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## ► To cite this version:

Claire Lamine, Ika Darnhofer, Terry Marsden. What enables just sustainability transitions in agrifood systems? An exploration of conceptual approaches using international comparative case studies. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 2019, 68, pp.144-146. 10.1016/j.jrurstud.2019.03.010 . hal-02310101

**HAL Id: hal-02310101**

**<https://hal.science/hal-02310101v1>**

Submitted on 4 Oct 2023

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# What enables just sustainability transitions in agrifood systems? An exploration of conceptual approaches using international comparative case studies

Introduction to the Special Issue “What enables just sustainability transitions in agrifood systems”,  
*Journal of Rural Studies*

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## Abstract

The paper introduces a special issue on the timely question of ‘What enables just sustainability transitions in agrifood systems?’ which emerged from an explicitly international comparative and collective writing project. The special issue gives central attention to addressing and interlinking the key issues of power relations, food justice, change mechanisms at meso-level, and the diversity of sustainability visions, by exploring a range of revisited and new conceptual approaches which are blended with rich empirical cases. Especially as the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century closes, we argue that we need to open up this conceptual vector and invite scholars to engage, debate, and combine new and well-established approaches. This will allow to analyse and progress with the urgently needed transition processes in agrifood systems. Six cross-national contributions are introduced which provide starting points for this endeavour.

## What do the justice and ecological turns mean for agrifood transitions studies?

The diversity of theoretical approaches to analyse past, current and possible future transitions of agrifood systems towards more environmentally friendly models has grown over the past two decades. In the 1980s and 1990s, critical approaches inspired by Marxist political economy focused on the global-scale analysis of negative trends, and on the impacts of historical and contemporary global food regimes (Friedmann and McMichael, 1989). They assessed the *unsustainability* of the ‘dominant’ (or ‘mainstream’, or ‘corporate’) agrifood system (Buttel, 2006). In contrast, other approaches were more reformist, with a careful optimism based on actors’ agency and capacity for action. They explored the possibilities and promises of alternative paradigms for rural development, such as multifunctionality (Van der Ploeg et al., 2000), eco-economy (Kitchen and Marsden, 2009), or agroecology (Levidow, 2015). A large body of literature also emerged around alternative food networks (AFNs) in the Global North, a literature which is similarly characterized by intense debates between critical approaches warning against the elitism of these networks, and potentially over-optimistic approaches, highlighting their transformative power (Goodman et al., 2011). From the late 1990s onwards, these various approaches were refined and adapted to the evolving context. Of particular interest were the mechanisms through which the global food system responded to the growing criticisms, among others by forging a new ‘corporate environmental food regime’ (Buller and Morris, 2004; Campbell, 2005).

In the late 1990s new approaches also emerged, which applied concepts and theories from other fields to agrifood studies. These include approaches inspired by Actor-Network Theory (Whatmore and

Thorne, 1997), as well as approaches building on Transition theories (Geels, 2010). However, some of these approaches were critiqued for overlooking power relations (Shove and Walker, 2007; Meadowcroft, 2011), which were at the centre of the earlier food regime theory and associated political economy approaches. Indeed, they did not address the question as to whether the multiplication and diversification of alternative food networks lead to changes within power relations, at local or at larger scales.

As the 'blind-spot' issue of power relations remained central, two concepts recently gained importance in the research agenda on agrifood systems: (i) 'food democracy', which refer to the ways (and extent to which) consumers, producers, and citizens can take part in decisions regarding agrifood systems; and (ii) 'food justice' which qualifies the ways (and extent to which) diverse social groups and categories are included or excluded from agrifood systems transition benefits (Gottlieb, 2009). Indeed, while some production practices increasingly become more environmentally friendly, as evidenced for example by the spread of organic farming and agroecology, these transitions do not necessarily address fairness in the agrifood system, or broader issues linked to social justice.

Moreover, while food regime or transition theories mainly address change mechanisms at the macro-scale (global food regimes or national-level agricultural sectors), and the literature on alternative food networks addresses changes mainly at the micro-scale (producer and consumer practices), there is a need for approaches that address change mechanisms at the meso-scale (Marsden and Murdoch, 2006). This meso-scale can be understood in spatial terms, i.e. regional food systems, as opposed to local networks, national sectors, or global food systems. However, the meso-scale can also refer to the objects of analysis, i.e. the interactions and interdependencies between actors of the agrifood system, as opposed to individual practices, or to larger economic or institutional determinants.

