Wilson, 2013, p. 4). Up to date, both designations find most of their significants at the urban level. What they evoke often times in the urban imaginary is simplicity, authenticity, natural and socially sustainable foodstuffs associated with rurality or neo-rurality archetypes (Blecha and Leitner, 2014; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Goodman and DuPuis, 2002; Goodman and Goodman, 2001; Goodman, 2004; McCarthy, 2006b) while invisibilizing or overlooking the changes in agricultural practices, behavior, mindsets, and identities for the farmers themselves. I argue that a better understanding of the aspirations and lived-experiences of those involved in so-called alternative spaces help to unfold the power dynamics that might undermine the reasons and objectives that originally motivated the creation of such networks.

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# CHAPTER 6

## Discussion and concluding remarks

***"Change takes more effort than what we can take credit for"***

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Debates on alternatives ultimately discuss the possibilities of these groups and initiatives as transformation agents (Alkon and Guthman, 2017; Bialski et al., 2015a; Fuller et al., 2010; J. K. Gibson-Graham, 2006; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Guthman, 2011; McCarthy, 2006a; Moloney et al., 2010; Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012; Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Zademach and Hillebrand, 2013). The positioning of the scholarship on this debate seems to depend on experiences and expectations of researchers, who range between those who see the bottle half empty and those who see it half full. I sit closer to the critical take on alternatives (which is inclined to first considering their weak points, giving a secondary role to the political openings that these initiatives may bring), and I believe the results of this dissertation reflect important reasons to do so. I argue that a more critical examination of the alternatives-provisioning strategy is needed, despite the ubiquitous desires to make such initiatives thrive, as one of the apparently most hopeful phenomena in current (environmental) politics and civic society mobilizing.

In a recent conference on Economic Geography (GCEG 2018), presentations on the economic diversity of different practices and spaces around the globe abounded. The discussant of the panel "Alternative Green Practices", Prof. Chang, pointed out that Gibson-Graham's framework of diverse economies seems, paradoxically, to be hegemonic in the study of alternative economies. This claim aligns with other scholars that have pointed at the need to move beyond the analysis of the alternativeness of certain practices, to rather investigate and reveal "the tensions and contradictions underpinning the emergence, growth, proliferation of alternative economic and political spaces" (Fuller et al., 2010, p. xxvi, also Alkon and Guthman, 2017; Bialski et al., 2015a).

Throughout this dissertation, I engaged with existing debates on alternatives, and I did so through a novel angle. I was interested in analyzing how certain initiatives informed by particular values and rationales are constructed as alternatives and expanded into a broader strategy for social change. I approached the alternatives-provisioning strategy for social change from the standpoint of power and privilege, and paid particular attention to the on-the-ground mechanisms and dynamics that favor the construction and expansion of certain practices as alternatives to the mainstream system of production and consumption. To achieve this goal, I developed three empirical studies to examine how power and privilege issues manifest and unfold in different examples of the alterity quest, that is, in initiatives that claim to construct solutions to social and environmental problems by highlighting their difference/alternativeness in relation to the mainstream economic system. The articulation and external recognition of this difference becomes the vital political act in the three cases.

The case studies I examined are:

- Community-based economies in the domains of food, energy and transportation across Europe. Broadly, these initiatives aim to create more ethical and sustainable forms of production and consumption. They position themselves as the alternative to the globalized and capitalistic economic system, often claiming a communitarian and socio-environmental sustainability approach.

- Sustainability-oriented farmer training programs in the Northern Coast of California. These programs can be considered to be part of the broader trend of the alternative food movement in the United States. By producing new "sustainable" farmers these trainings aim at counteracting the power of the agro-industry and the impacts of the federal agri-food policy on the social and environmental realms. The discourses and praxis around farmer trainings embrace a sound sense of "otherness": sustainable small-scale local agriculture as being different – and inherently better – than the mainstream way of food production.

- Quality food strategies in an agricultural region in the province of Barcelona where different quality food strategies overlap. These initiatives try to revalorize foods and places in order to boost the economic activity of rural areas and integrate them in the urban economy. In such programs, difference – i.e. quality - is often defined though particular characteristics: local, small scale, organic, etc. in quite an elastic manner. This distinction nevertheless serves to valorize food and regions.

1. Key results and discussion

Throughout this dissertation I have tried to answer the overreaching question of what roles do power and privilege play in the construction and expansion of an alternatives-provisioning strategy for social change. The results of the empirical studies that compose this dissertation demonstrate how an array of existing power and privilege dynamics are embedded in the construction and expansion of an alternative strategy for social change. In the following subsections I explain and theoretically discuss the main roles that I have disentangled empirically. The arguments presented here complement the frequent scholarly and public assumption that predominantly sees/describes alternatives as enactors of a more just and socially sustainable future, as transition agents, or as innovative experiments (e.g. Hopkins, 2009; Hossain, 2016; Ornetzeder and Rohracher, 2013; Raven et al., 2008; Shove and Walker, 2007; Smith and Seyfang, 2013).

a. Neoliberal rationalities shape alternative subjectivities

First, I have argued that certain neoliberal rationalities play an important role in the construction of alternatives and in situating the alternatives-provisioning strategy as a preferred solution to solve socio-environmental problems. In chapter 3, I analyzed the imaginary of change and justice articulated by members of an array of community economy initiatives. This imaginary imprints the way that members of community economies imagine how societal change looks like and the role of the alternative strategy in

bringing about a more sustainable low-carbon and socially just economy. It is under this alternative imaginary that the movement defines its discourse and strategy. I have named this imaginary the "alternative imaginary of change."

