Agroecology-Based Local Agri-Food Systems

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ALAS are assemblages of alternative food networks, assets and infrastructures for local (sustainable) distribution, new and emerging types of institutionality, political measures, and appropriate bottom-up institutional governance, together with the symbolic revival of place-based cultural and historical identities. These assemblages are embedded in specific territories with the aim of maximizing social and ecological sustainability, supported by food and nutritional equality and security, the relocation of metabolic flows, and the improvement of the food system's ecological efficiency. To achieve this, agroecological experiences of production, distribution and consumption must be coordinated among themselves and with other actors, linking rural and urban areas, forming a plural subject led by farmers and peasants committed to agroecology. The aim of this plural subject is to develop operative and place-based ways of de-commodify and de-privatize food systems. Its aim is to achieve economic viability, agency and access to decision-making spheres, the development of physical infrastructures, and symbolic contexts to allow ALAS to emerge as hegemonic food systems as the corporate food regime loses its legitimacy. Such a social subject is tasked with promoting these transitions, while redefining our underlying thought categories and building economic flows, beyond the dualities of urban–rural and productive–reproductive work

Keywords: sustainable food systems ; agroecological transitions ; political agroecology ; agroecology scaling

1. Introduction

Over the last decades, the discipline of agroecology has evolved to encompass a variety of approaches and has moved from being shaped as a science, a social movement, and a set of farming practices for agricultural sustainability, mainly at farm and farming system scales [1]. Agroecology has largely centered on agency and power issues within food systems, along with the development of political agroecology [2][3][4]. The conception of agroecological transitions has also shifted from an initial focus on local and on-farm scales to the scale of food systems, and from ecology and natural sciences towards a transdisciplinary approach, which includes the social sciences [5][6][7]. As a result, agroecology has been recently conceptualized as “the ecology of the (entire) food system” [4][8].

The ‘agroecology scaling’ debate has focused on the challenges posed by social and peasant movements to multiply agroecological experiences within a given territory—agroecology out-scaling. Agroecology has also addressed the challenges of developing territorialized, sustainable food systems by promoting legal and political frameworks favorable to agroecological transitions [9][10] and incorporating the emergent complexity of broader territorial scales [11]—agroecology up-scaling. The dialectics between both agroecology up-scaling and out-scaling has led to an expansion of the scientific debate on power, agency, subjects, methodologies, and devices. These elements have been recently articulated with the aim to build comprehensive and transdisciplinary views on agroecological transitions at a food system scale [12][13][14]. The complexity of such transitional processes cannot be contained within binary (out/up-scaling) visions of alternative food networks and systems, nor to the role given to the state and public policies. It is rather a question of understanding how both dimensions of these transitions converge into processes that cut across different scales and spheres of bio-physical and social reality.

2. Territory, Localized Food Systems and Agroecology

By applying the multi-dimensional approach of agroecology, we argue for the need to articulate socio-technical and market approaches to local food systems with other approaches such as food justice, (multi-dimensional) equity, (multi-level) food policies and governance, and social (and demographic) sustainability. This drives us to propose community, place-based approaches to food systems sustainability, beyond the logics of commodification.

Re-localization requires the territorial reorganization of production, logistics and consumption. The theoretical and methodological implications of the integration of the territorial basis of transitions require the development of constructivist,

empirical and transdisciplinary research that is capable of capturing such a complexity [14][15] and being flexible enough to adapt to different contexts [7].

Based on rural development studies, a territorialized approach facilitates the spatial concentration of specific activities that generate comparative advantages through the processes of clustering, information exchange and convergence in the producing, processing and marketing activities. Such rural clustering would be favorable to the local population's bigger interest in issues such as income, employment and the conservation of natural resources [16][17][18]. Networks of small holding companies that establish a range of interrelationships and generate a great diversity of products based on cross-cooperation and the use of common resources—such as local landscapes and ecosystems—can generate, through "economies of scope" (as opposed to "economies of scale"), greater value-added uptake for the territory with reduced metabolic profiles [11][19].

