



Introduction: Is Europe skilling for sustainable food?

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Why an ethnographic contribution connecting skill, food, and sustainability?

Sustainable food is a pressing concern in Europe, as elsewhere around the world. As we write this introduction, diverse socio-economic actors operating in increasingly complex and challenging contexts are experiencing new vulnerabilities caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, energy crisis, and war in Ukraine. Startling increases in food poverty are being reported by European media, with an additional 200 million people confronting acute food insecurity since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic (Harvey 2022). Philanthropic organisations rush to open new food banks and parents report cutting back on food consumption, while the multinational corporations that control 70-90 per cent of the global grain trade have made a “record bonanza” since the Ukraine war began (Harvey 2022; Lawson 2022; Yucel 2022). Many agree that we need radical changes to make food provisioning more sustainable. In the words of the United Nations, “Everyone, everywhere must take action and work together to transform the way the world produces, consumes, and thinks about food” (UN n.d.).

This daunting scenario is directly addressed by the four articles and report that comprise this special issue of *kritisk etnografi*. With contributions grounded in first-hand ethnographic observation of diverse European contexts, we consider our positioning in food provisioning systems: not only where we are and where we need to go, but what is at hand to make the change, what works and what is stunted in its striving – often by sociocultural considerations that rarely enter dominant sustainability agendas. Anthropological research on food provisioning is seldom spotlighted at international summits or featured in major news stories, yet ethnographers know a great deal about “the way the world produces, consumes, and thinks about food” (UN n.d.), including which action is (or is not) congenial to “transforming” foodways in specific contexts and among specific people (e.g., Barnard 2016; Grasseni 2013; 2020; Pilgeram 2011; Rissing 2019). Our ethnographic insights on “sustainable food” in Europe examine skill in relation to food production, distribution, and consumption. If change is what is needed for Europe and the world to achieve sustainable foodways, then skills to support that change must be developed.

Sustainability talk is here to stay, but what does it mean?

Despite critique from anthropologists and other social scientists that “sustainability” is unclear, weak, and/or oxymoronic (e.g., Duell 2013; Hinton 2015; Redclift 2006), sustainability

as a concept has become a social force. Even multinational supermarket chains, typically part of seed-to-table agribusiness rather than sustainable provisioning, claim this sensibility, promising to deliver “sustainable food for everyone” (<https://www.axfood.com/about-axfood/axfood-in-brief/>), and publishing glossy reports to show their patrons “this is what we do for sustainability” (<https://www.ah.nl/over-ah/duurzaamheid>). In fact, producers at all scales, from the largest conglomerates to the tiniest concerns, describe their products as “sustainable,” while ecolabels, Fair Trade certifications, and other forms of sustainability-related audit culture proliferate (e.g., Konefal 2013; Merry 2019; Thedvall 2017). Scholars may seek to challenge or reorient these developments, but the talk of sustainability has become omnipresent in everyday life, marketing, and political discourse, and is likely to remain so in the future too.

Scholars have traced the historical emergence of sustainability in the late 20th century (Redclift 2006) and scrutinised the term’s deeper roots to illuminate paradoxes inherent to the concept (Medovoi 2010). In this special issue, we approach sustainability as an emic category rather than a normative one, highlighting the subjectivities and meaning formations that emerge in specific sites. Sustainability is enacted (or not) in specific communities, making it profoundly contextual, even if inevitably influenced by discourses, policies, and agendas that shape sustainability at more macro-levels. To ascertain how “ordinary people” in Europe – local activists, food cooperative members, urban gardeners, fishers, and volunteers – envision, advocate for, and practice sustainable food in dialogue with larger societal trends, politics, and economic forces requires what other anthropologists have called “toad’s eye science” (Gyawali and Thompson 2016). Thus, this special issue foregrounds research based on participant observation and qualitative methods in the broader European context.

