



Combining political ecology and pragmatist sociology to repoliticise agri-food systems' transformations at the territorial scale

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Abstract

Recent crises (especially Covid-19 and the Russia-Ukraine war) have led to an increased framing of agrifood systems transformations through the lens of food supply at different scales (global, national, territorial), sometimes justifying a neo-productivist perspective, often at the expense of environmental issues and social justice. In turn, this has produced a broader depoliticisation of food systems transformations despite an institutional politicisation, i.e., an increased integration in policy narratives, often with limited real effects. We suggest that pragmatist sociology and political ecology might offer fruitful insights for addressing food systems transformations in a repoliticised way. These two literatures demonstrate how people identify problems affecting agri-food systems and collectively work to find solutions, while also recognising the plurality of understandings of transition pathways and highlighting the mechanisms through which some actors and worldviews are neglected when defining possible paths of transformation. Inspired by these literatures, we have established three key guiding questions dealing with the processes of defining food systems' transformations as a shared and collective problem, the analysis of the reconfigurations of power relations, and the recognition of the diversity of visions of the food system. These guiding questions emerged and were tested through our involvement in three territorial case studies in France and Brazil. They appear useful not only for the analysis of de/repoliticisation processes, primarily because they reveal the contrasted effects of the increasing institutionalisation and legitimisation of agrifood transitions, but also for developing a transformative approach aimed at repoliticising this issue.

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Introduction

Urgent transformations in agrifood systems are unanimously called for: even if some actors consider that some aspects of the global food system are positive (for example, because they allow affordable food prices and favour customer convenience), few would consider it virtuous in either ecological or social terms. However, this apparent consensus in policy and academic worlds tends to hide the multiple conceptions, imaginaries, and values linked to these transformations. Indeed, we can observe a growing struggle over the last two decades for the development and imposition of a "right" approach, one that would allow tackling in an all-encompassing way the complexity of these food systems to make them more sustainable, resilient, and inclusive (Ericksen, 2008; Béné et al., 2019; Juri, 2024).

Many of these approaches focus on questions of food supply and favour quantitative aspects (fluxes, inputs, outputs, impacts, etc.) as well as prospective and modelling approaches, as a result of the enduring framing of food issues by food security at the international scale (Fouilleux et al., 2017; Jarosz, 2011), as well as the effects of recent crises that affect these food systems just as they affect our societies as a whole (e.g., Covid-19, the Russia-Ukraine war, climate change, biodiversity erosion). This often comes at the expense of social and ecological dimensions, as well as more qualitative perspectives, which would allow for an understanding of the mechanisms that prevent or favour the much-needed transformations, especially the power relations that impact the definition of the trajectories of change. Furthermore, this often runs the risk of depoliticising the issue. For example, the field of sustainability transition studies, an epistemic community that primarily addresses mechanisms of change in production-consumption systems and influences academic and policy debates at least in Europe (Hinrichs, 2014), has often been criticised for neglecting a micro-sociological understanding of interactions and processes and for overlooking power relations, thus depoliticising the issue of sustainability transitions (Shove and Walker, 2007). This has given way to rich and lasting debates in this community and beyond (Avelino and Wittmayer, 2016; Bui et al., 2016; Haxeltine et al., 2017; Rossi et al., 2019), and led many authors today to reject the notion of transition as being intrinsically teleological and stuck within the framework of established structures, favouring instead the notion of transformation as more adequate to repoliticise sustainability in general and more specifically agrifood issues (Anderson et al., 2019; Pelenc et al., 2019; Stirling, 2011).

The academic interest in these processes of de/repoliticisation of food systems transformations is far from new and was amply discussed in the early 2000s along with the debates over food localism, with the argument that with local food networks, politicising food might lead to depoliticising the local and overlooking the social inequalities that can occur locally (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Feagan, 2007; Allen and Wilson, 2008). However, alternative food networks were also pioneers in exploring how people could participate in defining and conceptualising their local food system and in concretely experimenting with the notion of food democracy, thus strongly repoliticising food issues at their scale (Hassanein, 2003). In this perspective, beyond the participation of citizens in the governance of the food system, food democracy deals with the ways producers and consumers may be involved in the decisions regarding the transformation of the food system and puts at the forefront the fundamental rights to food, land, and water.

In the recent period, an increasing literature has analysed depoliticisation processes generated by multi-stakeholderism in food governance (Duncan and Claeys, 2018; McKeon, 2017; Moragues-Faus and Battersby, 2021; Swyngedouw, 2021). Indeed, multi-stakeholder processes, set up to bring diverse perspectives together to inform and improve policies, often lead to a reinforcement of incumbent actors rather than empower more alternative and marginal ones, through a "canalisation" of social critics (Fouilleux and Jobert, 2017). Moreover, the "responsibility turn" in agrifood governance, which leads to the current blooming of accountability mechanisms (Arnold et al., 2022; Brunori et al., 2019), supports, sometimes, value-oriented evaluation criteria more focused on products than on processes and power relations, which also tends to reinforce depoliticisation processes. Lastly, echoing the classical distinction between politics and policies, depoliticisation processes can



be addressed through the analysis of debates and controversies over competing agrifood narratives and models and contested transitions (Marsden, 2013; Rivera-Ferre, 2018) of agenda setting, policy making, and regulation processes (Fouilleux and Michel, 2020; Pahun and Fouilleux, 2022) and of the instrumentation of public action (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2004; Halpern, Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2014).

In continuity with these debates that mainly took place in geographical and political sciences, and relying on pragmatist sociology and political ecology insights, we propose to address the processes of de/repoliticisation of agrifood transitions through three key questions: how food systems' transformations are defined as a shared and collective problem; how reconfigurations of power relations are tackled; and how the diversity of visions of the food system are taken into account.

