Emancipatory or neoliberal food politics? Exploring the 'politics of collectivity' of buying groups in the search for egalitarian food democracies

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Abstract: In the context of apolitical tendencies in food studies, this paper explores how alternative food networks can contribute to developing emancipatory food politics rather than constitute a tool to reproduce neoliberal subjectivities. For this purpose, I contend that the post-political literature offers a useful approach to examining the concept of food politics by developing a more robust theoretical framework, permitting the establishment of linkages with broader contemporary processes of social change. The analysis of an action-research process with buying groups in Spain is used to examine the 'politics of collectivity' at play, that is, how these initiatives institutionalise 'the political'. Specifically I explore the motivations mobilised to construct place-based ethical repertoires and unveil how these groups govern the relationality of consumption practices in the pursuit of broader processes of change. I conclude by discussing the contribution of these initiatives to building egalitarian food democracies.

1. Introduction

In the last decade, food has become a key site to study neoliberalism and the resistance to it (Guthman, 2008). As Harvey (2005) summarises, neoliberalism proposes that "human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (p.2). In the agri-food sector we have witnessed a steady privatisation of resources (e.g. land, water or seeds), an expansion of agricultural free-trade agreements and a transfer of responsibility for food security and sustainability from states to markets and individuals (see for example McMichael 2009). Furthermore, neoliberalism when deployed as a source of governmentality involves extending and disseminating market values to institutions and social actions, even expanding this influence to the 'soul' of the citizen-subject (Brown 2003). Therefore, one of the key aims of neoliberal governmentality is to promote the maximisation of individual choices in front of shared responsibilities (Harvey 2005; Peck 2008).

In the food system, some consider that these neoliberal trends manifest themselves not only in the form of supermarkets and conventional outlets, but also in some cases in ostensibly alternative food networks (AFNs) (Guthman 2008). Academic literature commonly conceptualises these AFNs as an attempt to re-socialise or re-spatialise food (Marsden et al 2000) by establishing new relationships between producers and consumers based on trust, the redistribution of value in the food chain and the establishment of new forms of political association (Whatmore et al 2003). Numerous studies

celebrate these niches as a place of resistance to the placeless, unsustainable and unjust industrialised food system (Murdoch et al 2000; Tregear 2011). However, critical scholars have argued that more localised food systems do not necessarily mean more sustainable and socially just agendas or outcomes (Allen et al 2003; Born and Purcell 2006). Also, other non-local attributes of AFNs such as fair trade foodstuffs or organic certifications have been subject to critical scrutiny given their contribution to capitalist development, exclusion of vulnerable farmers and low-income consumers, and labour exploitation (Goodman 2004; Guthman 2004). Furthermore, in many cases these 'ethical' and 'sustainable' initiatives not only conceal potential environmental impacts and reproduce social inequalities, but may also be fostering an infertile consumer politics by deepening individualist practices and reproducing neoliberal configurations that hinder social change. One of the main issues of contention revolves around the capacity of individual consumption practices to elicit social change (Busa and Garder 2015; Johnston et al 2009).

In this context, a critical food scholarship has called for a more 'realist' approach in the study of these initiatives to uncover an 'antipolitics' or 'apolitical' tendency in the AFN literature and in food activism more generally (D Goodman et al 2012:24). However, this 'realist' approach should not only build on necessary critique but also allow the creation and nurture of spaces of possibility through food initiatives in order to contest, reshape or transform the neoliberal project. As Gibson-Graham (2006) warned, there is a danger that neoliberalism is portrayed as a "hegemonic story" (Larner, 2003; p.509) and used as an analytical lens that obscures new political opportunities (Crossan et al 2016; Harris, 2009).

In this line, the main aim of this paper is to explore if alternative food networks, and particularly those based in collective forms of production/consumption, can contribute to developing an emancipatory food politics rather than constitute a tool to reproduce neoliberal subjectivities (see Guthman 2008). While previous works have highlighted the need to 'read for difference' to explore radical possibilities nascent in AFNs (see Harris 2009), in this paper I contend the need to unpack further the concept of politics in this context – a concept widely used in food debates but seldom explicitly discussed - as well as to develop its productive links with related terms such as democracy. The expanding post-political literature is of great utility in allowing one to tackle this task. First, it provides a robust analytical framework that clarifies the distinction between 'the political' (i.e. an expression of dissent with current socio-ecological configurations) and politics or policy-making (i.e. "the interplay of social, political and other power relations in shaping everyday policies and

managerial procedures within an instituted organisational order" (Swyngedouw 2014:2)). And secondly, it permits the establishment of more fertile relations between transformations of the food system and other contemporary processes of social change such as those characterised by managerial and technocratic arrangements to govern socio-natural configurations (Swyngedouw 2007; Swyngedouw 2014). Post-political scholarship provides a framework to explore the aftermath of the eruption of political expressions in the public space (see Badiou, 2012), for example allowing one to link food related analysis with the emergence of new social movements and politics such as the *Indignados* (15M movement), the Occupy movement or the Arab spring, as well as advancing our understanding of new political configurations between civil society and the state. A more critical understanding of politics and political processes will also be conducive to enriching the meaning of terms such as food democracy and the more radical proposal of food sovereignty, which ultimately revolve around enacting emancipatory political processes in the food system, and striving for justice and equality.