I have related the alternative imaginary with certain neoliberal rationalities. In particular, I have noted how the imaginary is imprinted with logics of individual responsibility, state alienation, and naturalization of inequity. These rationales, which can have contradictory counterparts at times within communities and individuals, define the strategy of alternatives-provisioning as a way to by-pass existing socio-political and economic configurations. The alternative imaginary sees the state as an inefficient intruder and at times an ally, moving the attention from changing structural conditions to find the spaces in which these initiatives might find comfort. In addition, the imaginary envisions a trickle-down effect when considering issues of inequality: It justifies an attention on "low hanging fruits", waiting for others to come "like in a domino effect".

These results complement existing scholarship on the emergence of alternatives, that often posit these initiatives as an instrumental tool for meeting material needs and getting "alternative" goods and services (Seyfang, 2001; Trauger and Passidomo, 2012) or for engaging in a community of like-minded people and being part of something larger (Hardt, 2013; Holman, 2007; Neal, 2013; Seyfang et al., 2013), as an autonomy, redistribution and procedural justice effort from the bottom (Bell and Rowe, 2012; Cowell et al., 2012; Cox and Johnson, 2003; Eames and Hunt, 2013), or as a mere oppositional strategy against the dominant socio-economic and political model (Holman, 2007; Neal, 2013; Schneider et al., 2011; Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012). I suggest here that the alternatives might also be the outcome of neoliberal rationalities conforming alternative subjectivities. Yet, rather than proving alternatives as a fully neoliberal project, this dissertation has tried to make the connections between the top-down project of neoliberalism and everyday life practices (Barnett, 2005). Following Collier, I have identified initiatives, ideas and techniques that favor neoliberal governance in the context of sustainability-led initiatives with a discourse of alterity (Collier, 2012).

Responsibilization, as a key neoliberal governmentality feature (Burchell, 1996; Dean, 1999; Rose, 1999), emerges as an important element for the construction of the alternative strategy. The strategy of alternatives-provisioning is inevitably linked to the neoliberal premise of demand less and construct more (self-help). While existing scholarship has noted that responsibilized subjects are part of alternatives (Begueria Muñoz, 2016; Guthman, 2008a; Holman, 2007; Rosol, 2012; Seyfang, 2006) who try to improve themselves and the society through changes in their behaviors and practices, I have highlighted here how responsibilization works in practice, allowing for the expansion of the alternatives-provisioning strategy by promoting individual endeavors in order to achieve change. In chapter 3, the members of

CBEs take responsibility and action for a sustainable society, creating niches of morality and environmental sustainability, and even more, they also feel responsible to spread the idea of the change they envision. Others have observed such "evangelizing" logics (Guthman, 2008b; Slocum, 2007) and related them to class and race imbalances.


**Figure 14: Signs in shops in California disseminating particular visions and norms**

In chapter 4, I identified a strong sense of responsibilization in the young American farmers that embrace the farming profession, assume the precarity embedded in the current conditions of small-scale farming, and become responsible for transforming it into an environmental and socially sustainable activity. I have argued that this sense of responsibilization draws partially on the imaginaries of agrarianism and the renewed version of the eco-agrarian ethic, and it constructs the much-celebrated figure of the farming hero. Farmers, under this logic, are supposed to solve all the world's problems. It is responsibilization that proves farmer training programs as a feasible solution to the farming crisis. And it does so through developing the aura of "otherness" that imprints the more "sustainable" agriculture practices (as in these two popular books Logsdon, 2017; Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture, 2017) making them more deserving of sacrifice and individual accountability.

Yet, in chapter 5, I observed a different dynamic regarding responsibilization in the case of the farmers in Barcelona. These are more externally positioned vis-à-vis the alterity quest deployed by the Quality Food Schemes in which they are immersed. The farmers from Baix Llobregat and Garraf found themselves

embedded in an institutional program to impulse different forms of alternative food networks in order to sustain small-scale and family farming, but they do not fully share the same imaginaries as practitioners or urban consumers around food and farming and do not use the same discourses of quality, locality. Their discourses regarding change are rather centered on livelihoods or justice. They do not reflect the alternative subjectivity that members of the community initiatives across Europe do. Farmers demand greater state regulation and adopt a different mentality in relation to the regulatory failure (the political inability of governments to regulate against the impacts of economic liberalism); their position is more related to resignation than to responsibilization. Still, the programs promoting alternative foods, with a totalized image of consensus around what is good, unity and common purpose, and defended by their alterity, deploy a disciplining effect over the farmers. Farmers resign themselves to not contest or mobilize against the policies and regulations that hinder their livelihoods and the future of agriculture, showing a more passive or assimilated form of responsibilization..

b. The neoliberal governance apparatus embraces the provisioning of alternatives

The strong commitment to self-improvement that I identified especially in chapters 3 (community economies) and 4 (farmer training programs) is a condition to the overly neoliberal processes of shifting responsibility downwards and the consequent retreat of the state. While scholarship has focused on the grassroots emergence of alternatives (Sekulova et al., 2017; Seyfang et al., 2013), and their (in)capacity to influence regulatory structures (Blanchet, 2015; Davies, 2007; Taylor Aiken, 2014) by "casual encounters" (Celata and Coletti, 2018), I emphasize here the need to understand the role of the state in promoting and practicing the alternative strategy towards societal change.