In the following sections, we reflect on two key questions that inform the scholarship presented in this special issue. First, which skills and sensorial formations facilitate sustainable food provisioning? Second, which forms of social organisation might (or might not) facilitate movement away from “business as usual” in the food system?

1. Which skills and sensorial formations facilitate sustainable food provisioning?

“Sustainability” in its late 20th and early 21st century manifestation entails an attentiveness to the environment that was absent in post-World War II development trajectories. Scholars debate whether sustainability prioritises the economy or the environment (e.g., Hinton 2015; Medovoi 2010; Redclift 2006), but regardless of whether specific proposals or practices are “weak” or “strong,” “greenwashing” or transformative, the material world is part of sustainability in a manner unlike prior visions of modernity. Like other anthropologists (e.g., Duell 2013), the authors in this special issue examine sustainability as relationships and processes implicating humans and the nonhuman world. Material and environmental actants inform the sensibilities and subjectivities of the market-gardeners, coastal fishers, food cooperative members, and food waste activists that Loodts, Gillette et al., Plender, and Vasile discuss. Experiential or embodied sensitivity to plants, animals, soil, and water, as well as food’s material qualities, seasonality, and temporality, are forces in the skilled or soon-to-be-skilled performances investigated in these diverse empirical contexts. Material engagements inspire many of the human actors depicted here, set parameters for human agency, and elicit human pleasure, fascination, attunement, adjustment, and struggle. A central finding of the food sustainability ethnographies in this special issue is that sustainability in practice

requires a capacious notion of the social that includes material and environmental actants.

Europe is home to numerous agendas claiming to enhance food sustainability, which offer different diagnoses of contemporary unsustainability and remedies for improvement. The studies of London food cooperatives, market gardening in Wallonia, Swedish coastal fishing, Turinese networks to reduce food waste through redistributing surplus, and the *Food Citizens?* report presented here provide a taste of this diversity. Where change is located, and who or what needs to change, looks different in each case, but putting change in practice entails acquiring, developing, honing, rediscovering, or shedding skills. This enskilment relates to governance, assessment, and collaboration. Some skills detract from – or only apparently contribute to – sustainable food provisioning. Some kinds of knowledge hinder sustainability, even when presented in sustainability language.

In this special issue we investigate skill as a knowledge form produced through engaging local contexts. Conceptualising skill in this manner facilitates exploration of how intertwined social, economic, political, and material-environmental dynamics and conditions shape how people learn, acquire, adapt, and absorb skills. By focusing on skill as an interactive practice, we highlight the exploratory, creative dimension of enskilment, as opposed to the more routinised and institutionalised practices associated with specific crafts and their materials, tools, and techniques. Skill from this perspective is about the competences and practices of people who (could) embody change, even as they respond to change in the surrounding material world, caused for example by global warming or pandemics. Here, the level at which enskilment occurs, and whether skilling for sustainability means developing new skills, redeploying old ones, deskilling, or skills inhibited by structural forces (see Gieser 2014), merits particular attention.

1.1 “Skilled vision” in agroecology

Based on participant observation among agroecological farmers in Belgium, Loodts investigates the skills that develop in the garden, particularly the “skilled vision” (Grasseni 2007) needed to implement the garden plan and manage diseases, pests, weeds, water stress, and so on. In the context of this market-garden enterprise, the agroecological principles of maintaining biodiversity on and around the field, conserving soil life, and optimising the use of solar and water resources make up sustainability. To apply these principles, the farmers engage with the garden as a multi-sensorial field whose ‘polychrony’ or multiple temporalities, in combination with social practices of learning, elicits skilled vision. Anticipation is central to the agroecological farmers’ skilled practices of evaluative observation; this is because the farmers must foresee a harvest or project the evolution of a disease or incursion of pests, envisaging in situ what the rhythm of plant growth would look like in combination with a range of environmental factors, while simultaneously considering how such growth relates to the vision embodied in the garden plan. As Loodts argues, ascertaining which actions are needed to manage the multiple temporalities of the field demands more than a “recipe”-like application of techniques or substances. Rather, the practices of the market-gardeners suggest that close attention and attunement to the nonhuman world and its polychrony must guide efforts to develop more sustainable food production.