This paper explores these political processes through a participatory action research project with buying groups in Valencia (Spain). Buying groups are self-organised groups of consumers (and sometimes producers) which collectively reorient their purchasing practices towards more localised, sustainable and ethical foodstuffs (for examples in Italy see Fonte 2013). In the case of Valencia (Spain), some of the buying groups have been operating since the 90s, but many of them have been created or reinforced by the emergence of the 15M (or *Indignados*[i]) movement in May 2011 as a tool to materialise their vision of new socio-economic relations. In this context, this paper aims to analyse the politics at play in these initiatives, evaluating their contribution to a more emancipatory and egalitarian food system. The paper discusses how buying groups develop new ethical repertoires and associated 'politics of collectivity', that is, how they institutionalise through specific arrangements 'the political' (i.e. an expression of dissent with current socio-ecological configurations) and strive to build new food practices by bridging the gap between individual food engagements and collective action, developing new modes of being in common.

The reminder of the paper is organised as follows. First, I present a literature review that discusses the transformative potential of alternative food networks, highlighting the place-based contingency of alterity, the key role of motivations mobilised to construct ethical repertoires, and the relationality of consumption practices. Subsequently, I draw on the post-political scholarship and its conceptualisation of politics and the political to connect alternative food politics to wider processes of social change as well as expanding upon proposals such as food democracy and food sovereignty

by defining *egalitarian food democracies*. Section four introduces the territorial context and the participatory action research (PAR) process, including information about data collection and analysis. Section five scrutinises the 'politics of collectivity' at play - that is, how buying groups institutionalise through specific arrangements 'the political' - by exploring how these initiatives construct ethical repertoires and associated governance arrangements. Section six discusses how these politics are political or post-political and considers their contribution to egalitarian food democracies. Finally, I conclude by discussing how these collective initiatives might contribute to processes of democratic emancipation, developing a new politics but also positing new questions around equality and the role of the state and civil society in these emancipatory processes.

2. Unpacking the transformative potential of AFNs

Research on AFNs has commonly explored their capacity to transform the food system by re-socialising and re-spatializing food. Numerous case studies conducted since the mid-90s have shown the potential of AFNS to transform food practices and contribute to social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability (D Goodman et al 2012). Nonetheless, AFNs have been the subject of multiple criticisms, including the problematisation of their 'alternativeness' and therefore political implications. In the vast AFNs literature, the descriptor 'alternative' has been used for an array of meanings such as reconnecting consumers and producers or conveying active modalities of political resistance to global capitalism (Kneafsey 2010). Despite the potential power of discourses on alternativeness to stimulate challenges to perceived dominant and unjust socio-economic configurations (Holloway et al 2007), the concept of alternative is highly ambiguous obscuring the intentions and desires of those involved (Wilson, 2013). The lack of critical assessments around the alterity of these networks has led to deterministic oppositions between alternative-good-local-embedded and conventional-bad-global-dis-embedded (Goodman 2004; Hinrichs 2000). However, these two sets of conventions coexist in most of the cases in the agri-food chain, creating 'hybrid spaces' (Ilbery and Maye 2005) that might then contribute to reinforce distinct political projects.

Consequently, a first key element to discuss the transformative potential of initiatives is the recognition of the relational contingency of what is regarded as alternative in a specific time and place (Holloway et al 2007), since AFNs are based on particular configurations of ecological, political, economic and socio-cultural processes rooted in place (Jarosz 2008). Embracing this *place-based contingency and hybridity of alterity* urges us to reconsider the political dimension of AFNs in

different geographies and in different configurations (e.g. farmers markets, buying groups, food not bombs, etc.). Furthermore, it highlights a second key aspect, the importance of considering not only specific practices but also *motivations and intentionality* in AFNs. For example, Hinrichs (2000) distinguishes between alternative markets and alternatives *to* the market, with the latter embedding values different from those that commodify food. In a similar line, Wilson (2013) proposes to use the concept of autonomous food spaces to stress an inherent critique of capitalism in particular initiatives which explicitly dis-engage from capitalist systems to develop new social and economic realities.

These practices and motivations construct different politics and ethical repertoires. However, according to Guthman (2008), an important part of the alternative food movement has actually incorporated neoliberal characteristics despite aspiring to build different ethical repertoires; for example through the development of quasi-private forms of governance such as voluntary food labelling schemes (e.g. fairtrade, organics) dependent on consumer choice as a form of regulation. Furthermore, one of the main roles of the food movement in the last decades has been to develop market-based 'value-added' solutions to build a more sustainable food system such as farmers' markets, labelling schemes or box schemes (see Tregear (2011) and D. Goodman et al (2012)). These new products and associated demands have rapidly being recognised by larger international food actors who have quickly integrated 'ethical choices' such as certified organics, Fairtrade and local brands into their repertoire, resulting in a commodification and individualisation of sustainable food principles (see Guthman 2004; Lockie and Halpin 2005).

Critical accounts of AFNs have shown how this increasing range of 'ethical' food choices – in supermarkets or alternative spaces – is generally available only to those who have the economic means as well as social and cultural resources to access them (Guthman 2011). Critics have rightly pointed out the potential exclusion from these 'alternatives' of a large part of society, not only in terms of their purchasing capacity, but also creating class and race divides (Guthman 2008; Slocum 2006; Zitcer 2015). These divides, as well as neoliberal subjectivities, can be further reinforced by the social and political *process of framing ethical choices*. As Johnston et al (2011) argue, contemporary rhetoric around ethical eating is not shaped by a universal sense of right and good, but instead revolves around particular issues that have gained public attention (such as local or organics) marginalising others (e.g. hunger, social justice, labour conditions). They draw on empirical data to show that economic and cultural privilege facilitate access to this dominant ethical repertoire, but that less privileged groups also know, care and creatively engage with moral issues around eating. Consequently, a third key aspect to unpack the transformative potential of particular initiatives

revolves around the examination of *how ethical food practices are constructed* in specific contexts, who are the main agents in dominant narratives and who is excluded, and how more inclusive and therefore transformative discourses and practices can emerge.