In the following section, we will develop this analytical grid. We will then apply it to three territorial case studies in France and Brazil, where we have studied the trajectories of territorial agrifood systems' transformations and selected projects aimed at supporting these transformations. Finally, we will discuss how applying these guiding questions offers fruitful insights for understanding depoliticisation processes and supporting a repoliticisation of food systems' transformations, both in analytical and transdisciplinary transformative perspectives.

An analytical grid inspired by pragmatist sociology and political ecology

Within pragmatist sociology, inspired by the work of J. Dewey and his notion of "collective inquiry" (Dewey, 1927) and the constructivist approach to public problems (Gusfield, 1997) several authors have addressed politicisation processes through the analysis of the processes of construction of public problems. In this perspective, mobilisation processes lead to the construction of a "public" around a shared issue as a collective problem and to the elaboration of a shared vision that supports the elaboration of solutions to this problem (Cefai et al., 2019). Based on a set of critical operations designed to define the causes of the experienced problem through collective production of knowledge, stakeholders join forces and cooperate to propose alternative paths of action. Along its "political career," a collective problem progressively becomes a public problem, which can later be tackled by State action (law, public policies, public action) — or not. This pragmatist approach has been deployed around social, health, or environmental problems, where people directly affected recognise themselves as the public bearer of a common problem (Cefai et al., 2019). It remains rarely applied to agri-food issues (Tuscano, 2022). Yet, compared to other environmental subjects, agricultural and food issues have the particularity of being both "everyone's business" (a non-specialised and everyday subject, to which everyone's knowledge can contribute) and therefore inclusive, while also being the core activity of some people. In other words, the "public" likely to be formed, depending on the perception of what is problematic (Dewey, 1927) can just as easily be restricted to professionals involved in the various components of the agri-food system, or as a public deliberately defined as much wider, reaching "across" public policies, education, etc., and "down" to eaters. This focus on collective problems also supposes a strong attention to actors' visions and meanings, through the analysis of controversies and alliances, and the inclusion of "sensible" dimensions, in the double meanings of what is perceived by the senses and what "makes sense" and is valued (Jules et al., 2023).

This pragmatist approach thus suggests three key elements to take into account when analysing the processes of politicisation of agrifood transitions, which we have explored separately in previous publications:

- The critical resources that are mobilised by the "affected" actors in these processes and the transformative perspectives that they adopt through the design and experimentation of solutions (Lamine et al., 2024)
- The diversity of visions, imaginaries, and values present around the shared problem being defined and their divergences, as well as the potential effects of exclusion and the effects of power relations on the definition of "the visions that count" (Penvern et al., 2023)

- The role of "sensible" dimensions (understood as both multisensorial and what "makes sense") as a counterpoint to technicist and normative approaches of the ecological transitions but also to perspectives focused on cognitive and deliberative aspects (Granchamp et al., 2023)

As for political ecology, it is a transdisciplinary theoretical framework that also derives from many intellectual inspirations but, more specifically, seeks to address the political dimensions of nature-society relations, including environmental damage and protection, taking explicit account of conflicts and power relations (Bryant, 2015). Due to this focus, power relations are prominent in this literature, which has classically adopted a structural lens, highlighting, for example, "ecological-distributive conflicts" where "poor" populations suffer disproportionately from environmental problems (Martinez Alier, 2003). However, in the past decades, new currents of political ecology have reconceptualised questions of power in different ways. Namely, so-called Latin American political ecology (Jenatton et al., 2022) has adopted more constructivist perspectives based on notions of counter-powers, counter-histories, and practices of autonomous liberation (Blaser, 2013; Escobar, 1995; Leff, 2015a) often establishing interfaces with post-colonial and decolonial approaches. However, like pragmatist sociology, the incorporation of the lenses of political ecology into studies related to agri-food systems has occurred in a rather fragmented way, advancing mainly on a few specific themes (pesticides, the expansion of large agricultural monocultures, threats to agricultural and food biodiversity, extractivism, environmental conflicts, among others) (Jenatton et al., 2025). Some notable exceptions are Moragues-Faus and Marsden (2017) and Giraldo (2019), who have analysed politicisation at an epistemological level, delineating how the interests of "agro-capitalism" are built on dualist thinking that forms the foundation of "modern" epistemologies and a hierarchisation of ways of relating to other beings. Furthermore, an increasing literature coined feminist political ecology or ecofeminism describes the politicisation processes in everyday practices linked to care activities, including food (Pruvost, 2021; Trevilla Espinal et al., 2021). Here, then, we can identify several key 'touchstones' with pragmatist perspectives.

Considering the diversity of visions, imaginaries, and values is a key principle in many works of political ecology. Escobar (2020) for example, draws from decolonial approaches and the larger "ontological turn" in anthropology to advocate for a recognition of other ways of imagining life and inhabiting the Earth. He has also explored the potential of the notion of *sentipensar* (feel-thinking), in which reason is intermeshed with affect, producing more empathetic knowledge forms (Escobar, 2014). These diverse ontologies make up a decolonial "pluriverse" opposed to a uniformising Eurocentric ontology of capitalist "modernity." According to Leff (2015b) epistemological conflicts are at the heart of creating fairer and more sustainable futures and are not to be smoothed over or eliminated in the quest for an all-encompassing harmony free of difference. Speaking more directly of agriculture, Giraldo (2019) affirms that conflicting visions can be seen as starting points that make political action possible, representing a sphere of possibilities where symbolic dissensions can be dealt with and where power relations can be reconfigured.

Like the pragmatist approaches mentioned above, political ecology focuses on the role of collective knowledge production and seeks to highlight how politicisation processes emerge in the fertile encounter between different types of knowledge (Meek and Simonian, 2017) sometimes described by the notion of *diálogo de saberes* (dialogue of knowledge), inspired by the work of Paulo Freire (1969). Freire's critical pedagogy suggests that it is through this dialogue of knowledge that individuals build an awareness of their "oppressions" and subsequent capacity of changing the world in which they live, thus directly linking knowledge and power. Leff (2004) further conceptualises this notion in relation to environmental change, where education and learning processes are at the heart of an emancipatory project towards the construction of other environmental knowledge and other possible futures. This dialogue of knowledge supposes the rejection of the superiority of one type of knowledge over another and the recognition of the potential of creativity, exchange, and mutual aid in producing concrete solutions adapted to local visions and contexts (de Sousa Santos, 2007), here also echoing pragmatist approaches.