So far, the fact that certain values, practices and actions embedded in alternatives are institutionalized has been related to co-optation (Frantzeskaki and Rok, 2018; J. K. Gibson-Graham, 2006; Henfrey and Penha-Lopes, 2018; Leitner et al., 2007), but scholarship on alternative practices has not paid enough attention to the on-the-ground processes by which certain initiatives get expanded and institutionalized (funded, supported, researched, disseminated) and how the alternatives-provisioning strategy fits with and feeds a governance strategy that favors un-regulation and self-governance. I agree with Gibson-Graham's assertion that "the new politics draws upon alternative discourses of rights and visions of development" (Gibson-Graham, 1996, p. 179, cited in Jonas, 2010), but I argue that the State itself has adopted that same politics, and activists are not always aware of the perils of this shift. In this dissertation I suggest that in a context of regulatory failure and power devolution, different levels and domains of governance are indeed keen to support certain practices or initiatives (such as community economies, quality food schemes or farmer training programs) in order to improve socio-environmental conditions. While co-optation usually denotes a strategical undermining of alternatives by the State, this might not be always the case here.

Indeed, the expansion of their values and ideals outside their immediate socio-political circles is something that initiatives often desire themselves. I suggest here a revision of the ideas around the state leading to the notion of co-option, acknowledging the very ambivalent relations initiatives-state-policy (Celata and Coletti, 2018).

The alternative-provisioning strategy is also influenced by broader neoliberal trends in environmental governance and funding of civil society groups. Neoliberalism devolves power to NGOs, community organizations and community groups (in a form of Environmental Third Way). The power of the NGOs is tied to state funds, and also to foundations and philanthropists, that is, wealthy money, which might be keener on funding the construction of solutions rather than more oppositional and confrontational work (Bartley, 2007; Davis, 1991; Dinnie and Holstead, 2017). This trend influences the organizations' strategies and repertoires of actions. Indeed this is the case of the organizations driving most of the initiatives described in this dissertation (most of the initiatives from chapters 3 and 4, but not the quality schemes from chapter 5 which are funded and supported by public local institutions): most of them are NGOs or a community group, and the majority of them receives funds and/or support from the state and in the case of U.S. especially, multiple private donors.

The expansion of the NGO/community organization model favors certain types of alternatives over others. In chapter 4 I described the farmer training programs as an outcome of the NGOization of sustainable agriculture. As the imaginaries, visions and rationales around what food production means and what it entails in the US context has changed, sustainable agriculture has become inserted in the non-profit and third sector domains. This trend transforms the types of jobs that the sector offers, as farming increasingly requires providing services (i.e. education, trainings, assistance) instead of, or in addition to, producing food (with the exception of large scale organic farms). As a consequence, a myriad of farming and food organizations (many of them labelled as "alternatives") distort the realities of the food system and become an –advantaged- competence of those trying to produce food in a cost effective and technically viable way. These sorts of mechanisms promoting and defining the creation of alternatives are often not part of the broader discussion around alternatives and alternativeness.

c. Privileged imaginaries (entangled with socio-economic structures) construct and sustain certain alternatives

Throughout the dissertation I have highlighted the role of imaginaries in the construction of the alternatives-provisioning strategy for social change. Beyond the alternative imaginary of change that depicts the alternatives-provisioning strategy described in chapter 3, I have unpacked different imaginaries at play in the construction of alternative foods and alternative economies broadly. It is through certain

imaginaries that alternativeness is constructed and alternatives sustained (e.g. Cidell, 2017; Smith and Tidwell, 2016; Watts et al., 2018; Burnham et al., 2017). In particular, I have noted that the alternatives analyzed are imprinted by currents of agrarianism, localism, whiteness, communitarianism, Western environmentalism or sustainable development.

In chapter 4 I focused on the particular imaginary of lack of farmers to understand how the farmer training programs get framed, constructed and supported under a broader common imaginary of farmers' loss. I offer evidence for the fact that the more grassroots proponents of alternatives and the (more or less progressive) government agencies often share the imaginaries that form the alterity paradigm. The results from the study showed that certain privileged imaginaries not only construct difference but are actually entangled with the socio-economic and political structures that support the alternatives development and expansion, for example, through funding or media support. In this way, imaginaries "are carried out, reinforced, and reinterpreted through everyday practices and institutions" (Cidell, 2017, p. 171, also see Jasanoff and Kim, 2009; Peet and Watts, 2010). In chapter 3, a similar trend can be observed related to imaginaries around communitarianism or environmentalism while in chapter 5 the ideas about locale and localism, small scale agriculture and family farming that AFNs practitioners promote resonate in some institutional circles.