A key materialisation of ethical repertoires in AFNs is through consumption practices. According to Guthman, "much of what passes as politics these days is done through highly individualised purchasing decisions" (Guthman, 2008; p 1175) which further reinforce neoliberal subjectivities. Consequently, discussing the distancing, contestation and transformation of the neoliberal project through consumer or consumption politics becomes key in understanding the transformative capacity of these initiatives. A common approach to consumption politics assumes that the aggregation of individual choices in supermarkets or farmers markets can shape food demand and therefore have an impact on the overall food chain. These choices include different forms of market-mediated practices such as 'buycotts' (reward a company by buying their products) as well as boycotts. This approach fits well with the neoliberal project - as defined in the context of Thatcher-Regan assaults on welfare states - of maximising choice but also "constructing 'active' and 'responsible' citizens and communities to reproduce governmental results that do not depend on direct state intervention" (original emphasis Ferguson 2010:172). Some scholars argue that these individual practices constitute genuine movement participation (Willis and Schor 2012). This civic participation is portrayed as less organised, life-style oriented, spontaneous and accessible to ordinary people while encouraging political activism (Barnett et al 2005; Neilson and Paxton 2006). Several studies show how consumers frame their consumption as political (Seyfang 2006; Shaw 2007), and stress that social and political engagement encourages more conscious consumption and vice versa (Neilson and Paxton 2006). A step further is the proposal of ecological citizenship, which motivates voluntary personal commitment to sustainability goals considering private consumer behaviour as political as well as speaking to a need for collective action towards the common good (Seyfang 2006).

However, other critical voices contest the capacity of individualistic practices to enact broader projects of social change (Allen and Kovach 2000; Johnston 2008). Contradictions and limitations of consumer-based political action are increasingly documented and linked to neoliberal agendas (Johnston et al 2009), as illustrated in the case of fair trade (Goodman 2004) or other certified foodstuffs (Guthman 2007). Individualist consumption agendas are portrayed as detrimental to social change since they involve the displacement of and demotivation for collective political action and the consideration of the market place as the primary arena for change (Johnston, 2008). In many cases ethical purchasing practices are reported as mere manifestations of 'consumer conversion',

that is, buying different products rather than reflecting actual political contestation (Busa and Garder 2015; DuPuis and Goodman 2005). Busa and Garder (2015) unveil the lack of desire for social change in the discourses of some ethical eaters, questioning "to what degree individuals who do not connect with a larger project of collective action can truly impact social change" (p.337). In stressing the distinct character of collective action in consumption practices, these works point out the importance of the *relationality of consumption* as a fourth element to unpack the transformative potential of AFNs. Indeed, choice and consumption do not happen in isolation as "people's understandings of, motivations for and conduct of consumption are deeply social" (Willis and Schor 2012:163). In that respect, some of these apolitical accounts of ethical eaters rely on ill-defined notions the political that disregard the different meanings, motivations and intentions mobilised in consumption relations; and overlook how collective experiences articulated around consumption might embody emancipatory political projects, including the articulation of new 'politics of collectivity'.

3. Food politics and the political: problematizing food democracy

Criticism of apolitical accounts of food initiatives has led scholars to define different types of food politics. For example, Levkoe (2011) defines transformative food politics as those initiatives that aim to address the root causes of current food system challenges and work towards the institutionalisation of alternative food discourses in policy and practice, moving beyond isolated acts of resistance and reform. More recently, D Goodman et al (2012) propose the adoption of an open politics of reflexivity, admitting contradictions, differences and complexities of everyday life; not favouring scales of political practices and emphasising deliberative democratic processes. This emphasis on food democracy emerged in the mid-1990s as a response to increased corporate control, calling for the right and responsibility of citizens to participate in decisions concerning the food system (Lang 1998). According to Hassanein (2003), this participation is based on equal and effective opportunities to engage in shaping the food system. Food democracy revolves around five dimensions: becoming knowledgeable, sharing ideas, developing efficacy in the food system, building common public goods and emphasising collective action (Hassanein 2008). Furthermore, Johnston et al (2009) state that food democracy's robustness depends on its capacity to defetishize foodstuffs by revealing production relations embedded within food activities and opening them to political contestation and transformation.

In a similar vein, the right to decide in the food system or the 'right to act' (Patel 2009) has also been claimed by the peasant movement 'la Via Campesina' through the proposal of food sovereignty. This concept or vision is defined as the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through sustainable methods and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems (Nyéléni 2007), stressing self-sufficiency and autonomy as political demands and giving voice to marginalised food actors such as peasants. Nonetheless, the concept of food democracy faces scepticism among some food sovereignty activists who cast doubts on the values underpinning liberal 'democratic' practices as deployed by the governments of nation-states[ii]. The democracy rhetoric has indeed been used to enact anti-democratic imperial and domestic policies (Brown 2003), ultimately becoming a characteristic mode of legitimisation of neoliberal regimes (Ferguson 2010). This neoliberal co-opting of democracy extends to participatory practices and other beyond-the-state governance mechanisms (Raco 2000; Swyngedouw 2005). As many scholars now report, in some cases participatory processes have been instrumental as a means to co-opt radical demands and to avoid conflicts ultimately strengthening existing elites (White 1996). These processes are also present in the food system where initiatives like Food Policy Councils or food charters have been uncritically connected to democracy-enhancing process (Levkoe 2011) without contesting the actual values and mechanisms underpinning these new spaces of deliberation (Moragues-Faus and Morgan 2015). Nevertheless, democracy is by and large portrayed as an unchallengeable idealised form of political life; despite, as post-political scholars argue, democratic practices being largely reduced to a desiccated technocratic and managerial processes based on impotent participation and consensual modes of governance (Badiou 2009; Crouch 2004; Swyngedouw 2005, 2010).