Inspired by these meeting points between political ecology and pragmatist sociology, we suggest three key conceptual guiding questions which contend with the processes of definition of the food systems' transformations as a shared and collective problem, the analysis of the reconfigurations of power relations, and the recognition of the diversity of visions of the food system.

These guiding questions were defined during a long process of interaction across situated case studies and between researchers both on our case studies and on our respective theoretical frameworks and readings. They are based on our reflexive analysis of our own analytical approaches, enriched by the diversity of our theoretical anchorages and assemblages within the fields of sociology and geography, of pragmatist sociology and political ecology as well as across the "Northern" and "Southern" intellectual legacies, and on our experimentation of applying them as principles in action research projects. They can be applied either to carry out an analysis of the territorial agrifood system transformations; to analyse multi-actor transition projects/approaches set up by various actors to support such transformations; or to design a transformative research approach.

1. An analysis of how agrifood systems' transformations are (or not) taken as a shared and collective problem: through this guiding question, primarily inspired by pragmatist sociology, we suggest being attentive to the processes of debate over past, present, and future food systems' transformations, to the constitution and composition of the public involved, to potential effects of inclusion or exclusion, and to how local intellectual/critical and emancipatory resources are taken into consideration or not.
2. An analysis of the reconfigurations of power relations in food systems: through this guiding question, which is inspired by debates over sustainability transitions and by Latin American political ecology, we propose to assess the reconfigurations of power relations within the agri-food system: how do established power relations persist or become challenged over time? How does collective knowledge building impact these power relations (Rossi et al., 2019) and support the construction of counter-powers and the reconfiguration of power relations?
3. An analysis of the diversity of visions of the food system: taking into account the diversity of visions is a classical mantra of participation studies. However, the process of identification and characterisation of this diversity is often overlooked (as if the diversity would spontaneously be present and visible) (Pevern et al., 2023). At the crossroads of pragmatist and political ecology inspirations, we address here the notion of visions as imaginaries of the future (in our case, of the food systems' future — desirable or undesirable — transformations); and in their multi-faceted nature, i.e., considering that they encompass a mix of rational, axiological, sensible, and emotional dimensions.

Case Studies and Methods

We have chosen three case studies, all of which are rural regions with strong urban and touristic land pressure. In these regions, agriculture still has an important place but is confronted with competing dynamics and visions, although this translates into very different pathways, as we will later see. In these three case studies, we have studied agrifood systems trajectories over three to four decades, based on key common analytical building blocks (trajectories of public policies, initiatives, networks, analysis of key transition mechanisms and phases). The shared objective is to understand the interactions and relative roles of the State and public policies on the one hand, and initiatives launched by diverse organisations and networks involved in agricultural and rural development on the other hand, in transforming the agrifood system over these decades. In order to avoid a normative stance, rather than focusing only on (agro)ecological transitions, we studied agrifood systems transformations "at large" and looked at the place of agroecology in these trajectories over time. We thus analyse the relative processes of intensification (understood as increased dependency upon external inputs and agro-industrial food chains) vs ecologisation of these territorial agrifood systems over the last decades. The empirical material relies on documentary analysis, qualitative methods, and longitudinal ethnography and has been analysed for each case study in previous studies (Palm et al., 2021; Lamine et al., 2022; Tuscano, 2022).

The collective work for this paper took place in iterative steps and relied on diverse means of interaction: shared readings of key articles, research stays allowing to share interactions and discussions with local actors, co-supervision schemes, and webinars.

Beyond this analysis of agrifood systems trajectories, in the French cases, we also studied "institutionalised" agrifood transition projects that were carried out in the more recent period (2016–2022), in a context of a larger institutionalisation of agrifood issues at the territorial scale (Fouilleux and Michel, 2020; Tuscano, 2022; Lamine et al., 2023). In these cases, we thus studied both agri-food systems trajectories and transition projects. Moreover, in one of these case studies (Ardèche), authors were involved in such a transition project, thus combining analytical and transformative stances. In this case study, our three questions have thus been experimented as guiding principles within an action research scheme where we defined, with other local actors, facilitation methods to support ecological and just transformations.

The Case Studies

For each case study, we first present the context and dynamics of transformation that we have identified in the territorial food system and then analyse it in accordance with each of our three guiding questions.

Provence Verte: The Normativisation of Alternative Narratives

Provence Verte is an urban administrative unit (agglomeration) that also includes rural areas, comprising 28 municipalities and situated in the south-east of France, in the Mediterranean region. The area covers nearly 1,000 km² and around 100,000 inhabitants, resulting in a population density of around 100/km² (close to the national average). The area has undergone a rapid transformation in recent years due to the attractiveness of the area (located close to major economic poles and the coast) and linked to the installation of small and medium-sized businesses. The massive artificialisation of the coastline accompanied by progressive urban pressure towards the hinterland has affected this territory and its agrifood industry since the 1960s. Like trends observed elsewhere in France, this region suffered a significant decline in agricultural exploitation, and the cultivated area was more than halved between 1980 and 2010.

The study carried out in Provence Verte combined a socio-historical and ethnographic analysis to analyse local agri-food policies, local initiatives, and collective mobilisations held by diverse actors and aimed at transforming the local food system. By drawing on the conceptual frameworks of pragmatist sociology, the author identified groups of actors (the "publics") locally mobilised for sustainable agriculture and food over time (Tuscano, 2022). This aimed at identifying what kind of actors (institutionalised, activist, or community-based organisations) promoted a transformation of the local food system (and how). The study covered the period from 1990 to 2020 and allowed for a periodisation of the local transformations.