Finally, despite a call for an ecological turn in agrifood system research (Campbell, 2009), there is an ongoing conceptual and methodological debate on how to best address environmental and social change in agrifood system transitions (see Spaargaren et al., 2012). While food and agricultural sciences most often address ecological dimensions through impact-based approaches, the wider role of social scientists, as expressed in this special issue, is to develop new conceptual and methodological approaches that allow incorporating the diverse knowledge, contestations, and visions about transition to sustainability, as well as the related controversies at diverse scales.

This special issue aims at addressing the key issues of power relations, food justice, change mechanisms, and diversity of sustainability visions. It does so by exploring various and innovative conceptual approaches which attempt to go beyond macro and micro approaches. The six papers engage with the recent literature, and combine and modify some of the more established theories referred to above. They apply them to a diversity of sustainability transitions, and to a diversity of scales and objects: from farming practices, to food governance at the territorial scale, to national agricultural sectors. What the papers have in common is that all build on long-term case studies from several countries, thus allowing the identification of commonalities, but also enabling to highlight the context-dependency of change processes. These papers emerged through a process of collective writing at a three-days writing workshop that was organised in September 2016 by the ESRS Research and Study Group 'Holistic and pragmatic approaches to sustainable agrifood systems', as well as further discussions at the 2017 ESRS Congress in Krakow and other symposia.

### **Six comparative case studies combining different conceptual approaches**

The first article, *Redefining power relations in agrifood systems* by Adanella Rossi, Sibylle Bui and Terry Marsden, develops a conceptual framework inspired by transition studies and political sciences to explore the mechanisms underlying the reconfiguration of power relations in agrifood systems, as a precondition for the transition to more sustainable food systems. The framework is applied to three case studies: participatory plant breeding in Italy, public food procurement in France, and diversification in agrifood chains in Wales. Through the cases, the paper highlights the need for a more variegated and dynamic configuration of power relations. Transformations of agrifood systems depend

on the variety of interactions that, in a multi-scale and dynamic dimension and through the play of different forms of power, may develop among the actors involved.

The second paper, *Territorial agrifood systems: a Franco-Italian contribution to the debates over agrifood systems transitions in rural areas*, by Claire Lamine, Lucile Garçon, and Gianluca Brunori, discusses the recent literature about alternative food networks and quality food networks by highlighting the specific contributions of the French and Italian scholarship. It proposes addressing agrifood system transitions at the territorial scale, understood as territorial constructions made of diverse initiatives. The conceptual approach is inspired by transition studies and by French pragmatist sociology that allows analysing the diversity of visions of sustainability transitions. Based on case studies in Ardèche (France) and in the Genoa hinterland (Italy), the paper describes the trajectory of the territorial agrifood systems since the 1980s, showing that it results from the intermingling of the trajectory of diverse initiatives emanating both from alternative networks and more conventional ones, with more or less support from regional public authorities. The analysis shows that this diversity allows for effects of hybridization, but also of re-differentiation over time. For example, as issues related to fairness and social justice are increasingly raised by some actors, they are integrated in the vision guiding transition processes.

The paper *Politics of scale in urban agriculture governance: A transatlantic comparison of food policy councils* by Charlotte Prové, Joost Dessein, and Michiel de Krom, emerges from the recent literature on food governance. It focuses on issues of food democracy and food justice by exploring the conditions that support the effective inclusion of marginalized voices and communities. It is based on the study of the food policy councils in Ghent (Belgium) and in Philadelphia (USA). By analysing the processes of scale framing, scale negotiating, and scale matching at play in these food councils, it highlights the need to include marginalized voices, along with providing sufficient resources and collaborative support, to effectively empower communities and achieve socially just outcomes.

Participation is also addressed by the fourth paper, *The participatory construction of new economic models in short food supply chains* by Yuna Chiffolleau, Sarah Millet-Amrani, Adanella Rossi, Marta Rivera-Ferre, and Pedro Lopez Merino. Participation at the level of short food supply chains is analysed in relation to the economic models they endorse. This paper develops an analytical framework based on new economic sociology and convention theory, enriched by social and solidarity economics, to assess the social construction of these economic models, made of challenges and compromises. From two case studies, one in France and one in Italy, it opens two lines of discussion, on the common features of the 'new' economic models which emerge from the two cases, and on actors' participation in elaborating and enacting these new economic models.

The paper *Exploring cooperative place-based approaches to restorative agriculture* by Paul Swagemakers, Maria Dolores Dominguez Garcia, Pierluigi Milone, Flaminia Ventura, and Han Wiskerke, addresses transition processes at the farm and agricultural cooperatives' scale. Through a conceptual framework anchored in rural sociology, and based on three case studies in Friesland (The Netherlands), Emilia Romagna (Italy), and Galicia (Spain), it assesses the contribution of agri-environmental schemes on the one hand, and innovative entrepreneurial business models on the other, to viable ecological transitions. The paper shows that although these dynamics are place-specific their success or failure depends on their alignment with actants at larger scales.