In order to reclaim an emancipatory democratic politics based around notions of equality and freedom, Swyngedouw (2011) proposes to distinguish between 'the political' and 'politics'. The political refers to the space for the egalitarian public encounter of heterogeneous groups and individuals (Swyngedouw 2014) that "signals the absence of a foundational or essential point on which to base a polity or a society (…). The political stands for the constitutive lack of ground." Instead, politics "refers to the power plays between political actors and the everyday choreographies of policy making within a given institutional and procedural configuration in which individuals and groups pursue their interests. (…)." Politics stand for the "always contingent, precarious and incomplete attempt to institutionalise, to spatialize, the social, to offer closure, to suture the social field, to let society coincide with community understood as a cohesive and inclusive whole" (Swyngedouw, 2011; p373).

The colonisation of the political by politics seems inevitable, but clearly can take a different form from current post-political practices where politics are replaced by a social managerial administration. Building on Rancière (1998), Swyngedouw (2014) asserts that politics can be "a space of dissensus, for enunciating difference and for negotiating conflict, for experimenting with a new sense and form of sensuous being" (p.9). For that purpose, he contends that the political needs to emerge through a process of political subjectivation, that is, the process through which those that disrupt the state and 'do not count' become a recognised voice of the people striving for equality, equality being the capacity to act politically and thereof the foundational gesture of democracy. In order to strengthen the conceptualization of politics and food democracy, in this paper we build on the post-political scholarship to explore the concept of *egalitarian food democracies*, which stresses the capacity to act politically in the food system and therefore is linked to the 'right to act' that food sovereignty claims. These diverse democracies display the place-based contingency of alterity and the political, linked to motivations and intentionality (as the AFN literature review above shows), but also to enacting the capacity to act politically in particular sites, places or locations. Swyngedouw (2014) suggests that insurgent movements like the *Indignados* (or the 15M) might be leading the way. Nonetheless, a key political question is "what happens after the dream is over and the 'ordinary' everyday life begins again"(p.13). This paper addresses this question by examining a particular expression of the aftereffects of a political eruption, looking at a specific tool or arrangement in the food domain (buying groups linked to the food sovereignty movement) to materialise and enact broader socio-political transformations.

4. **Understanding place-based political eruptions: building food sovereignty through action research with buying groups in Valencia**

In order to discuss the construction of transformative food initiatives it is key to acknowledge the place-based contingency of alterity and potential emancipatory process. In this case, the buying groups studied emerge in Valencia, the third largest Spanish city, with a population of 780,000 inhabitants. This Mediterranean city is surrounded by a historical *Huerta,* a large market-garden dating back to Roman times that preserves the irrigation infrastructure of the Arab period and late middle-ages. This landscape, internationally recognised for its cultural and ecological values, has been degraded in the recent decades due to the expansion of the city and a lack of agri-food policies to support small scale vegetable production; although public support has increased steadily to protect this area (PATH 2008). This 'disconnection' of the city with its agricultural surroundings does

not preclude a high valorisation of the Mediterranean diet and local foods, which are also marketed internationally through different territorial quality schemes such as Protected Designation of Origin labels. Fruit and vegetables are mainly purchased at independent outlets, including Valencia's vibrant traditional food markets, although there is a relatively low uptake of organic certified foodstuffs (MAGRAMA 2015). Notwithstanding, the number of 'alternative food networks' in the city has increased in the last decade, partly supported by the *Plataforma per la Sobinaria Alimentaria del Pais Valencia* (a regional food sovereignty platform).

In this context, the origin of buying groups is variegated, with the oldest initiative, *Aiguaclara* starting in the early 90s. However, most groups were created between 2010 and 2012, many related and/or reinforced by the emergence of the 15M movement. The 15M movement occupied the squares of many cities in Spain the 15th of May of 2011 for some months and later channelled part of their demands through local and community initiatives. In fact, the 15M is characterised as a rhizomatic movement (Castells 2013), given its decentralised organisation and its call for individual and collective action. In Valencia, this movement created a commission on Agroecology during the occupation of the city's main square that continued working after the movement re-organised in neighbourhood assemblies. This commission was made up of different organisations and individuals including members of *Plataforma per la Sobinaria Alimentaria del Pais Valencia*. Among other activities, the Agroecology commission encouraged the creation of buying groups in neighbourhoods as a materialisation of economic alternatives to the current capitalist system by sharing information, training materials and organising meetings.

In order to enhance the food sovereignty movement, two organisations, Utopika (a multidisciplinary action-research network) and ISF (an NGO working on food sovereignty at the local, national and international level) proposed to develop a participatory action-research (PAR) process to understand the growth in numbers and scale of buying groups and facilitate knowledge creation and exchange. In this context, buying groups of Valencia City and its surrounding area were invited to a meeting to discuss the suitability and potential of a PAR process. This 'kick-off' meeting was instrumental to define needs of the groups, potential research questions and the overall functioning of the process. The research questions - or topics that buying groups wanted to pursue - were collectively identified and grouped into three main topics: i) internal structure and organisation, ii) relationships between producers and consumers, and iii) political dimension of BGs understood as the potential to become an alternative to the current system. These topics were agreed to be pursued through a diagnosis of buying groups in Valencia.