The first dynamic (1990–2000) was framed by the then-dominating paradigm of sustainable development, translated locally into an enhancement of local rural identity, including local products and agricultural specificity linked to terroir. The second dynamic, which developed in parallel from the 1990s onwards, is the development of organic farming, driven locally by groups of farmers pioneering this kind of agriculture. This department has a very high rate of organic production, with a total of 42% of its agricultural land in 2022 (mainly in viticulture), and with some villages reaching 100% (e.g., the village of Correns). The third dynamic, more focused on reconnecting food production and consumption, developed slightly later (from the 2010s onwards) and sought to structure short food supply chains, particularly by establishing links with public procurement. These dynamics and repertoires are interwoven and result from both external changes (e.g., the greening of public policies and the influence of transnational social movements) and local transformations driven by local organisations and groups involved in food production and consumption.

How are agrifood transformations defined as a collective problem in Provence Verte? (guiding question 1).

Since the late 1990s, a significant number of initiatives have been deployed in this territory; various actors



have been mobilising for the protection of agricultural land, the diversification and valorisation of production activities and, more recently, for the structuring of local food supply chains. These initiatives, launched either by local authorities, civil society, and/or economic actors (farmers, retailers, etc.) contributed to the definition of agrifood issues as collective problems and gradually encouraged new stakeholders to invest in these subjects. Despite the large number of initiatives in this territory aimed at greening agriculture and food, until recently there was no strategy for articulating them. Over the last years though, two leading public programs have played a central role in the structuration of local dynamics. The first one is the European LEADER program (2014 to 2020), whose financial support has undoubtedly made it possible to implement a range of actions aimed at reconnecting production and consumption. The second one is a Territorial Food Project, funded by a recent national policy. Led by the agglomeration since 2018 and aimed at relocating food production and consumption, these programs concretely offered the opportunity to establish an agri-food governance that included alternative actors of the region. However, the main limit is that these programs impose a normative framing regarding participation processes and objectives to be reached. In other words, the "normativisation" of alternative narratives has both participated in legitimating these visions but also limited the capacity of these actors to take ownership of territorial agrifood system issues and to self-determine future orientations.

How are power relations reconfigured over time? (guiding question 2).

In this case study, this reconfiguration of power relations is somewhat dichotomous, with a progressive integration of alternative actors into local political spaces on the one hand, and this "normativisation" of some alternative dynamics on the other. Conventional as well as alternative farmers are very committed in local political circles, and projects are often guided by the concerns and interests of these different actors. Alliances between local elected representatives and farmers are often long-standing and provide fertile ground for the emergence of projects aimed at protecting farmland, assisting new farmers in setting up, or creating agricultural infrastructures. These alliances created the conditions for counter-powers in local policy advisory boards. The implementations of the above -mentioned public programs (LEADER and Territorial Food Project) — jointly to community-based initiatives — allowed alternative narratives to gain visibility, particularly around organic food production and short food chains. This gain in visibility, jointly with the inclusion of alternative farmers in local political arenas, allowed a reconfiguration of power relations. For example, the local organic farming association Agri-bio Var has been involved for several years with local authorities in the creation of a local organic poultry industry — from chicken feed to slaughtering — in response to the massive importation of poultry for human consumption. However, these processes are gradual, and the implementation of new actions often depends on civil society organisations with weak leadership and funding. Indeed, the projects carried out by these alternative actors often depend on public policy programs which reduce their alternative scope due to the funding granted or pre-established guidelines.

How is the diversity of visions taken into account? (guiding question 3).

Food system transitions have been fostered locally following three main arguments: i) local economic development, ii) local agri-food production as a fundamental dimension of collective identity, and iii) local agri-food production as a condition for maintaining a "quality" environment. These visions are often interrelated, but sometimes reflect different commitments on the part of social groups who promote one aspect more than another. Our analytical work showed two dynamics of competition at the local level. The first is within alternative networks: networks for the promotion of peasant agriculture on the one hand, and sustainable food and environmental associations on the other, often do not have the same ambitions and visions. Indeed, some groups — notably those linked to pioneering organic farming networks — focus on issues of social justice and the impact on inequalities for both consumers and producers, while younger associations more committed to the environmental cause attach greater importance to ecological issues, sometimes neglecting the political and social implications of their initiatives. The second dynamic of competition is linked to the institutionalisation processes mentioned above: if the succession of different projects and public programs at the territorial level has enabled certain initially marginalised visions to gain visibility, the rising of local food system issues at the national and local level has a twisted effect. While these programs create the conditions

to encourage the participation of new audiences in the shared definition of "problems," the modalities often remain predefined and limit spontaneous initiatives. In the case of the Territorial Food Project, for example, a disagreement arose between the person in charge of coordinating the program and the institutional stakeholders, due to her non-compliance with conventional methods of participation. In order to include the plurality of visions, she adopted experimental, sensible, and bottom-up approaches (i.e., through the organisation of a festival), which created conflicts with the more institutional actors and led to a change in coordination and to a reframing of the project, translating into more top-down involvement methods where those to include in the process are chosen beforehand.

Southern Ardèche: A Lasting Politicisation Confronting a Recent Institutionalisation

Southern Ardèche is a rural territory in southern France comprising 177 municipalities, covering 2500 km² and around 140,000 inhabitants (population density of around 45/km²; lower than average). It has been for a few decades an attractive region (both to newcomers and tourists), with a population that increased in the last 20 years after more than a century of rural depopulation. The local agriculture is quite diversified, although wine and chestnut dominate in some areas. A diversity of initiatives, both from civil society and farmers' networks around short food circuits, seed exchange, processing units, mutual help, etc., some having emerged already in the 1980s, makes it a region where the agrifood system remains relatively ecological (as an indicator, organic farming covers around 25% of the agricultural area). It is also a region where local, quality food is very present in the local "foodscape" and thus easily accessible, although this of course applies to those who can afford it. It is indeed a relatively poor region in terms of average income, and despite rural poverty being often less visible, food poverty is increasing as it is in more urban regions.