The final paper of this special issue, *A relational perspective on the dynamics of the organic sector in Austria, Italy, and France*, by Ika Darnhofer, Simona D'Amico, and Eve Fouilleux, considers ecological transitions at the national scale by contrasting the trajectories of the three national organic sectors over 25 years. Building on relational sociology, the agrifood system is seen as an ensemble of emergent social practices, with the dynamics of the organic sector depending on the relations that are built and maintained over time. The relations include those built between and among a variety of actors such as organic actors, policymakers, mainstream farmers associations, advocacy groups, and actors along the food chain. It also includes relations between organic agriculture and broader issues in the agrifood system, such as the maintenance of family farms, environmental protection, gastronomic heritage,

fairness in the food chain, or export promotion. The paper argues that given the unpredictability of unfolding interactions, it might be less helpful to search for specific mechanisms that encourage transitions, than to promote creativity in action, such as recognizing and seizing windows of opportunity.

### **Conceptualising transitions: beyond impasse and optimism to creating necessary transformations**

Overall, the six papers thus highlight the wealth of insights and new conceptual launch pads that can be generated by combining different conceptual lenses and comparing case studies from different countries. In particular, by explicitly and analytically comparing different national and regional empirical experiences in each of the six papers, we can begin to recognise that the agrifood transitions on which Europe is embarking are now far more substantial, widespread, and potentially transformative than previously considered. As such there are indeed strong grounds for jettisoning the old binaries between 'alternative' and 'conventional' agrifood systems. As the papers expose, we need to create a more diverse and embedded, empirically rich and conceptually rigorous, vocabulary from which to draw both the rich diversities but also the new generic properties of these new transitions. It is important here to note that postulating wholesale transformative potentials in agrifood systems does not assume that the dominant 'conventional' system is becoming either redundant or of declining significance. Indeed, as many of the papers in the special issue discuss, conventional logics and power relations are constantly contending the rise of transition processes. What is clear, however, is that there is now a co-evolving and contested process underway globally, between a conventional and commodity-based food system, which is facing both internal and external economic, social and ecological crises, and transitions processes identified in the papers, which are based upon a re-territorialised and ecologically more sensitive set of principles (see Marsden, 2017). Do these transitions processes lead to a more profound and substantive transformation? If we admit that the term 'transformation' denotes and postulates a wider process of fundamental change in agrifood systems, many of the transitions identified and explored in the papers, are indeed leading collectively to such a transformation. But of course this is a far more 'longue durée' process, which is subject to much more debate.

The case studies and comparative analyses developed in this special issue suggest that we should begin to focus much more on the *enabling processes* – socially, economically, institutionally, and ecologically – which lead to sustainability transitions. This is inherently, as all the papers and their cases depict, an evolutionary and contested process, and one which demands the re-assembling of power and justice relations over different territorial and temporal scales. Central here is the re-definition of social ecologies and knowledge. Indeed, the transitions have their own collective and innovative agency, not least around creating new power relations and 'anchoring points' around which such agency can be further mobilised and consolidated.

We also see this special issue as an invitation to scholars to engage with and combine various approaches to better capture the dynamics of sustainability transitions in agrifood systems, and in particular how notions of power relations, justice and participation are debated, integrated, and practiced. The special issue also raises the central issue of the active creation of collective knowledge about the social, economic and ecological processes that support sustainability transitions in agrifood systems, and the need to develop interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches that allow the development of what can be coined 'socio-ecological literacy', which is needed to nourish this collective knowledge.

This begins to suggest a way forward beyond the conceptual and binary impasse – and one might say hiatus – between structural political economy approaches on the one hand, and the proliferation of literatures on alternative food networks on the other. Now, and as many agrifood actors and agencies fully appreciate, we face a different empirical and conceptual terrain, with the growing crisis-ridden nature of what has traditionally been labelled the 'conventional sector' in these two intellectual

genres. We also face the emergence of wider and deeper agrifood transition processes, which are operating across different spatial and temporal scales. In this special issue, we have particularly highlighted the importance of the meso-scale, as well as the growing salience of both food sovereignty and justice as socio-political ingredients in fuelling these transitions. Of course, at the macro-scale the growing global ecological crisis, of which the agrifood sector is a major contributor, implies that such transitions processes are now mandatory rather than optional, and far more urgent than scholars would have appreciated even a decade ago. This suggests that the pace, as well of the direction of transitions we depict here, will both intensify and diversify in ways which will become far more complex than we envisaged in the past. As such we invite agrifood scholars to join us in refreshing and sharpening our conceptual and empirical tool box over the coming decade.

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