This diagnosis consisted of open-ended interviews with key stakeholders of ten buying groups around the three main topics identified in the first meeting (see table 1). The results of these interviews were analysed and transformed into datasheets that were publicly shared. The whole research processes was developed with an explicit awareness of 'being useful' (Taylor 2014) and also contesting conventional power asymmetries between researchers and the research object. For the purpose of this paper, the meetings and interviews conducted through the PAR process were analysed within the theoretical framework presented above. This data was complemented by my active participation in one of the BGs (assemblies, mail conversations, working group activities, regional gatherings, etc.) that allowed me to better understand the daily politics, conflicts and negotiations inside these groups.

In total, the BGs participating in the PAR supply around 900 people with a range of products, mostly foodstuffs such as fresh fruit and vegetables, pulses, olive oil, drinks and in some cases non-food products. The average size of these groups is 30 consumption units, i.e. households or small group of friends, relatives, work colleagues, etc. that share the purchase order. The composition of the BGs varies in many respects from group to group. For example, GC de *Vera* operates within la Universidad Politecnica de Valencia and therefore members are students and University staff; *Patraix* is located in a working class neighbourhood where professionals and unemployed people come together; while *Russafa* is a trendy neighbourhood where young professionals, including families with young children, run the BG. These differences invariably affect the politics of the different groups illustrating the place-based contingency of these initiatives and their alterity. However, a detailed account of these differences supersedes the aim of this paper.

Table 1 Basic characteristics of buying groups investigated

Buying Groups	Consumption Units	Average Number people per household	Number of consumers	Year
El sabinar	7	2-3	18-20	2011
El Cabasset d'Arrancapins	13	2-3	30	2011
Grup de consum Russafa	15	2	25-30	2011
Grupo de consumo Patraix	20	2	35-40	2011
V-land Solaris	21	3	40	2007 (operating 3-4 years before)
Soc el que menge	21-25	2-3	60	2011
GC de Vera	35	2	71	2011
Tutta Revoluta	45	1-5	-	2009
Eina de Bioconsum	47	2-5	150	2010
Aiguaclara	49	-	200-300	1993-1994, cooperative in 2003

5. Constructing ethical repertoires to arrange different 'politics of collectivity'

This section scrutinises the 'politics of collectivity', that is, how buying groups institutionalise through specific arrangements 'the political', i.e. an expression of dissent with current socio-ecological configurations. In order to unpack the transformative potential of those arrangements, I build on the elements identified through the literature review on AFNs. Therefore, this section discusses how these groups disengage from neoliberal configurations by exploring the motivations mobilised to construct place-based ethical repertoires as well as how they unveil and govern the relationality of consumption practices in the pursue of broader processes of change.

When describing their *motivations*, BG members emphasized their desire to practice an agroecological, alternative, coherent or fair mode of consumption. Respondents also stressed what can be considered more individualistic motivations, such as health or quality of life. In some cases these were linked to a more complex understanding of nature, including the co-transformations of territories and societies. However, most BGs explicitly mentioned the interest "to work collectively, to create networks in the neighbourhood and create spaces for personal development" (*Russafa*). "It is a way of organisation, building trust among people that live close to each other and that can translate into other things… it's creating a social fabric" (*Patraix*). There is a desire to change the food system as an entry point to transform the current social and political system: "Consumption is the tool that we have to generate an economic and political impact. It is our tool for action." (*Arrancapins*).

These motivations are translated in two key procedures that shape ethical repertoires: governing principles and consumption criteria. The **governing principles** of buying groups revolve around participation and decision making mechanisms to build new consumption relations. In terms of *decision making*, all groups function in a horizontal fashion holding periodic assemblies which exemplifies their motivation and desire to establish different socio-economic relations. In order to operationalise the functioning of the groups, most BGs have working groups or commissions responsible for specific functions (see figure 1 below). These working groups have some autonomy but they are guided by the principles and decisions agreed in the assembly where all members participate. This participatory and non-hierarchical organisation constitutes a defining trait for all groups, being a key element to differentiate themselves from conventional food practices. This form of organisation aspires to implement a direct and egalitarian democracy, allowing space for deliberation and dissent, although aiming for consensus. Notwithstanding, as in any collective there are power choreographies that affect individual participation, including leadership and the status different members hold within the group (e.g. due to their knowledge on the topic or social relations). However, these decisions have a direct implication on a daily and basic activity, that is, what food you will purchase/eat, which motivates active participation and grounds collective discussions in individual everyday practices and constrains.

Figure 1 Types of commissions/functions

Types of commissions/ functions
Economic
Producers
Centralization of consumers' orders
Receive and organise foodstuffs
Logistics
Legal affairs
Communication
Welcome
Activities, events,
Relations with other institutions
Quality

In fact, *participation* is a key requirement of joining most of these buying groups. Participation is understood in a practical and political manner, that is, helping with the practicalities of the BG (contact producers, manage finances, clean the headquarters) but also in decision-making processes where members express and negotiate different needs and worldviews. Eight of the BGs interviewed demand explicitly that new members participate in one of the commissions and attend assemblies.

"We explain that you need to collaborate actively in the group, integrate in one of the working groups, come to the assemblies, learn to give a talk about the project and if there is a wall that needs to be painted then to do it as well!" (V-land Solaris).

