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Special Issue: Sociologia Ruralis

Understanding sustainable food system transitions: practice, assessment and governance

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Introduction

This Special Issue has its origins in a 2015 European Society for Rural Sociology Working Group on *Impacts and implications of alternative food practices in a post-neoliberal transition*. The session set out to explore examples of resistance to neoliberal food systems and related innovative practices. The papers covered a diverse set of concrete cases and proposals for new theoretical frameworks that consider pathways, implications, and the impacts of practices aimed at shifting the food system towards one that is more just and sustainable.

Reflecting on the outcomes of the session it was clear that conventional food system models, dominant since the late 1970s, are no longer ‘fit-for-purpose’. In this regard, ‘business as usual’ practices are increasingly seen as unable to deal with interconnected sets of food system pressures (e.g., climate change, peak oil, food security, changing diets) (IAASTD 2009; Foresight 2011; Hinrichs 2014), which are unforeseeable in terms of timing, scale, intensity or consequence (Jiggins 2016). Sustainability innovations, also termed ‘sustainability transitions’ (Hargreaves et al. 2013; Avelino et al. 2016), are fundamental processes of social change that are needed to address the complex and interrelated problems affecting food systems. For innovations to be meaningful and effective, it is argued that they must transform mainstream practices (Werbeloff et al. 2016). However, many of the innovations being widely proposed and taken up (e.g. sustainable intensification, climate smart agriculture and robotics, seed-based strategies) involve incremental adjustments to existing neoliberal modes of provisioning, and fail to provide transition pathways that radically challenge and transform structural weaknesses and system failings (Loos et al. 2014; Marsden 2016). All too often a diversity of existing and emerging “alternative” practices are overlooked or underrated in terms of their ability to bring about sustainable change (Gibson-Graham 2008; Forssell and Lankoski 2015).

‘Alternative practices’ include grassroots social innovations and other related socio-technical niches, which are often advanced by ‘alternative food networks’ (AFNs) (Kneafsey et al. 2008; Goodman et al. 2012; Kirwan et al. 2013; Maye, in press). However, system change through innovation (as the driver of transition) also involves and includes innovation practices and governance approaches embedded within or related to conventional systems that are seeking

change within the regime and/or through different forms of niche-regime interaction (Ingram et al. 2014). The Special Issue aims then to understand ‘alternative practices’, which include but are not limited to AFN and grassroots social innovation practices, utilising conceptual approaches that shift, undermine, or better understand and evaluate neoliberal food systems. These practices and approaches seek to re-organise food systems in the context of wider social relations and values and with differing potential to influence neoliberal systems of rules and institutions.

Building on the discussions and outcomes of the ESRS Working Group, the Special Issue brings together a collection of papers that critically engage with questions of sustainable food system transition. The Special Issue is timely, with several recently completed or on-going international and national research projects engaging with questions of food systems transition across Europe (e.g. SOLINSA, FARMPATH, GLAMUR, SUPURBFOOD, FOODMETRES, TRANSMANGO, SUFISA, SALSA), as well as an increasing number of conference sessions dedicated to the topic. Moreover, and linked to societal relevance, Goal Two of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals is to “end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture”. Achieving this goal at the European level requires innovative thinking around how to promote and action sustainable food system transitions and, within that, how to improve measures of sustainability that avoid ‘hypocognition’ (Lakoff, 2010) and broaden ‘visibility fields’ (Spence and Rinaldi, 2014) in order to capture multiple dimensions of performance. It also requires tools to identify and understand existing innovations that operate under the radar of neoliberal hegemonic worldviews.

The papers in the Special Issue have been grouped together around two themes, as follows:

- 1) Examining relations between AFN practices and transition;
- 2) Opening up measures and assessment practices for sustainability transitions.

Theme 1: Examining relations between AFN practices and transition

This first theme seeks to not only problematise existing approaches to understanding the relations between AFNs and transition, but to offer new ways of researching and analysing the practices of actors committed to changing the food system. Towards this end, the contributions introduce conceptual and methodological approaches that serve to make visible the diverse creative and normative motivations, and governance arrangements, that give shape to the many practices and tensions inherent in AFNs. Taken together, these contributions make a convincing case for the need to take creative, messy and often overlooked, or taken for granted, practices into account if we want to understand relations between AFNs and transition.