Localized Agri-Food Systems (LAFS) are understood as localized networks of farms, firms, services to the production companies, and institutions (whether local or sectoral) who specialize in the production and marketing of food products linked to territorial identities [20]. The success of LAFS has been linked to the concept of "territorial governance", as "the process of dynamic articulation of the set of practices and institutional devices existing between actors in close geographic proximity, intended to address a production -or consumption- related issue or to implement a territorial development project" ([21], p. 701, cited in [22]), through multi-level coordination processes between economic and social actors [23]. The role of institutions is key in the provision of regulatory frameworks, cooperation and control of the quality of products, as well as the legitimacy they give to the actions of local actors [22].

LAFS can be rooted in the territory as "localized value chains" or can use territorial resources (territory-linked identity, work, or natural resources,) as inputs to generate greater added value in distant markets through quality labels [24]. However, the types of AFN linked to quality labels and oriented to distant markets, which Murdoch [25] called "vertical", have been criticized for marginalizing small local productions with respect to big operators [26][27], and creating static notions of culture and tradition that hinder innovation and the co-evolution of the production process and the socio-ecological context [28]. Further criticism is related to the standardizing of differentiated local productions [29] or the imposing of access biases to such products based on social class, race, gender or territory [30].

The concept of "rural districts", for its part, focuses on local value chains. It integrates the territory's primary and secondary productions into a network of production, knowledge and work exchanges. Such a network is linked to ecological and social values and the orderly segmentation of the production chain in the territory, based on the specialization of the different local production units [31][32]. Supported by the coherence of a network of local actors, the 'rural districts' model aims to combine economies of scale—by concentrating resources of a different nature—and economies of scope—by diversifying the productions of the territory through the optimization of the existing productive resources [33].

This model was recently revised based on agroecology approaches around the empirical analysis of "bio-districts", which incorporate sustainable (gastronomic) tourism activities and are linked to organic productions [34][35]. The bio-districts experience emphasizes territorial governance and a wide range of well-coordinated actors. Bottom-up approaches are called upon to achieve the goals of improving the local population's quality of life in accordance with social and ecological sustainability. The process is reinforced by the increasing participation of urban and regional administrations within comprehensive frameworks of rural–urban coordination, through territorial food policies. However, the concept of bio-districts also presents weak sustainability approaches when one analyses the upstream stages. For example, they might allow for the uncritical equating of certified organic production with ecological sustainability, but they do not necessarily entail an analysis of key social sustainability factors in the territories, such as working conditions in the food chain, or the income received by small (organic) farmers.

The Local (territorial) Food Systems approaches examined focus, however, on monetized economic relations, and therefore overlook some relevant aspects of the socio-economic relationships unfolding outside the market. They do recognize the key role of social and cultural factors in generating symbolic and relational contexts that support the building of LAFS. However, they do not necessarily incorporate major components of the social reproduction dynamics of rural communities and the agri-food production fabric. Among others, the lack of public services in rural areas, difficulties for farm transfer and for new entrants into farming, and especially the oft-forgotten migrant labor force's hard working and living conditions in the agricultural sector [113–116]. The absence of a gender approach in these analyses also leads to the invisibility of important processes whereby, for example, the social reproduction of rural communities is weakened due to female emigration [117]. Finally, from the perspective of the feminist economy, inconsistencies regarding the social sustainability of food systems—including local ones—are revealed, as mentioned in the previous section, which require the re-conceptualization of the categories of work, production and local development [93]. All these elements should be addressed when building ALAS, along with processes of reconstruction of local economies through community, place-based approaches, and beyond the logics of markets and commodification [118,119].