McCarthy and others have noted that many of the characteristics upon which – mostly urban-based - alternatives draw on are predominantly rural (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; McCarthy, 2006; Neal, 2013). I have observed how these imaginaries work for rural dwellers, in particular famers, whose more-or-less idealistic values about the environment or the farming profession are combined with a more instrumental economic perspective. This combination of imaginaries, values and needs creates tensions and confusion among many of them. Even though certain imaginaries and discourses might be at times instrumentalized (for example, in order to get funding, to convince clients), this approach still requires commitment and work, and might create an internal ambivalence that discourages and disappoints farmers. These results align with the idea that the most celebrated alternative food imaginaries predominantly fit urban consumers' needs and desires.

Remarkably, in the imaginaries forming alterity that I have observed, social justice often appears as a second level issue. In those imaginaries, privilege is often sustained by notions of selective entitlement, whiteness, etc. For example, most of the AFNs practitioners from all of my case studies seem oblivious to one of the most evident outcomes of such movement: the naturalization of the unequal access to food. The invisible dynamics that favor exclusivity and the reproduction of unequal social structures (Lipsitz, 2006; Omi and Winant, 2015; Pulido, 2015) are often times overlooked when assessing otherness. Yet, these imprint the privileged character embedded on the alterity quest (Alkon and Guthman, 2017; Alkon and

McCullen, 2011; Bialski et al., 2015b; Reynolds, 2015; Slocum, 2007; Zitcer, 2014). If social justice concerns are left aside, these alternatives might be unintentionally reproducing one of the most representative characteristics of the system they try to defeat.

Eventually, otherness might become a pretext to sustain a system that provides privileged people with resources, opportunity, wellbeing, satisfaction, and social/political capital. I have tried to elucidate how privilege is reproduced within the expansion of the alterity paradigm. Part of that exercise requires the understanding of how the – relatively - privileged members of society, who happen to be highly educated and progressive, face and handle that privilege (an aspect that I have addressed in chapters 3 and 4). Political and economic structures and individuals' rationales and imaginaries contribute to that reproduction, sustaining meta-privileges (Flagg, 2005) and notions of self-entitlement (for example, those with environmental privilege setting the terms in which environmental problems and solutions are constructed, deployed and interrogated). I claim that these initiatives are also benefited from the seductiveness particular to the environmentalist project of self-regulation: their environmentalist ethos can come with the possibility of claiming an identity of innocence, resistance to power and solving the world's problems (Finney, 2014; Park and Pellow, 2011; Rutherford, 2007). For example, the battle of some of farmers/prospective farmers to promote and extend organic foods and environmental-sound practices is not accompanied by a reflection on the commodification and fetishization of foods that indirectly accompanies alternative food markets.

d. Unequal discursive power and broader power imbalances allow the thriving of privileged and biased narratives around alternatives

Imaginaries produce hierarchies (Burnham et al., 2017) and impose visions, providing the languages, norms and meanings for constructing and expressing social change. These imaginaries rely on commonly held beliefs, but they are far from being universal. I show here that the prominence of the alterity quest as deployed by sustainability-oriented initiatives is the result of a power imbalance in participation processes, as well as in discursive power (the ability to generate knowledge=truth) among different social classes and groups. In the case study of the Baix Llobregat, the lack of farmers' voice in the definition of quality food or in the design of strategies directed to maintain their livelihoods was visible. Although agrarian trade unions are strong in the Barcelona area, their discursive power is limited, and their work seems to fit more with a resistance mode rather than a proponent role. The disenfranchisement of these farmers contrasts with the role of NGOs and environmental organizations behind the farmer training programs and the emergent farmer movement in the U.S. (chapter 4). The latter are able (themselves or through powerful allies) to generate a discourse around sustainable agriculture and the future of farming that is heavily supported by media and public and private institutions. At the same time, discourses around privilege,

racism, unfair immigration practices have been relegated to the back burner by NGOS and environmental groups because of a more appealing narrative around emergent farmers (with notable exceptions).

Here, I align myself with Poland's argument that social class is a crucial factor in how a particular image of alternative practices is forged and communicated in the media and discourse of popular culture (Podkalicka and Potkańska, 2015): Alternatives are promoted or legitimized depending on who crafts these initiatives. The ability to create narratives about the environmental crisis and promote solutions, in other words, the power to be legitimated, is part of the Environmental Privilege embedded in these initiatives. With settings in Europe and the U.S., and a broader understanding of Environment-and-Privilege beyond the more exposure/access EP framework, this dissertation has moved EP beyond merely race issues, and even purely economic ones, and focused more on culture, education and access to resources. In addition, results align with the common idea that constructing and inhabiting environmental enclaves are a form of environmental privilege. Going beyond obviously luxurious richness hubs, this dissertation sheds light into less sumptuous and more subtly rich enclaves. The latter are inhabited by people who, paradoxically, have more sensibility for social justice than those from gated communities have, which brings interesting insights into perceptions of social justice and privilege.