Jehlička and Daněk open the Special Issue with a paper that renders visible the existing and wide-spread practices of home-grown food sharing. By examining the relations that exist around practices of home-grown food sharing in the Czech Republic, they contribute a more holistic understanding of how people access food and why people share food. The results of their research lead them to reject some of the traditional categories used in the study of transition, such as ‘niche’. They reject the idea that food sharing is a form of ‘coping strategy’.

Instead they show how food sharing is part of a robust existing sharing economy. Further, they provide evidence to show that people participating in this sharing economy participate because it makes them feel good, and for the joy of giving, and that most interactions are non-reciprocal and non-obligatory. This contributes to the theme of the Special Issue in that motivations are often ignored in the sustainability transitions and AFN literature, especially in the context of Eastern Europe.

Along similar lines, contributions by Feyereisen *et al.* and Grivins *et al.* propose ways to advance inquiry into the creative processes and conflicting motivations that exist within AFNs. More specifically, Feyereisen *et al.* aim to contribute to the multi-level perspective (MLP) of transition (Geels and Scott 2007). They do this by making use of three analytics concepts (i.e., lock in, bricolage, and ambiguity) to analyse the potential of a fair label initiative to transform the dairy sector. In so doing, they address the tension around competing objectives: in their case between seeking fair prices within existing market structures, and seeking alternatives or wishing to work outside of mainstream markets (a tension that also comes up in Duncan and Pascucci (this issue)). Through their analysis the authors illustrate how researchers can better capture practices that are excluded from conventional procedures. In so doing, they draw attention to the creative processes employed by AFNs but often overlooked, and provide tools for making sense of such processes.

Grivins *et al.* also use bricolage, but in their case characterise actors of two AFNs as “*bricoleurs*” who accept the limitations of materials, but who nonetheless make use of what is available to them to meet their goals. Positioning the actors as *bricoleurs* challenges normative assessments that are often used to evaluate the practices of alternative food movements (see for example, Jehlička and Daněk (this issue) and Duncan and Pascucci (this issue)). Their analysis suggests a way to see these practices as part of a practical response. Grivins *et al.* contribute to an understanding between AFN practices and transition by providing insight into how AFNs adapt to limitations, including strategies of organisational development that are rarely pre-defined or well sourced.

Duncan and Pascucci’s contribution shifts attention from less formal practices to the formal organisational elements used by networks of AFNs in Europe, specifically Slow Food International and Urgenci. Making use of theories of organisational elements, the paper contributes to an existing gap in the sustainability transitions and AFN literature. The authors use the two case studies to reflect on a proposed typology, and propose a theory for understanding the relationships between organisational forms (i.e., how networks of AFNs organize themselves) and socio-technical transition. Their theory proposes a way of understanding why the practices of some AFNs are more likely taken up at the level of the regime, but also run a higher risk of becoming conventionalised (Ajates Gonzales 2017). And in contrast, why some networks of AFNs struggle to get their practices scaled-up and adopted at the level of the regime, and why these practices are more likely to resist conventionalisation.

Taken together, these contributions enhance our understandings of the relations between AFNs and transition by exploring formal and less formal practices that have been overlooked in the

AFN and the transitions literature. They highlight the importance of normative motivations and creative thinking in the everyday work of people seeking to transform the food system. They also highlight competing approaches and objectives and provide tools for exploring this complexity. While the contributions to this first thematic section highlight the diversity of food practices being undertaken to provoke food system change, to varying degrees, and propose methods and frameworks to deepen our understanding of these practices, they do not touch on questions of assessment and measurement. These questions are taken up the second thematic section.

Theme 2: Opening up measures and assessment practices for sustainable food transitions

A key contribution in this Special Issue is to ‘open up’ what we mean by sustainability assessment. A number of sustainability frameworks are now commonly used to assess food chain performance. However, they often rely on the use of indicators, offer a narrow assessment of sustainability, and are increasingly techno-political instruments of governance (Friedberg 2014). We have included papers under this second theme that challenge conventional approaches to sustainability assessment and governance. Slätmo *et al.* use a novel framework that combines critical policy analysis, agroecology and political ecology to assess the application of three popular sustainability frameworks applied at farm level: Indicateurs de Durabilité des Exploitations Agricoles (IDEA), Response-Induced Sustainability Evaluation (RISE), and Sustainability Assessment of Food and Agricultural systems (SAFA). Their paper affirms sustainability frameworks as useful instruments of farm-level governance. For example, they can be used to inform a dialogue between farmers and advisors that can in turn guide farm-level changes. However, such frameworks are also expressions of power by those who designed them. This raises important questions about the implications of using common sustainability frameworks to guide sustainability transitions in food and agriculture; it also challenges the assumption that it is possible to quantify agri-food sustainability (using indicators and benchmarks).