3. A Plural Social Subject to Push for Multi-Actor, Bottom-Up Governance

Territorial processes involve diverse actors at different scales and with wide-ranging and often conflicting interests, languages, and ways of doing things. Therefore, they require complex approaches, with a solid empirical and non-deterministic basis that allows creative and open-ended transition trajectories aligned with constructivist approaches to be understood [15][36]. The empirical basis constructed so far is limited and has often been restricted to situations in which social movements and agroecology farmers have a stronghold [9][37]. Such situations are rare in a global context of sturdy de-agrarianization [38], in which the agricultural social, collective subject is highly differentiated and thus becomes blurred [39]. For its part, the literature on food systems' transition to sustainability focuses on territorial processes in which alternative experiences are coordinated; however, such studies rarely discuss their interrelationships and the political and regulatory context of such articulations [10][14][40], which is key to agri-food system scaling [11][41][42].

Agroecology has emphasized the major role of the (small and medium size) farming sector and peasants in bottom-up approaches to progress towards food system sustainability [13][43][44]. The prominence of territorialized alliances with other social movements has been presented as opposed to state action, which tends towards the co-opting of agroecology [45] [46][47]). While the need to promote policy and institutional frameworks conducive to agroecological transitions through extensive social coordination and bottom-up approaches is acknowledged [48], specific proposals or analyses of policies that would foster agroecology or would be unfavorable to the corporate food regime are few and far between [49]. The construction of ALAS thus allows the "politics of possibility" to be activated. The conceptualisation we bring here for ALAS acknowledge the risks of co-optation when cooperating with public administrations, and at the same time reject such a co-optation as being a necessary condition to relate with the state [50][51].

In recent years, urban food policies have been one of the main domains of experimentation and development of sustainable food policies [52]. Based on these policies, comprehensive approaches to food policies have been designed, bridging the concept of SFS and those of food and nutrition security, climate change, diets, or space planning [42][53][54]. Initiatives such as the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (2015) are today fostering far-reaching policy agendas for sustainable and healthy eating in more than 200 cities around the world [55]. The development of empirical research and grey literature on urban food policies is wide-ranging and growing, although connections to the literature on agroecology are still incipient [56][57]. The so-called "urban agroecology" often focuses on agricultural production and/or food supply within cities [58], limiting its ability to analyze comprehensive food systems [59].

The dialectics between administrations and civil society have been at the heart of food policy discussions, from local to global scales, with a focus on agency and bottom-up political coordination [42][48]. Topics such as food sustainability and justice have generated notable social urban organization and mobilizations, which have been referred to as 'governance-beyond-the-state', not without controversy [52]. Cities are also developing novel forms of horizontal cooperation between local administrations (called 'trans-local governance') in which the support—and sometimes leadership—of grassroots organizations could be understood as "meta-governance" [60]. The emergence of urban agriculture and food and nutrition insecurity in the global north urban and metropolitan areas has been also highlighted to represent a new social movement [61].

The construction of territorial (place-based) relationalities, convergencies, and assemblages, around new, more inclusive narratives such as "food as commons" or "repair agroecologies", could lead to the development of broader alliances for the transformation of food systems, adapting languages to the characteristics and conditions of the different actors that are being expelled from global markets [41][42][62][63][64]. Here is yet another field in which to develop empirical work, in order to identify drivers, levers, and transition paths adapted to the different ecologies of food actors engaged in systemic transformations in different territorial settings. The exploration of agroecology as an integrative populist movement, oriented towards liberating and repairing work and land, could be an interesting line of research in this regard [11][65].

4. Conclusions

We understand ALAS as assemblages [42] of alternative food networks, new and emerging types of institutionality, political measures, and appropriate bottom-up institutional governance, together with the symbolic revival of place-based cultural and historical identities. These assemblages are embedded in specific territories with the aim of maximizing social and ecological sustainability, supported by food and nutritional equality and security, the relocation of metabolic flows, and the improvement of the food system's ecological efficiency. To achieve this, agroecological experiences of production, distribution and consumption must be coordinated among themselves and with other actors, linking rural and urban areas,

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