While the BGs are ready to assume the challenges of direct participation (e.g. decision-making times are long, arguments, compromises, etc.) not everybody can easily commit to take part in these spaces (i.e. working shifts, disabilities, family caring) which adds to the existence of other potential cultural and social barriers to join AFNs as discussed above. As Gross (2009) notes, alternatives often require a pre-existing class privilege of being able to take the time to engage in non-capitalist practices. This more critical approach to participation/membership is seldom discussed, assuming that the 'open' and assembly character precludes potentially exclusionary practices, failing to establish a reflexive politics (D. Goodman et al 2012). This does not preclude groups from debating around how to improve participation or increase membership, including changing periodicity and times of meetings, using online tools for communication, organising social events, etc. In fact, through the analysis of the interviews we could identify two 'speeds' (in respondents' words) of participation which some BGs assumed as 'natural' while others actively discouraged what they considered to be an unacceptable free-rider attitude resembling the neoliberal individualist purchasing practices that they are trying to confront.

These governing principles also influence the level of formality of BGs, understood as the codification of their practices but also their legal form, which is generally quite limited. Most buying groups rely on other 'close' organisations if they need to invoice providers or conduct other legal procedures. By and large, BGs contest current options for legal forms and in some cases prefer to operate on the margins of the system which takes the form of a conscious political stance supporting the *nonlegal*[iii] character of these initiatives. Nevertheless, this is not without contention, participants actively debate about whether these activities should contribute to the welfare state and its associated delivery of public goods, or if it should constitute a self-managed independent activity that by-passes current institutional and political configurations.

These governance arrangements underpin the process of constructing collective ethical repertoires, including the establishment of **consumption criteria**. These criteria correspond to different sustainability dimensions embedded in the concept of AFNs as presented above such as promoting environmental integrity, economic sustainability and social justice (see Figure 2). There is a special emphasis to reconnect with producers, building close relationships that embrace the needs and limitations of both sides of the food chain whereby creating new forms of political association and mutual support that challenge the corporate food system. An example of this recreation of trust is

realised by buying products that are not necessarily certified as organic. Instead members of the BG rely on the credentials of specific producers that feed other groups or/and visit the farm to understand the production process and progressively build trust.

Figure 2 Compilation of consumption criteria

CONSUMPTION CRITERIA
- ✓ Agroecology/Organic (non certified and certified)
- ✓ Local (seasonal)
- ✓ Small producers
- ✓ Trust
- ✓ Direct contact with the producer
- ✓ Seasonal
- ✓ Fair prices for producers and consumers
- ✓ Cooperative organisation with fair labour relationships
- ✓ Social project behind the product, participation of producers in other personal and collective initiatives (eg. Defence farmland, protection of biodiversity of local varieties and breeds, etc.)
- ✓ Produce 'de la terra': autochthonous, traditional, local varieties
- ✓ Quality
- ✓ Pedagogy. Producers that are willing to share knowledge and experience, so that we can learn things
- ✓ Minimisation of packaging
- ✓ Catalan labelling
- ✓ Easy distribution and payment facilities

The BGs also establish criteria that they consider 'political', for example looking for partners that share their wider project of social transformation and are interested in sharing their knowledge. In some BGs, this is materialised by supporting producers' cooperatives or associations, or producers engaged in activism, for instance defending agricultural land from urbanisation or being part of the food sovereignty movement since, for some, the BG "is a materialisation of the implications of food sovereignty" (*Eina*). This activism is mainly regarded as local or regional, and is part of a wider process of incorporating into food choices social, ecological and cultural attributes related to the Valencian territory, that is, building a *place-based 'alterity'*. This form of territorial embeddedness (Moragues-Faus and Sonnino 2012) of products/producer criteria includes adding value to produce '*de la terra*'[iv] supporting the reintroduction of autochthonous varieties and species, but also looking for products labelled in Catalan, which links with wider regional identity issues.

As these criteria show, the construction of ethical choices in BGs is a place-based collective process based on direct participation. The operationalization of these criteria generally relies on the producers' commission who look for different options and analyse them in the light of these principles, although the final decision is taken in the assembly. The relationship between the

consumers and each producer varies; however, most producers, despite being invited to participate, do not take part in regular activities of the BG beyond providing foodstuffs and hosting visits. In some cases, consumers of BGs have transformed into producers that provide their groups with different foodstuffs. This is the case of a group of new producers *La caterva* that offers their produce to and still actively participate in the *Grup de consum Patraix*. This example shows a continuum in the producer-consumer role in BGs that is seldom problematic. While consumers generally seem to engage more directly in decision making processes, producers relegate themselves to the providing role, being content to leave decision making processes to consumers. These politics, in Swyngedouw's (2011) sense of the managerial mechanisms and institutions, are sustained as long as the basic principle of equality is respected. This equality includes a sense of collective responsibility that is always at risk given the different worldviews and needs of individuals that could be interpreted as emerging neoliberal traits, for example people not placing food orders on holidays or failing to carry out assigned tasks. However, this collectivity also opens the possibility of caring about the self, the proximate and the others.

"The main idea is that the individual is obsolete, we are vulnerable; collectively we have more strength, the buyers and us ... The buying groups are very important. For instance if now one or two people from a group are made redundant and without benefits, the group and me as a producer can finance their box for some time." *(Producer)*

This scale of caring expands beyond the maintenance of the group itself linking to a wider politics of transformation where other scales, places and people are included, as discussed below.