Understanding the sociology of sustainability assessments and the techno-politics associated with sustainability attributes, indicators and benchmarks thus raises important epistemological and methodological questions and asserts the need for approaches that can legitimise and give voice to a wider range of stakeholder perspectives. Informed by post-normal science and reflexive governance, Kirwan *et al.* take up this challenge. Reflexive governance is now well established in the sustainability transitions literature, so we were keen to include papers in the issue that address it explicitly. In their paper, Kirwan *et al.* link discourse, ethics and governance to consider the role of reflexive governance in encouraging change to the frames by which actors and institutions judge food chain performance. In response to narrow definitions of sustainability, they argue that ethics is the key driver of change in food chain governance. They assess the extent to which discourses in different spheres (i.e., public, market, scientific and policy) engage with ethical issues. Of particular value to the Special Issue is the identification of two types of ethical attributes: ‘commonly identified ethical attributes’ (which signify ethical dilemmas regularly debated) and ‘procedural ethical attributes’ (which are actions that encourage actors in the food chain to organise to more explicitly embody ethical considerations). In terms of reflexive governance instruments that

‘open up’ sustainability, drawing attention to procedural attributes (e.g. improved transparency of information and governance patterns that develop new practices and frames) is particularly useful, given their potential to develop ethical considerations at different levels of the food system (consumers, the firm level, policy level, etc.).

Beers and Mierlo also offer important contributions to the reflexive governance debate, in their case providing a valuable critique of the concept via a detailed analysis of a system innovation initiative introduced to improve greenhouse vegetable production in The Netherlands. Analysis of relations between reflexivity and learning to improve approaches to manage persistent sustainability problems shows how relations between reflexivity and learning are not straightforward. This warns against simple assumptions that conscious reflection and organised learning is enough to enable transformative change at a system level, as is sometimes assumed in the sustainability transitions literature. Longitudinal data from the system innovation initiative studied is used to distinguish between learning and reflexivity, as well as examining relations between reflexivity changes within the initiative and the initiatives wider context. A further challenge for sustainability transitions studies is to develop concepts that extend the MLP framework and move beyond the ‘niche-regime dichotomy’ (Avelino et al. 2016, Jehlička and Daněk (this issue)). In this regard, Beers and Mierlo’s notion of ‘reflexivity alignment’, which characterises the extent to which an initiative shares an orientation towards reflexivity with its societal environment, is useful because it helps to reflect a more complex understanding of niche-regime actor dynamics (Darnhofer 2015; Maye in press), niches as ‘protected spaces’ (Smith and Raven 2012) and niche-regime compatibility (Ingram et al. 2014).

The final paper in the special issue, by Dupré *et al.*, is also horticulture based, although this case examines the social construction of work satisfaction on organic market gardens in the south of France. Within the AFNs literature the effects of organic production and short chains on well-being and quality of life are difficult to assess and not much explored. The authors argue that sustainability metrics need to examine work satisfaction and social sustainability beyond the traditional lens of economics. Using approaches developed in the sociology of professional activities, the analysis shows how diversified organic market gardening is a demanding farm work environment which paradoxically can create high professional satisfaction due to a complex integration of different elements, including social support and decision latitude. This environment creates rewarding professional identities and social recognition. The findings identify future research opportunities related to farmers’ work satisfaction and quality of life in alternative and conventional production systems, which understands specific working situations that are difficult to capture using only normative indicators. Like other papers under this theme, this reiterates the need to recognise the multidimensionality and wide-ranging nature of food system performance in agri-food sustainability transitions studies.

Conclusions

The Special Issue provides theoretical insights and advancements into sustainability transitions through empirically grounded and informed investigations of food system practices. The papers confirm, following Hinrichs (2014: 143), that “numerous opportunities exist to forge more

productive links between work on food systems change and the broad and growing sustainability transitions field.” Taken as a whole, the Special Issue advances discussions and thinking on alternative food practices and sustainability, opening up the debate not only on how to identify and analyse ‘alternative food practices’ in Europe, and beyond, but also on sustainability assessment metrics, governance processes and what counts as ‘sustainable’ in sustainability transitions.

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