Scholarship has so far given little attention to the clash of particular discourses on alterity with differing imaginaries and realities. In the case study of Barcelona, I have described how, constructed and promoted by the values that AFNs espouse (gastronomy, agrarianism, locale), programs that deploy quality standards are lived and experienced by people who are external to such rationales and articulations. I argued that the quality paradigm constructed by these programs has brought new forms of rule for farmers and produce an overall "politics of resentment" towards the progressive urban elites. These results echo similar results found in more mainstream environmental interventions (Benjaminsen and Svarstad, 2008; Cramer, 2016; Dinnie et al., 2015). Despite the fact that the urban-rural politics embedded in quality or direct marketing programs might reproduce conventional power dynamics (such as discipline, exclusion or domination), consumers and policy makers seem fixated on other dimensions such as the environmental, the cultural, or the economic aspect (or a partial and subjective view of those).

Then, while scholars often remark that alternatives are constituted by the "usual suspects" with similar ideas and distinct imaginaries, I would argue that this is not a problem per-se. I find it much more problematic for certain groups to have prevalence over others due to their perceived superiority and self-entitlement to solve socio-environmental problems while assuming a universal ethic or view around social change or environmental conditions. In the alternative imaginary of change described in the case study of community economies, I have noted the politics of conversion (Childs, 2003) at play in this initiatives,

denoting superiority and notions of universality among members of the community economies (Guthman, 2008c).

For Gibson-Graham, a key element for imagining and enacting alternative economies is the self-cultivation of ethical subjects capable of desiring and enacting a new economic politic, a process of "cultivating ourselves and others as subjects of noncapitalistic economies" (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 77). But, who can afford to do that … when people's lives are so embedded – and at stake - in the capitalistic economy? For most of the people, their politics is a more reactionary struggle against the direct impacts of this economy to their livelihoods or environments. Their politics is not built on choice, but on improvisation and constraint. In the case of farmer training programs, young black and Latino women from Oakland engage with alternative practices as a means for more secure livelihoods rather than a conscious choice for social change or for performing differences (at least way less predominantly). Similarly, farmworkers from Salinas engage in organics' production as a way to avoid toxic chemicals that greatly impact their health and that of their communities.

e. What do these entanglements tell us about the strategy's achievements and prospects?

Forms of community organizing and sustainability-oriented initiatives undoubtedly play an important role as sites of grassroots participation and place-based community development (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014), as forms of enhancing social interactions (Conill et al., 2012), as drivers of a low-carbon economy (Burch, 2010; Seyfang, 2010), as economic relocalization agents (Bailey et al., 2010; Hopkins, 2009), and as tools for alleviating poverty (Stockton and Campbell, 2011; Walker, 2008). However in general there is lack of social justice aspects when considering the outcomes of these initiatives. Initiatives' members generally fail to recognize their own privileges and the entanglements which make these initiatives thrive, which are much related to dominant power structures such as a neoliberal economic and political system or social/racial hierarchization. As these initiatives establish and institutionalize themselves, a number of invisible politics (urban-rural, politics of representation, politics of imaginaries) are at play. These should be acknowledged and reflexed upon collectively.

The uncritical celebration and consequent expansion of the alternative-provisioning strategy might miss important underpinnings about its role and capacities, risking to perpetuate current power structures and imbalances. For example, some people might be excluded from the broader societal debates about the future while others are entitled with the capacity to decide how social change looks like, at the same time as getting the reward of feeling good about it. Under the banner of difference and accompanied with discourses around sustainability, community or social embeddedness, precarity, oppression and dominance might look less apparent. Alternative, as other keywords in environmental discourse such as

community, diversity or democracy, has the risk of "turning favored merely on the basis of its metaphorical appeal, their suggestiveness, rather than on its ability to promote a pragmatic course of action" (Bourke and Meppem, 2000, p. 300)

Moreover, the institutionalization of these alternatives might exacerbate even more these inequalities and power structures. A state complicit to expand these alternatives might mean more un-regulation and more inequality between those who access these alternatives and those who can't or don't want to (the latter possibility often unacknowledged). A central argument in this dissertation has been that relying on built difference around "safe spaces" is part of the state's strategy to compensate the regulatory failure. Results highlight the importance for the alterity quest of dealing with the state, which means the need to profoundly transform, not only avoid or instrumentalize, the governing structures that make these initiatives marginal and constrained.

I think there is a need to understand the entanglements presented in this dissertation and re-work the binaries that define alterity and ultimately make these alternatives so dominant. Despite the frequent call for relationality rather than binary-thinking (e.g. Goodman et al., 2014; Jonas, 2010) that I claim in parts of this thesis – binary is fundamental for the practice of alternatives, since these are meant to be distinctively different from the conventional (Samers and Pollard, 2010). Binaries might not be necessarily bad, when they are strategical and well framed. "The spirit of alterity might be pragmatic rather than ideological. And pragmatic means open, experimental, creative, always with an eye of what consequences actions have" (Jones et al., 2010, p. 107). It is necessary then to complement the "reading for difference" with a disclosure and recognition of the entanglements and articulations of the alternatives with the dominant systems of power and privilege. This would help to understand the actual potential and the constraints that certain initiatives, projects or organizations face. It seems important that the strategy realizes which are the imaginaries that form their ideas of alterity and where these imaginaries come from, being aware that "our dreams of future so easily replicate colonial patterns" (Natasha Myers, 2017). The "radical imaginary" (Castoriadis, 1997) should be constantly reflected and revisited.