In this case, an analytical and a transformative stance have been combined within a recent action research project set up in 2018, which led to the creation in 2023 of a local food council. In a first step, the research team carried out an analysis of the trajectory of the territorial agrifood system, relying on a longitudinal approach (as diverse studies had been led by the team since 2008), on complementary documentary analysis, and on the involvement of key actors of this history, within a process of collective construction of the interpretations (Lamine et al., 2022). This collective process allowed the identification of four major periods since the middle of the 19th century, along with key tipping points.

Until the 1950s/60s, the agri-food system was diversified, mainly oriented towards local markets and "by nature" relatively ecological. Agricultural systems combined crops and livestock, while self-consumption and local exchanges remained high. From the 1960s to the beginning of the 1990s, and following the "modernisation turn" of the 1960s, there was a strong process of specialisation/intensification, which is referred to in this region as the "golden age" of fruit production. The agri-food system got increasingly "pulled" by mass distribution. However, the arrival of new rural populations in the 1970s and 1980s and the emergence of many initiatives focused on local products valorisation somewhat mitigated the effects of agricultural modernisation, compared to other territories. From 1995 to the early 2010s, there was a proliferation of initiatives around quality and local food, strongly supported by public policies, along with the affirmation of the issue of multi-functionality. Finally, since around 2015, the rise of the environmental, climate, health, and social inclusion issues has led to intense debates around the necessary reconfiguration of the agrifood system. Indeed, the effects of climate change threaten many agricultural productions, while many newcomers have difficulties in finding land to develop small farms, and food poverty is expanding.

How are agrifood transformations defined as a collective problem in Southern Ardèche? (guiding question 1).

In this region, there have long been strong efforts to locally build the issue of agrifood transitions as a collective problem. In the 1970s and 1980s, pioneer farmers and citizens' networks set up various initiatives linked to food production, processing, and distribution that allowed a concrete politicisation of agrifood issues and also became "de facto" local arenas of debate, although mainly circumscribed to their users. In the 1990s, these efforts started to get more articulated and also more institutionalised. Two main institutions have been



key in bringing a large range of local actors together to discuss these issues, quite early on: first, from 1997 on and like in Provence Verte, the process set up around the Leader program, with its local action group and diverse ways to mobilise local actors; second, from 2006 on, the Pays (local authority) through its technical team and through its local development council — a multi-actor instance planned in the law defining this territorial institution. Both instances brought together local farmers, citizens, economic entrepreneurs, civil society organisations, and both have been key arenas of debates in the 2000s and 2010s, until diverse reforms led to their weakening.

From 2016 on, in the context of the institutionalisation of "Territorial Food Projects," the organisations applying for support for the elaboration of such projects (mostly local authorities such as inter-municipalities) were invited to set up participatory approaches. Our analysis of several of such Territorial Food Projects set up between 2016 and 2022, mainly through participatory observation (being involved in their instances as local researchers), allowed us to observe the efforts made by their facilitators to identify and mobilise a diversity of local actors and bring them together in prospective exercises aimed at collectively defining the future trajectory of their local food system. On the other hand, our analysis also revealed the normative framing of participation with its classical exclusion processes (for example, of "simple" citizens and minorities) as well as the reframing processes at the decision stage, i.e., when elaborating a concrete action plan.

In parallel to this institutional dynamic, our action research project set up in 2019 a multi-actors group that aimed at building transitions as a shared problem, first based on a shared understanding of the past trajectory, as described above, and in a second step, on a shared writing of a collective manifesto for a just and ecological transition. In its different forms (plenary, thematic groups, annual public event, etc.), the process strove to favour the participation and expression of all participants, in forms of collective inquiry and experimentation (e.g., collective work on forms of land provision for the support to new farmers, identification of key initiatives in school catering). This succeeded to some extent, as far as the participants' feedback allows to assess. However, some key actors remain left out of the arenas of debates. Some, such as large retailers for example, refuse to be enrolled despite having a prominent role in the territorial agrifood system transformations, but for others, the lack of time and resources did not allow to really enroll them, as is the case for most disfavoured social categories.

How are power relations reconfigured over time? (guiding question 2).

The interpretation of the above trajectory relied on a systemic perspective aimed at identifying the changes in power configurations in the territorial agrifood system. This systemic perspective led to characterise each period through the interactions that characterise the power configurations in this given period in contrast to other periods. In the "modernisation" period, for example, retailers and intermediaries exerted an increasing domination on farmers. Over the three periods since the 1960s, farmers' networks and the State have exerted a strong reciprocal power over one another, with farmers trying through their unions to influence policies and reciprocally, policies trying to orientate farmers' practices. Finally, the last 20 years have seen the reinforcement of alliances of two components, e.g., farmers and civil society, trying to influence both policies and markets. These reconfigurations have also reinforced the competition — which sometimes takes the form of a combination or coexistence — of two different dynamics, one driven by the valorisation of quality products and the other one by the issue of social inclusion of more disadvantaged farmers and consumers.

How is the diversity of visions taken into account? (guiding question 3).