6. Transforming the food system? Towards egalitarian food democracies

The previous section has analysed the 'politics of collectivity' of BGs, unpacking how these groups build different ethical repertoires through governance arrangements and consumption criteria. This section discusses how these politics are political or post-political and thereof their contribution to egalitarian food democracies. That is, how these initiatives incorporate eruptions of discontent and calls for equality and freedom in new institutional configurations that change our food practices and build egalitarian spaces where people have the capacity to act politically. Drawing on the analysis of the interviews with buying groups, I wish to argue that such political claims can be discussed using notions of equality, participation and inclusion; knowledge and reflexivity; and connectivity and autonomy.

Equality, participation and inclusion

The buying groups analysed in this paper easily conform to the five dimensions of food democracy as defined by Hassein (2008) (see above). However, taking a post-political approach, democracy is based on equality or the capacity to act politically. BGs incorporate this notion of egalitarian food democracy through their commitment to *horizontal and assembleary decision making processes* based on the respect of all ideas. This form of organisation has a qualitative superior outcome for participants, that is, it has value in itself beyond efficiencies. Precisely, this functioning is underpinned by an ideological principle of equality and direct participation that reflects the type of social relations that these groups aspire to build. In contrast with the post-political literature, participants do not consider consensus as alienating, rather as a goal to include and accommodate different interests; allowing difference to emerge. This form of organisation, its terminology and meanings are broadly shared with other movements such as the 15M (see Serrano 2011) but also food sovereinty's principle on the right to decide.

In the BGs organisation, spatial and internal *decentralisation* is instrumental to build in capacity but also to assure the 'right to act' (Patel, 2009), promoting direct democracy rather than representative mechanisms. Most BGs are established in specific neighbourhoods – incorporated into their names: *Arrancapins, Russafa* or *Patraix* – or spatially delimited spaces such as the University. This spatial decentralisation erases conventional ideas of expansion, and instead supports the creation of new place-based autonomous groups that can build on the experience of other BGs. Decentralisation is also key inside the BGs themselves, allowing self-organisation from below and participation in the different commissions. As a participant highlights: "some of us can represent the group in different spaces but we cannot take decisions on behalf of the group, the assembly is the only space with the capacity to make decisions" (*Soc el que menge*).

However, as Swyngedouw (2014) warns, the institutionalised forms of policy making suspend the axiomatic equality manifested through the political paving the way to post-political configurations. BGs are not exempt from everyday power choreographies and practices that result in individualisation or exclusion, not only inside the groups themselves but actually in developing ethical repertoires and mechanisms of collective identification that establish boundaries and distances with others, as reported in other collective ventures (Zitcer, 2015). In order to overcome these limitations it is necessary to embed reflexive practices at different scales that deal with connectivity/autonomy tensions as described below.

Knowledge and reflexivity

As many scholars have pointed out, knowledge constitutes a key enabler for egalitarian participation in political processes (Hassein, 2008). BGs *share knowledge and raise political awareness* at different scales, from the intimacy of digesting foodstuffs to visiting farms, developing consumption criteria or engaging in regional, national or international networks linked to food sovereignty. This constitutes a rich set of formal and informal learning spaces that help acquire/generate knowledge on the food system, unveil the relational dimension of consumption practices and learn to work and consume collectively. In this regard, participating and 'doing' are in themselves pedagogical processes that build critical and political consciousness.

However, these learning and deliberation spaces need to constitute reflexive 'communities of practice' in order to resolve or at least render visible many of the tensions, neoliberal trends and exclusionary practices present in AFNs (such as these BGs) and build truly emancipatory spaces. This reflexivity is processual, open-ended and messy, calling for pragmatic compromise (Goodman et al 2012) but also building capacity to act politically and allowing 'the political' to emerge in different places, that is, allowing those who 'do not count' to become a recognised voice in midst of institutionalised spaces.

Connectivity and autonomy

The relationality of consumption but also the 'formalisation' of collective initiatives prompt us to consider the tensions between self-management and collaboration with different actors. In navigating these tensions, Iles & de Wit (2014) understand food sovereignty as the practice of creating connectivity but also autonomy within different spaces and institutions, as illustrated by BGs dynamics. For example, BGs *cooperate and create alliances* with different actors in their daily activity. Some of these relations are pragmatic, such as the collective purchasing with other BGs or sharing knowledge and resources, but also serve the purpose of building new socio-economic realities. As a participant states: "In our BG we understand that in order to put in place an alternative consumption model we need to work as a collaborative network" (*Soc el que menge*). Alliances among groups have included the development of a *Coordinadora de groups de consumo* inside the *Plataforma per la sobinaria alimentaria del Pais Valencia* (reinforced by the PAR process described in this paper). The participation in the food sovereignty movement creates connectivity at different scales: local, regional, national and international; supporting the development of shared goals, principles and collective identities, where ideological aspects play an important role and support the process of building a common political project. Many BGs members also participate and engage with other social movements for example by sharing their headquarters with a social centre

in the case of *Patraix* or the assembly spaces with the 15M movement in *Arrancapins*, which creates close links with other political and socio-economic demands for transformation. Most of the groups also conduct outreach activities as a means to connect to 'others' such as hosting food debates or occupying public spaces with their foodstuffs. These activities are identified as political, as long as they are reclaiming a space to exist in their neighbourhoods, in public spaces and the food system as whole.

Some of the BGs also reinforce the idea of the commons, championing the creation of *shared spaces* but also *self-management of communities*. This drive for self-governance and autonomy from current bureaucratic institutions is reflected in the debates some groups have around their legal issues as explained above. However, this rupture with the conventional role of the state is contended, with some members arguing for more 'state' or public support, in terms of education, health or pensions; while others posit the challenge: "Do you still think we need the State? Find out how we can self-manage our lives"[v]. This debate prompts unresolved questions around how equality at different scales and geographies can be enacted through self-managed groups and what type of agents and institutions are required to build emancipatory processes.