2. Limitations and avenues for future research

    a. Research limitations

This dissertation presented a novel explanation about the expansion and institutionalization of the alternatives-provisioning strategy for social change. It shed light on how issues of power and privilege are entangled with sustainability-led alternatives in the fields of community economies and alternative food networks with the analysis of three different case studies. The results of this dissertation resulted from

inductive, grounded and situated research on particular initiatives and programs in Europe and North America framed with an idea of alterity.

The research has limitations.

1. The study is unavoidably limited theoretically. My approach to my RQ through neoliberalism, EP and imaginaries is of course partial, and it imprinted the research design, strategy and analysis phases.

Because I try to answer a very broad question, the response is necessarily limited. I am approaching the question from a partial perspective on power and privilege. Power dimensions embedded in alternatives are also related to economic, regulatory, gender aspects, etc. I could have used a purely structural approach, rather than adding a more post-structural stand. For the analysis of privilege, I could have used more class- or race- oriented frameworks (although I did focus on whiteness in some parts of the analysis) instead departing from an EP lens. While I acknowledge that if I have chosen capitalism and white privilege, for instance, as theoretical approaches, my answers might have varied, my thesis presents a coherent and rigorous, even if partial, answer to the central research question driving this thesis. My selection of the theoretical frameworks was justified in section 1.2.

2. When I chose to look at how power and privilege influence the rise of the alternatives-provisioning strategy, I was leaving out the reverse dynamic, that is, how the alternative strategy shapes or is able to contest power and privilege. Although I have done that elsewhere (Pinker et al., 2018; Sekulova et al., 2017) and my research question is clearly targeting one direction only, I am aware that the two directions of the process might not be as independent as scholarship, including myself, usually treat them. In other words, the "positive" and "negative" outcomes of the alternative strategy are likely to be co-constituted and this is something I did not focus my attention on in this thesis.

3. My results are also limited by the three case studies I developed. In the dissertation, I recognized the diversity of initiatives and rationales within the alternatives-provisioning strategy and I justified why I have focused on the alternative dimension of them (see chapter 3 specifically). Nevertheless, the results of this thesis would have been different had I selected a different array of initiatives. For example, there are initiatives that could be framed as alternative food networks or community economies which have a more radical social dimension, for example those embedded in a context of crisis (e.g. Calvário and Kallis, 2016; Kallis and Varvarousis, 2017) or with a clear anti-racism (e.g. Loh and Agyeman, 2018) or anti-capitalist discourse (e.g. Crane, 2012). In these initiatives, the alterity dimension confronts its limits and finds allies and complementary strategies (more confrontational activism). By focusing on sustainability-oriented initiatives I was in a way pre-selecting initiatives with a more privileged character, but this has

been my objective. In other words, I chose to select on the dependent variable to better understand how power and privilege permeate the alterity quest.

I extracted conclusions from particular cases which then extrapolated to what I refer to as "alternative practices" and the "alternatives-provisioning strategy for social change." Yet, I am aware that I am representing the reality of some practices but others (and a continuum of validity in between) who try to represent and build alternatives might have a different reality. In chapter 1, I clearly stated the boundaries of this research, defining and illustrating the types of initiatives I am looking at. In any case, more than certain types of initiatives, in this dissertation I have tried to understand the dynamics behind the alterity quest which is transversal to an array of different practices. Still I recognize that different dynamics in different sorts of alternative practices might exist, and I have missed that nuance due to the limited scope of this research.

b. Open research pathways

There are a number of questions that emerge from the results of the thesis, which I would like to further explore in future research. These are the most important ones:

*The role of the state in the expansion of alternatives*

In this dissertation I have argued that the alternatives-provisioning strategy for social change is undertaken by different state levels in order to compensate for the regulatory failure. This is the case of the municipalities supporting different forms of community economies, or regional agencies promoting alternative food networks to boost rural development. I have also shown how certain imaginaries contained in public programs align with those of grassroots groups, such as the one of lack of farmers. In future research I would like to pay more attention to the state, as a political and economic structure, that allows, accept and institutionalize certain types of alternatives. I will study more deeply the actual process of institutionalization that I have described in this dissertation and I will test more firmly how alternatives alleviate unregulation and deregulation. For that I would pay more attention to the on-the-ground regulations, laws, funding schemes that influence the institutionalization process, as well as to the imaginaries and rationales of public officials and policy makers (which I partially considered in the case study on quality schemes).