The analytical work first aimed at identifying competing visions and alliances and their effects on the transformations of the territorial agrifood system, as mentioned above. Of course, the two competing dynamics mask a much larger diversity of visions. Then, in a transformative perspective, the composition of the local multi-actors group and the facilitation methods were designed so as to favour the expression of (and debates across) diverse visions, including their sensible nature (with devoted tools/ methods). The composition of the "plenary" group of 25 people (35 in the following local food council) was indeed thought

out so as to include a diversity of actors (research, farmers, civil society, agricultural networks) and to associate representative actors ("stakeholders" representing their organisation) as well as concerned ones — affected by the issue, although not representing any organisation (Lamine, 2018). The facilitation methods were conceived in order to be inclusive and respectful of the diversity of visions, which was made possible by the complementarity of the five co-facilitators (one researcher, two persons working for local public institutions who were used to dealing with the "powerful" actors, and two involved in civil society organisations who were experts in popular education approaches). The goal was to gather people with different (and sometimes even contradictory) points of view. The regular meetings allowed maintaining an attention to this diversity of visions and to collectively write a manifesto that recognises it. An annual forum has also been organised since 2021, which allows for an expansion of the public involved and also of the diversity of visions that can be expressed in different ways, including sensible and practical ones — for example, a cooking class open to any citizen is held in parallel to this forum and then shared by all forum's participants at the end of the day.

Serra Fluminense: Politicising Change Based on Practical Solutions

Serra Fluminense is a mountainous region close to Rio de Janeiro, with a tropical climate of high altitude and significant presence of family farming. The municipalities of Petrópolis, Teresópolis, and Nova Friburgo were selected for our study, among other reasons, for their relevance in the emergence of alternative paths for the development of agriculture and food supply. The three municipalities cover 2,700 km² and count around 690,000 inhabitants. Many farmers do not have land or have restricted access to plots suitable for cultivation, working as sharecroppers (*meeiros*). The dynamics of the rural space are not driven only by agriculture but are also influenced by tourism, by real estate speculation, by the advance of urban peripheries over land for agricultural use (like in the two French case studies), by the presence of rural-based industries linked to the textile sector, and by the implementation of several environmental conservation units.

In this case study, we have carried out an analysis of the socio-ecological transformations affecting the territorial agrifood system from the 1960s on. Special attention was devoted to the emergence and intertwining of a heterogeneous set of initiatives of environmentalisation of agriculture and food supply. This historical reconstruction reveals the restrictions faced in the structuring and consolidation of alternative paths of change informed by a critical perspective in relation to the dominant sociotechnical regime shaping agriculture and food supply in the region. It shows, at the same time, the capacity for agency, both individual and collective, which enabled the unfolding over time of a shared field of relationships, experiences, interpretative references, and controversies related to the socio-ecological transformation of the agrifood system interconnecting the different initiatives implemented in the territory. This shared and decentralised space of interactions and production of practices and knowledge can be referred to as an ecology of projects (Palm, 2021).

From the middle of the 20th century onwards, we can observe a process of intensification of agricultural production in the Serra Fluminense region, especially vegetables in a conventional system, reflecting, to a large extent, the ways in which this territory was inserted in a broader fabric of economic, social, ecological, and cultural relations, closely related to the intense process of industrialisation and urbanisation that affected the state of Rio de Janeiro and, particularly, the Metropolitan Region (Palm, 2021). In this process, three large streams of political and institutional transformation can be identified. From the 1960s on, the region was impacted by policies aiming to promote the technological modernisation of agriculture, especially the horticultural production. From the 1980s on, the private sector expanded its influence in the production, distribution, and consumption networks of vegetable crops operating in the region, affecting the composition of demand and imposing quality conventions. This period was also characterised by the densification across the region of a capillary network of private agents involved in the commercialisation of pesticides, chemical fertilizers, among other inputs. From the middle of the 1990s and to the present, we observed the construction of federal public policies for the strengthening of family farming, which reinforced the modernisation of agriculture in Serra Fluminense, mainly due to credit programs specific for family farmers. At the same time, the room for maneuver for actors engaged in processes of environmentalisation of agriculture was expanded



as organic production and agroecology began to be recognised, at least at some level, by social organisations and public institutions, as a potential way to enable the social and economic reproduction of family farms. We thus observed the development in the Serra Fluminense region of a plurality of local arrangements, in the form of collective projects that operate as focal points from which the different actors involved in agroecological transitions manage to trigger and coordinate interventions articulating different actors, domains, and scales within the agri-food system (Palm et al., 2021). For example, Coonatura developed from the late 1970s until the late 2000s, connections and arenas of debate between urban consumers interested in alternative agriculture and food, urban people who migrated to rural areas to become farmers, and local producers (particularly women) in search of markets for their products (up to 30 farming families and 2,100 urban consumers). ABIO (created in 1985) is another organisation originally created by a group of people with an urban background, initially aimed at creating market channels enabling the social reproduction of family farmers. In the 1990s, the certification of organic products became its main focus. ABIO got involved in the construction of the national legislation regulating organic agriculture and in the early 2000s and in 2010, started to operate as a participatory certifying body. ABIO was also a protagonist in the creation, in 2010, of the *Circuito Carioca de Feiras Orgânicas*, constituting an important market place for the production of organic farmers in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

How are agrifood transformations defined as a collective problem in Serra Fluminense? (guiding question 1).

In contrast to the French case studies, in the Serra Fluminense Region, there was no effective construction of a public problem on a broader territorial scale, nor formal arenas to discuss it, but several initiatives connecting different types of producers that allowed building networks and alliances. This may be mainly linked to the absence of a devoted territorial policy (comparable to the Territorial Food Projects one in France), considering that this small region does not correspond to any administrative perimeter, but also to the lack of coordination of the diverse initiatives and networks and the lasting power of the actors involved in "conventional" vegetable production. In this context, we have described the development of the initiatives studied, over time, through the notion of an ecology of projects. These projects generally end up achieving fragmented results, being driven by groups of specific actors, who seek to transform the contexts in which they are inserted, working with the resources they have at hand. Food systems transformations are thus taken as collective problems by different groups and alliances that are loosely linked rather than as a shared public problem at the territorial scale. Among these networks and alliances, the participatory certification system for organic products structured by ABIO deserves to be highlighted, due to its ability to articulate groups of producers operating in different parts of the territory in a plurality of commercial circuits.

How power relations are reconfigured over time? (guiding question 2).