1.2 New skills are not always good news

Taking the extensive literature on the “good farmer” (e.g., Cusworth 2020), as their starting point, Gillette, Arias Schreiber and Siegrist examine the skills and values that Swedish coastal fishers claim make the “good” and sustainable fisher. Increasingly restrictive fisheries policies and environmental degradation have transformed what the authors, inspired by Bourdieu, conceptualise as the “social-ecological field” of coastal fishing. Drawing on interviews coupled with digital ethnography and longer-term field knowledge, the authors explore how coastal fishers have – often unwillingly – deskilled, reskilled, and retooled their practices in response to these changing rules of the game. Skilful handling of regulatory “paperwork” and skilled “sustainability talk” now form part of the practical mastery of their profession. The capacity of the coastal fishers to adapt to these changes is facilitated by the moral values of toughness, adaptability, and creativity that the fishers regard as central to “good fishing,” which already informed the absorbed coping and environmentally guided improvisations manifested during fishing trips.

2. Which forms of social organisations might (or might not) facilitate movement away from ‘business as usual’ in the food system?

Scholars from a wide range of academic disciplines have argued that designing sustainable food systems requires attending to social positionings and cultural categories (e.g., Cusworth 2020; Duell 2013; Medovoi 2010). Building on this premise, our critical ethnographies of food sustainability interventions complicate taken-for-granted assumptions about the social composition, civic participation, and institutional structures of sustainable food. The empirical cases scrutinised here investigate a broad range of actors and institutions that constitute and co-construct the food systems we have, including nation-states, the EU, municipal and township governments, NGOs, citizen groups, consumer cooperatives and collective purchasing organisations, short food-chain entrepreneurs and CSAs, producers and consumers – all co-producing diverse discourses and practices of food citizenship and solidarity. The broader political economy of sustainability, including particular measures taken by states to “outsource” sustainability to consumers and citizens, affects the specific initiatives studied here. While some actors comply with government efforts to shift the burden of sustainability elsewhere, there are others who resist and adopt practices that contravene official intentions.

2.1 Food waste reduction and neoliberal enskilment in Italy

Drawing on participant observation fieldwork among non-profit organisations that collect and redistribute food surplus in Turin (Italy), Vasile investigates the reorganisation of these groups into a much-lauded sustainability network and the skills that such restructuring demands of non-profit workers. “Building networks” and “systematising action” emerge as new core repertoires for non-profit workers, whose organisations increasingly take on tasks once considered the responsibility of the welfare state. In the process, the “ethical imperative” (Elyachar 2005) of sustainability becomes implicated in neoliberal government agendas of self-management, rendering non-profit groups even more vulnerable to the dictates of private funders and the infrastructure of measurement, while making them responsible for sustainability transitions. By interrogating the labour and skills demanded

by Turin's acclaimed food waste network, Vasile calls into question exactly who or what is being sustained in this precarious social formation.

2.2 Cooperative structures, skills, and imagination in London

Plender, drawing on participant observation research at two London food cooperatives, interrogates the role of cooperation in a sustainable food system. The organisational structure of a cooperative can be understood as a transformation of the social order through shared ownership, labour, and decision-making, yet precisely how cooperatives are organised and what relationships they have with other institutions affect possibilities for enacting cooperation as collective practice. As with other forms of enskilment, skilling for cooperation is grounded in societal knowledge about its value – which in neoliberal Britain is low. Plender demonstrates that development of cooperation as a skilled practice requires a “radical imagination” (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014) and social nurturance, achieved not merely through doing but also by discussing cooperative ideas, logics, processes, and stories.

Food sustainability, skill, and citizenship?