I referred in this thesis to the ambivalent relation of the initiatives with the state. Following this line of research, I would like to study more systematically the relation of alternative practices with the state, looking at how and why they work together or they are confronted. This will require paying more attention to the spaces of interaction between activists and policy makers.

This research could bring important insights for understanding the workings of actually-existing neoliberalisms on the ground, especially about the role of sub-state levels. It would also add to the limited scholarship on the relation of alternatives and policy change (Celata and Coletti, 2018).

*Different imaginations and discourses about the desired future and alternative forms of living*

In this thesis, I argue that alternatives are expanded and institutionalized due to certain politics of imaginaries and the imbalance on discursive power among different society groups. I exemplify this argument in the case of the farmers in Barcelona, which have a different imaginary around small farming and the strategy for its survival. However, their perspective gets silenced by a top-down program based on promoting artificial quality foods.

I also suggest that more disadvantaged groups act more based on improvisation, rather than choice, and for that, the alternatives discourse is less attractive to them. I do not mean that alternatives cannot emerge from the underprivileged. I agree with Cavenagh and Benjaminsen that "alternatives (…) are being experimented with (out of inspiration or desperation) on a daily basis among the poorest of the poor. They have no choice but to seek alternatives to what they are experiencing." (Cavanagh and Benjaminsen, 2017, p. 210). Following this, I would like to understand how the underprivileged or marginalized sectors of society (those generally excluded in the alterity paradigm) think of difference, future and alternative forms of living. I want to understand what is alternative for them, how they envision the future and how they want the society to change.

I would like to expand this line of inquiry analyzing where and how historically marginalized groups negotiate, contest or simply co-exist (in certain conditions) with the practices, discourses, and imaginaries from the more accepted alterity paradigm. Here, I would like to dig more into issues of whiteness, class and race in the study of alternatives, by understanding the different futures imagined and how and why the prevalent ones get more powerful – while others become obscured or invisibilized.

*Hidden narratives within alternative practices*

I aim to further understand the hidden or unacknowledged aspects within alternatives practices. Moving beyond common understandings of community initiatives as convivial spaces of sustainability building, I want to understand what alternatives really do and what are the aspirations around and uses of these initiatives that get hidden by the main – often instrumentalized - discourses around them. In the study of the farmer training programs (chapter 4), I encountered very different narratives about the "usages" of these trainings. For example, usages related to different relations with nature, the connections with ancestral roots, the dissatisfaction with the current formal education system and the political economic

system broadly, the loneliness and the need to live in community, etc. Understanding and highlighting these commonly overseen narratives will likely tell us new insights about what the alternatives actually oppose to and more importantly, where is the potential of these practices for impacting society more broadly.

*Emotions, aspirations*

Lastly, I would like to deepen the study of imaginaries and rationales developed in this thesis with a better understanding of the emotions at play in the alternatives. In particular, but not limiting only to those, there are two emotions that I encountered repeatedly throughout the research process. One is hedonistic pleasure, and the other is disquiet due to personal contradictions and precarity. I would be interested in understanding how these two emotions play a role on the engagement and disengagement of people with alternative practices, as well as on alternatives' strategies and achievements.

For the analysis of hedonistic pleasure, I am particularly interested in the role of the "alternative hedonism" at play in community initiatives. In a master thesis that I co-supervised (of Helen Zaiser, 2016) we started developing this topic in a very preliminary way. Soper has identified an "alternative hedonistic pleasure" found in environmentally-conscious behaviors, but has not looked specifically at grassroots activities and more politicized actions, in which likely this feeling manifests and works in different ways. My hypothesis, following Soper, is that people find hedonistic pleasure in the behaviors typical from alternative practices, such as group meetings, volunteering, doing farm work, sharing, cooking and eating good healthy food, biking, and so on. This pleasure is also linked to feeling their own "otherness". I am particularly interested in unravelling the relation of this "alternative hedonism" with responsibilization.

Anger and disquiet are often produced from contradictions, and might help to understand the complexity of individuals' actions (and the way they relate to the alterity quest). Contradictions "emerge from the encounter between utopian attempts to transform the world and the need to implement such attempts in practice" (Castán Broto, 2015, p. 461). I have slightly touched the issue of frustration and precarity on chapter 4 but more especially on Sekulova et al., 2017. In that paper, we examine how contradictions and conflicts in groups influence the communities' trajectories and internal functioning, highlighting the positive role that such contradictions might have for the groups. In future research, I am interested in understanding the contradictions and frustration at the individual level of initiatives' members and/or beneficiaries, and how these are dealt by different members of alternative practices. This includes food producers, who have to reconcile their desire to do good with an economic imperative to survive, or consumers and users of different alternative services who have to confront their own privilege in doing so.

## 3. Conclusion

The contribution of this dissertation is to propose a critical analysis of the alterity quest deployed by sustainability-oriented community economies and alternative food networks and of existing scholarship on these initiatives. I do so by incorporating an analysis on power and privilege embedded in the construction of alternatives and in the expansion of an alternative-provision strategy for social change. This perspective balances, but does not neglect, the positive accounts of these initiatives within emergent geography scholarship.