7. Different politics to build new modes of 'being in common'

This paper contends that alternative food initiatives not only reproduce neoliberal characteristics but can actually contribute to emancipatory political processes. The transformative dimension of these initiatives is intimately linked to specific socio-political and natural configurations since the political is always place-based (Swyngedouw 2014), related to motivations and intentionality of eaters but also to enacting the capacity to act politically in particular places. Furthermore, the construction of ethical repertoires, including the ordering and re-shaping of the relationality of consumption, constitutes a key process to understand the contribution of these initiatives to social change. The BGs analysed aspire to *democratise access to ethical repertoires* by developing place-based participatory criteria which might not conform to the contemporary rhetoric of ethical eating as identified by Johnston et al., (2011). In this process of defining and enacting consumption criteria as well as modes of organisation, the collective character of these buying groups and the connection to larger projects of social change play a key role. That is, putting at the centre the constant definition of new arrangements to live together underpins the always normative and incomplete process of grounding notions of right and good with more equalitarian values. Among other things, buying groups supersede consumerism logics including traditional views of growth and expansion

linking their quest for 'alterity' to explicit *motivations and desires* of more just socio-economic configurations. In fact, they re-politicise food by developing new ethical practices of thinking economically and enacting different types of economic beings (Gibson-Graham 2006). Instead of maximising choice, BGs aim to offer choices that embody the ideals, values, constrains and preferences of many individuals, including those that produce the foodstuffs. Furthermore, the informed and conscious process of assuming the implications of our desires in others, negotiating those demands and translating them to food practices constitutes a powerful device to transform individual choices but also our understanding of being 'in common'.

The analysis of how these collective endeavours build and experiment with different politics after a political eruption, in this case embodied in the actions and demands of the 15M movement, contributes to food debates but also to the post-political research agenda preoccupied with the aftermath of these insurgencies.

On the one hand, the use of the post-political literature enriches the concepts of food politics and food democracy. Indeed, this paper shows the need to consider food politics beyond defetishation processes incorporating into the analysis the 'politics of collectivity' that tackle how initiatives institutionalise through specific arrangements 'the political' (an expression of dissent with current socio-ecological configurations). This includes tackling the definition of organisational forms, construction of ethical repertoires and linkages to other processes of social change. Furthermore, the construction of egalitarian food democracies (in plural because they are place contingent and therefore diverse) should revolve around the construction of spaces where people have the capacity to act politically. On the other hand, this paper contributes to further our understanding of this capacity to act politically championed by the post-political scholarship. In the buying groups studied, this capacity is articulated first through the operationalisation of politics that includes notions of equality, participation and inclusion. In the BGs studied, despite painstaking organisational efforts, the institutionalisation of collective action inevitably excludes some as shown above, limiting participation for practical, cultural and socio-economic reasons. However, in order for BGs to build more egalitarian spaces, these new politics should allow the emergence of the political, creating spaces for the encounter of heterogeneous interests and needs, including access to knowledge and reflexive 'awareness of and care for others' that do not participate in these spaces and are not anticipated to participate. Finally, this capacity to act politically relates to creating connectivity at different scales and with different 'non-recognised' voices and at the same time fostering autonomy as a form of rupture from current socio-political configurations. These collaborative tensions inevitably raise new questions with regard to the configuration of new politics, particularly around the geometry of the state-civil society arrangements.

Specifically, the neoliberal project not only champions individualised choices over shared responsibilities, but has also leads to a progressive de-coupling of social policy and nation-states (Ferguson 2010). This de-coupling is also materialised through the varying relations between new economic alternatives and the role of a changing nation-state that remains unresolved in practice and theory. The initiatives analysed here create autonomy and connectivity by regaining control over the food system, reshaping it and embedding their practice in wider processes of social change. Nevertheless, this once more posits questions about how to assure equality assuming the lack of common ground and potential exclusionary practices, raising the need of further socio-political infrastructure and reflexive egalitarian politics. Similarly, new social movements in Spain have re-energised libertarian municipalist proposals based on direct citizen participation (see Bookchin, 1991; Observatorio Metropolitano, 2014), and have even seized conventional power in key cities such as Madrid and Barcelona. The challenge for practitioners and academics is to uncover how this political emergence can transform into egalitarian democratic politics that cares for others and delivers social justice at different scales.

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[i] This movement is internationally known as the *Indignados*. However, the Spanish public and activists identify the movement as the 15M, commemorating the 15th of May of 2011 when many Spanish squares were occupied after a demonstration for *Real Democracy Now*. This paper refers to this movement as the 15M.
[ii] During the conference *Food Sovereignty: A critical dialogue* in the Hague on January 2014, a debate on food democracy and the need to qualify its meaning emerged among a group of participants (see http://www.iss.nl/research/research_programmes/political_economy_of_resources_environment_and_population_per/networks/critical_agrarian_studies_icas/food_sovereignty_a_critical_dialogue/).
[iii] Non-legal or alegal refers to aspects that are not regulated, and therefore are neither legal nor illegal.
[iv] "La terra" refers to the land in Catalan, but it also has an identity dimension since it is an expression in Valencian and therefore it is circumscribed to that geography.
[v] This slogan responds to the title of one of the main publications of the 15M, *Revelaos*. See http://colectivosandia.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Publicaci%C3%B3n-REBELAOS-Baja-Resoluci%C3%B3n.pdf