Given the urgent need, in Europe and beyond, of skilling for sustainable food, we close the special issue by profiling the FoodCitizens? project, in which special issue editor Grasseni and author Vasile both participate, in a collectively authored report. Through ethnographic fieldwork, researchers in the *Food Citizens?* project scrutinised the diversity, solidarity, skill, and scale of collective food procurement networks and phenomena in European cities, particularly Gdańsk (Poland), Rotterdam (the Netherlands) and Turin (Italy). In comparative perspective, Grasseni, De Musso, Gracjusz, Smith, Vasile, and Walstra underline the labour of reskilling, highlighting in particular its relational and strategic dimensions in the context of broader phenomena such as gentrification and urban restyling.

Conclusion: Ethnographies for sustainability

Scholars, policy-makers, and professionals have argued for decades that the global system of food production and provisioning is unsustainable and should change. Such calls have become increasingly vociferous as individuals, families, and communities reel from the effects of Covid-19, the energy crisis, and the war in Ukraine. What sustainable food looks like and how to achieve it, however, are highly contested. This special issue reveals the value of “toad's eye science” (Gyawali and Thompson 2016) for informing these debates. Some of the authors critically investigate normative notions of efficient resource management, public-private partnerships, and technological innovation as the key to sustainable food. Others focus on endeavours to relocalise food production and (re)craft provisioning as a more intimate and reciprocal practice. Taken together, the research presented here demonstrates that enskilment for food sustainability is profoundly contextual. At the same time, three shared analytic themes, which we believe are generally relevant for sustainability work, emerge from our collective scholarship.

First, prefiguration and foresight, for example in agroecology (Loodts) and food cooperatives (Plenders), are at the core of experimental enskilment. Anticipatory skills necessarily take different form as they develop in specific socioecological milieux, e.g., for market-gardeners or fishers working directly in food production sites, but they are also

broadly engaged in the routines and institutional fabric of organisations such as NGOs (Vasile) and other governance institutions (Vasile, Gillette, Arias Schrieber and Siegrist).

Second, enskilment does not emerge “organically” in local contexts, as seen for example in the articles on coastal fishing (Gillette, Arias Schrieber and Siegrist) and food waste networks (Vasile). It is also forced upon sustainability actors through policy, financing, and public discourse. Reskilling brings with it new and potentially conflicting forms of labour and organisation (Vasile; Plender). These often are connected to the relational and political dimensions of food system initiatives.

Third, in all the cases presented here we observe forms of “sustainability talk” that could be called “strategic.” Participants in food production and provisioning efforts adopt discourses and narratives about sustainability to justify what they do or do not do. While sustainability talk is a change from the discourses of modernity that characterised the immediate post-World War II period, its potential to index meaningful movement toward more sustainable food must be critically assessed in every instance. Sustainability talk may embellish “feel good” sustainability practices that fail to address the central problems of unsustainability in the food system (see, for example, Grasseni et al., this volume). There is a danger that citizens and groups may feel satisfied with what they do, imagining they are “making a difference” while nevertheless – and perhaps inevitably, given the contemporary configuration of global capitalism – falling short of radical transformation.

In conclusion, we return to how the contributions to this special issue, in addition to their analytic insights, demonstrate the value of including “toad’s eye science” (Gyawali and Thompson 2016) in our collective strivings for sustainable food. The intimacy which characterises the research presented here enables deep understandings of what sustainability or unsustainability looks like in particular contexts, initiatives, and professions. Such knowledge is needed if we are to articulate sharper critiques of the systematic unsustainability that ultimately limits what actors working at smaller scales can accomplish. Ethnographic study sheds light on what certain kinds of sustainability interventions do and do not do, how they go wrong, and where they offer hope or demonstrate the need for more resources or greater improvements. If we are serious about creating food policy and institutions that advance transformative change for sustainability, our efforts must be informed by ethnographic “toad’s eye science.”

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