More broadly, this dissertation contributes to the field of political ecology by examining a 1st world political ecology around what seems a societal consensus about how to bring about socio-environmental change and how this looks like. By doing this, this dissertation expands the empirical and theoretical groundings of the field, which has traditionally focused on conflict (rather than consensus) over resources in the Global South (rather than in the Global North). I have also engaged with theories of neoliberal governance and its resistances, environmental privilege and imaginaries, through an original critical analysis of the alterity quest in the fields of sustainability-led community economies and alternative food networks. I have also discussed the emerging but yet underdeveloped field of the politics of alternatives, looking at the roles of power and privilege in the construction and expansion of an alternative strategy for social change in three specific alternative initiatives in Europe and North America.

The results of this dissertation demonstrate that the expansion of the alternative strategy for change, as is deployed and celebrated by progressive groups in the field of environmental protection and sustainability, is entangled with conventional power and privilege dynamics. All the results of my analysis are often ignored by participants, practitioners, and supporters of these initiatives, even though the entanglements of the initiatives with power and privilege raise important questions about the actual alternativeness of initiatives and their transformational potential. The reality is that in these initiatives change seems linked to some fetishized values (i.e. communitarianism, locality, environmentalism) and biased perceptions of certain elements (i.e. food and farming, bikes, health and other dimensions of lifestyle) while others are concurrently forgotten (inequality and privilege, power dynamics, precarious lives, or uncomfortable emotions).

Alternatives and alterity are often considered as universal, and the alternative strategy is often shredded with an idea of innocence. However, the alternatives seem to play a politics that work for certain identities and classes, not for others such as rural farmers or non-white people, who often face the burdens of the mainstream system. The expansion of certain alternatives over other visions and demands for regulation

and more oppositional claims takes place because alternatives' goals and aims are negotiated within a context of unequal discursive powers from different social groups and classes.

Then, acknowledging the results from this dissertation, I challenge the strategy of reading for difference (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; J. K. Gibson-Graham, 2006; Harris, 2009). I recognize that it is important to have an optimistic gaze and to acknowledge and foster political openings that "excavate the possible." However, I also see the transformational potential of excavating the possible depending on what "possible" means, also on who excavates. "Bringing the background to the foreground" might be interesting when ideas and initiatives are really relegated in the back, meaning marginalized or hidden. But that is not the case of many initiatives around sustainability that emerged from spaces of relative privilege, even when they are progressive and politicized. Before bringing them to the foreground, we might need to ask what exactly we are highlighting of these economies and which imaginaries are constructing them as alternatives. In view of the fact that notions of alterity are ambiguous and arbitrary, the alternatives "become what participants wish them to be" (Spiller, 2010, p. 147), which can lead to erroneous pictures about what the initiatives are and what their role in society is.

Moving beyond constructing particular alternatives, I call for a more egalitarian and unifying strategy for social change, one that rather than seeking artificial alternativeness for a few, would unite allies – without homogenizing - and find similarities in the effects of the current socio-economic political system (however is that defined, and sub-divided) among social classes and groups. This strategy is one of acknowledgment and strong opposition to the globalized manifestations and impacts of capitalism, racism and imperialism, with a focus on what makes radical social change seemingly impossible, that is, addressing inequality and privilege, disciplining power, and putting an end to an oppressive and dominating economic and political system.

I thus echo Michelle Murphy here, who argues that "We need to undo before doing, decompose before composting" (Natasha Myers, 2017 after Michelle Murphy). With this lens, these temporary precarious experimental spaces or transitory tools might be seen as premature alternatives, precipitated by the urge to inhabit something different, but constrained by a legacy of power and privilege that is difficult to accept and acknowledge. At the end, it is hard to accept, for all of us that desire a radically different world, that change might take more effort than what we can take credit for.

An interesting proposal, which shifts the perception of otherness, comes from the idea of alterlife (Murphy, 2018, 2017, 2015). Alterlife is "the condition of being already altered, being co-constituted by material entanglements (…) which is also the condition of being open to ongoing alteration" (Murphy, 2018, p. 83), both desired and imposed. It names a historically new form of life that is altered by the

activities of industrialization - capitalism, colonialism, racism - at metabolic and epigenetic levels. Alterlife tells us, for example, that eating organics in an eco-village is a rather partial and blind choice to avoid contamination given the extent of capitalism' pollution into the air, soil and water. It also reminds us that we are all deeply affected by whiteness, also as whites. Alterlife motivates a form of politics that does not build on perceptions of alterity triggering solutions based on the individual choice of the privileged class. Instead, it focuses on "the realities of large-scale everyday environmental violence" (Murphy, 2018, p. 83) and puts the political efforts for social change on the "hotspots of hostility", that is, on looking at the violent effects of capitalism, colonialism and racism in the places where these have profoundly concentrated (Murphy, 2018).

Rather than creating spaces of difference and alternativeness, I propose instead to push for the consciousness of alterlife (i.e. universal damaging alteration linked to the effects of capitalism, colonialism and racism) for motivating that "new political imaginary" and the "politics of the possible". For the implacable authority of the current regime and its effects, no enclave works unless we start dismantling the system that sustains oppression and inequality.

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