In their agroecological trajectories, farmers are challenged to deal with territorial, political, symbolic, and institutional "contentions" that stand as obstacles to a deeper transformation of agrifood systems at the territorial level and to a reconfiguration of power relations. In this sense, it is worth highlighting: the concentration of conventional production in the areas most suitable for agricultural cultivation; the unfeasibility of transition processes to agroecology and organic agriculture due to the drift of pesticides; the constraints in access to water; the high value of land; the difficulties faced in structuring local market circuits capable of boosting a more significant and financially compensating regional demand for organic products; the complexities involved in the connections with organic markets in the Metropolitan Region; and the fragility and discontinuity over time of support policies for family farming, organic production, and agroecology, at federal, state, and municipal levels. We therefore observe that the actors involved in these processes, mainly farmers, face a set of constraints in relation to the transition processes. Faced with these "contentions," two types of strategies have emerged: locating agroecological production experiences in areas far from spaces dedicated to intensive vegetable production and promoting network organisation, especially through the participatory guarantee system, whose institutionalisation at the national scale involved the agroecological and organic producer organisations of Serra Fluminense. Some agroecological farmers, however, end up choosing to move forward with sales to supermarkets and thus to adapt to their quality standards.

How is the diversity of visions taken into account? (guiding question 3).

From the end of the 1970s onwards, various transition experiences have developed in the Serra Fluminense Region, most of them based on marketing arrangements linking producers and consumers. These experiences facilitated the emergence of visions (and actions) around "alternative" or "natural" agriculture, prioritising the non-use of chemical-synthetic inputs and contrasting the conventional agricultural model. From the 1990s onwards, with the process of institutionalisation of organic agriculture in Brazil, two distinct perspectives started to emerge, that encompass different modalities of criticism of conventional agriculture: (i) a vision focused on improving organic quality and making these products available through large retail chains and specialised stores, (ii) a transformation path focused on participatory certification and the construction of alliances between producers and consumers through direct marketing circuits.

Discussion

Reading our three case studies through the lenses of the three guiding questions reveals some common points and differences and illuminates how processes of both depoliticisation and repoliticisation take place differently in specific contexts.

Cross Reading of the Case Studies

The way agrifood transitions are built as a collective problem (our first guiding question) differs across the three cases. In the two French cases of Provence Verte and Ardèche, in contrast to the Brazilian case of Serra Fluminense, there are institutional projects that aim at fostering the agrifood transition by "articulating" and coordinating the different actors of the food system in an encompassing way. This recent institutionalisation of agri-food issues reveals new agenda settings that are in turn accompanied by the adoption of participation and concertation methods in the steering committees and/or multi-actors groups created within the Territorial Food Projects' governance schemes. However, these governance schemes and related facilitation approaches tend to involve the same "usual suspects" and methods and to exclude less visible actors and social groups, as well as methods that would allow for taking into account less visible issues, echoing a more normative than substantive politicisation process. These cases thus show the unexpected effects of institutionalising these issues and question the top-down nature of the processes that have been put in place. Of course, some actors and networks criticise these processes and try to repoliticise the issues they are more concerned with, as is the case of the action research project and local food council in Ardèche. Our first guiding question thus sheds light on possible processes of depoliticisation linked to the increasing institutionalisation of the issue of food systems' transformations, mostly through the governance and participation schemes that prevail in institutional transition projects. It also allows studying (or even experimenting) how careful facilitation approaches may allow, favour, or even generate processes of (re)politicisation.

Applying our second guiding question (analysis of the reconfigurations in power relations) allows for an understanding of how established power relations would persist or be challenged over time. In all three cases, a reconfiguration of power relations happened under the pressure of alternative farming and food networks that urged for agrifood systems transformations, thus repoliticising the issues, as had long been described by the alternative food network literature (Goodman et al., 2012). In the French cases, the progressive construction of local food governance — mainly driven by public policies in the framework of the Territorial Food Projects — offered some spaces for the expression of heretofore marginalised actors and networks. However, the participation spaces built around these policies often occupy a marginal position in relation to a whole set of already institutionalised arenas where the most important decisions are made, such as around land access. Such changes in local governance thus tend to maintain the status quo in terms of power balance at the stage of decision-making and to depoliticise the debates. In this context, the articulation of territorial actors with national networks of civil society organizations appears, in some cases, as an important strategy for politicising some issues in some key arenas, as with the debates over participatory certification



in Brazil. Our second guiding question allows for addressing depoliticisation processes through the analysis of lasting effects of domination (of certain actors/groups over others), and repoliticisation processes through the attention to resistances and alternatives.

Finally, the application of our third guiding question (analysis of the diversity of visions) shows that in all three cases, there are competing visions of transition constructed throughout the interactions between the different actors and endorsed by different alliances. In ProvenceVerte, these visions relate to an economic local development perspective, an ecological perspective, and a more collective and social perspective. In Ardèche, there are two competing dynamics, driven by the valorisation of quality products and the social inclusion of more disadvantaged farmers and consumers. In Serra Fluminense, networks of ecological agriculture are divided between a perspective focused on third-party certification and marketing mainly via supermarkets and one favouring a more systemic agroecological perspective based on participatory certification and direct marketing mainly in regional farmers' markets. Although these contrasted and partly competing visions take different expressions in the three contexts, they can be characterised by the degree to which they include equity, justice, and ecologisation. Putting equity, justice, and ecologisation on the forefront indeed expresses an attempt to repoliticise agrifood issues. However, this also requires efforts to take into account the diversity and multi-faceted nature of people's visions, including those often excluded from governance and participation arenas. This may be favoured by a diversification of the forms of debates and shared activities as in the annual forums organised in Ardèche (Granchamp et al., 2023).

Common and Contrasted Processes of Depoliticisation and Repoliticisation

The French cases of ProvenceVerte and Ardèche show how the institutionalisation of agrifood issues (through the Territorial Food Projects set up in these regions) leads, despite an apparent legitimisation and politicisation of these issues through these institutional projects, to processes of depoliticisation, because institutional procedures of so-called "participation" generate a canalisation of social critics (Fouilleux and Jobert, 2017) rather than a larger inclusion of a diversity of visions. In this critical perspective, depoliticisation is partly strategic: it is intended by some actors to impose their visions of transitions (i.e., neoproductivist, technology-based visions) and to maintain established configurations of power. Indeed, sustainability issues, regarding food systems as in other fields, are often reduced to technical questions through the imposition of a techno-scientific and economic rationality, as have amply shown recent works in political ecology (Pelenc et al., 2019). However, our case studies reveal that depoliticisation is also partly systemic: it is the result of a convergence of mechanisms, of which the institutionalisation of Territorial Food Projects is part, in the sense that it tends to reinforce in most cases a "normativisation" of alternative narratives, a normative participation based on a narrow view of the actors to be included, as the studies on multi-stakeholderism have also shown (McKeon, 2017) and finally, a homogenisation of facilitation, participation, and planning processes (Granchamp et al., 2023). This shows the need to carefully study participation, i.e., not only through the lens of the "who" (takes part or not in the process) but also the what (is discussed or not) and the how (is the process defined).

This institutionalisation of agrifood transitions through public policies in the two French case studies reveals this paradox: while these issues are being institutionalised and gaining visibility in public policies, many alternative actors, who have been for decades at the forefront of the claims and experiences for more sustainable forms of food production and consumption, are losing ground on these subjects. In the case of Serra Fluminense, despite a strong politicisation of organic agriculture and agroecology at the scale of local farmers and citizens' networks that succeed in establishing alliances with distant urban networks of consumers, as was exemplified by the two cases of Coonatura and Abio, the absence of an encompassing dynamic as is the case with Territorial Food Projects in France and the prevailing and lasting power relations in the agricultural industry constraints and limits these politicisation processes, exempting local governments and other relevant actors from contributing more actively to the transformation of the agrifood system at a territorial level. However, these networks have made a permanent effort to politicise specific conflicts related, for example, to the establishment and maintenance of public spaces for the operation of farmers' markets. Moreover, these local

networks got strongly involved in the discussions about the regulation of organic farming at the state and national scale, thus contributing to politicisation processes at other, larger scales.

In the larger depoliticising context linked to the institutionalisation of Territorial Food Projects, some actors try to repoliticise agri-food issues. In the case of Ardèche, the action-research project and the local food council created as an outcome of this project appear as such attempts to repoliticise these issues by putting equity, justice, and ecologisation on the forefront and enlarging the public involved in the discussions, through the organisation of annual forums open to all actors and inhabitants since 2021, an open call for participation for the local food council, the collective writing of a manifesto (2021) and then of a statement about the effects of these institutional Territorial Food Projects (2023–2024). With this last initiative, in a context where these projects have enhanced normative participation in “classical” multistakeholder arenas controlled by the local authorities, the strategy is to create an original arena of debate that can also become a place of discussion and a source of constructive criticism about this depoliticising policy framing. However, this experience as a whole cannot be read as a success story, because this very process is subject to larger power relations and influences, which limits their concrete effects on the transition at play. Indeed, a strong re-politicisation process would require de-constructing existing governance structures that reinforce incumbencies and unjust dynamics, while embracing the transformative power of democratically designed structures that might support transformative change (Kok, 2023). Of course, we have tackled here forms of repoliticisation closely linked to the frameworks of food democracy and food justice, but these coexist with other claims for repoliticisation, that in many contexts may focus on issues such as the relocalisation of food systems based on conservative visions.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have suggested that lines of inquiry inspired by pragmatist sociology and political ecology may offer fruitful insights for addressing food systems' most needed transformations in a repoliticised way, and with greater attention to their becoming (or not) more ecological and more just. Articulating these two literatures can help demonstrate how people identify problems affecting agri-food systems and collectively work to find solutions while, at the same time, recognising the plurality of understandings of transition pathways and highlighting the mechanisms through which some actors and worldviews are neglected. Pragmatist approaches invite us to examine how actors affected by environmental problems experiment with diverse solutions through collective inquiry. However, they tend to undertheorise power, as they have historically focused primarily on the situated modes of action and interpretation of actors, or to read power relations through the tensions and interactions between civil society and the State, rather than through structural asymmetries and enduring inequalities. Political ecology complements these approaches by encouraging a direct focus on power relations and inequalities in relation to environmental issues. However, political ecology analyses are often somewhat disembodied — either conducted at a panoptic level influenced by political economy traditions, or fragmented into surveys of exceptional “conflicts,”.

We seek to invest the complementarity of these approaches by translating them into three key guiding questions: defining food systems' transformations as a shared and collective problem, analysing reconfigurations of power relations, and recognising the diversity of visions of the food system. Applied to three case studies in France and Brazil, these guiding questions emerged as relevant for the analysis of processes of depoliticisation and repoliticisation, primarily because they reveal the contrasting effects of the increasing institutionalisation and legitimisation of the issue of food systems' transformations. This application also shows that these processes are both historically contingent and subject to different scalar dynamics and dialectics, which deserves more attention in food systems debates.

Beyond this heuristic potential in analytical perspectives, these guiding questions can also support repoliticisation processes through their use in reflexive processes anchored in transformative perspectives.



In the face of an increasing depoliticisation of not only agrifood issues but also participation, they suggest that, in the dynamic construction of transformation projects, the recognition of different positions and world views needs to go along, step by step, with the analysis of the power mechanisms that frame possible futures and legitimise the "visions that count" and the collective experimentation of ways to confront these mechanisms. This echoes Freire's notion of conscientisation, i.e., the development of a critical consciousness through a process of reflection and action that supports emancipation. This also reflects a limitation of well-intentioned experimentation, as highlighted by Rancière (1995), which is the risk of creating political idylls aimed at achieving the common good through the actions of an enlightened elite—another point that warrants further exploration in the future.

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