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# **Agriculture, Food and Land: Struggles for UK post-Brexit Agri-food Justice**

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## Abstract

This paper examines the possibilities and challenges of nurturing agri-food justice by using land as a foundational node in the context of the UK leaving the European Union – what has been termed ‘Brexit’. Drawing upon the interconnected literatures of land justice and food justice, which have received sparse coverage in the UK, we develop an *agri-food (in)justice* lens to reveal the diverse contestations and struggles to transform the physical and political agri-food Brexit landscape in more socioecological just ways. Our research highlights the tensions and difficulties in addressing the complex social and environmental injustices bound up with UK agri-food relations, given the unequal power dynamics that permeate food and farming politics and policy. In particular, the research reveals the continued ‘hidden’ politics of historically-embedded land (in)justice. We therefore argue for greater focus on the multiscale relationships between land and the intersecting contestations of agri-food labour, capital and knowledge. We end the paper by discussing the limitations of the nascent ‘public goods’ approach to agricultural policy under a purported ‘Green Brexit’ and arguing for participative and inclusive agri-food praxis based on land and food justice to cultivate more socioecologically just futures.

**Keywords:** Agri-food Justice; Brexit; Food Justice; Food System Transformation; Land Justice; Public Goods

## 1. Introduction

What is the role of land justice in social change? Ultimately, it may be to bring us together on that irreducible terrain of hope from which all other struggles for food, livelihoods, water, and environment emerge: the land. (Holt-Giménez and Williams 2017:263)

As powerfully articulated by Holt-Giménez and Williams (2017), land is a complex terrain of conflict *and* hopeful possibilities. In particular, heterogenous social histories, intimacies of human and nonhuman encounter, and processes of environmental change create complex, layered relationships with land and struggles over food justice (Penniman 2018). Despite this complexity, debates about *land justice* (Kerssen and Brent 2017) and *agri-food justice* (Hochedez and Le Gall 2016) – and how they are entangled with the politics of land – remain largely invisible in mainstream United Kingdom (UK) agri-food policy discussions in the context of the UK leaving the European Union (EU) following a referendum in June 2016.

Against the complex socio-political and economic background of Brexit, contestations over the future *governance* of agriculture have unfolded, particularly the uncertainty surrounding the scale, purpose and possible reconfiguration of subsidies towards a ‘public money for public goods’ approach outlined in the new Agriculture Bill<sup>1</sup> (Defra 2018a; HM Government 2018) and the role of the Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme (in England) to achieve a ‘Green Brexit’. This idea was set in motion with Michael Gove’s<sup>2</sup> (2017) ‘unfrozen moment’ speech in which he argued “new possibilities occur” in relation to the environment and agricultural system upon leaving the EU, summarised by the evocative statement of “*taking back control* of environmental policy” (no page; emphasis added). This begs important questions of what ‘taking back control’ really means, the possibilities for whom and for what purpose. Brexit, then, must be understood not as a singular ‘event’ but as part of a broader *process* (Maye et al. 2018) – a contested opening which raises larger questions of values and justice about who shapes agri-food policy, who benefits from it, and in what

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<sup>1</sup> The Bill was passed into UK law on 11 November 2020, becoming the *Agriculture Act 2020*.

<sup>2</sup> Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs of the UK (2017-19).

ways should and could it be changed. Ultimately, these questions can be addressed in ways that either sustain the status quo, by preserving existing power relations, or prise open cracks in neoliberal ideology and policy to develop interventions that foster greater social and ecological justice.

In this paper we utilise a relational approach to agri-food justice to unpack the ongoing politics and possibilities of Brexit concerning UK food and farming. To do this, we begin by outlining the interconnectedness of land justice and food justice, and developing a critical agri-food (in)justice lens that allows broader and historically-situated contestations regarding transformations of the physical *and* political agri-food landscape to be revealed. Based on an analysis of empirical material from interviews with 77 stakeholders involved with food, farming or rural landscapes together with discourse analysis of key Brexit agri-food policy documents, we highlight various inherent vested interests that permeate food and farming politics and policy as well as the tensions and difficulties in addressing the complex systemic (in)justices of the politics of land that shape UK agri-food relations.

## **2. Theorising Land and Agri-food (In)Justice**

### *2.1 UK Agrarian Contestations: Farming, Land and (In)justice*

At its very core, demands for equitable access to land are intimately connected to both old and new agrarian questions (Bernstein 1996; Holt-Giménez and Williams 2017). In this respect, land is the foundation of food systems. Moreover, agricultural relations are permeated with social and spatial inequalities that span diverse territories and timescales. For instance, during what Friedmann (2005) characterises as the ‘Settler-Colonial’ food regime, British geopolitical hegemony was secured through the establishment of agricultural monocultures in colonies to import commodity crops into the Imperial centre to feed its industrialising workforce. However, as Jackson et al. (2009) argue, there has been a pervasive collective *disremembering* of Britain’s involvement in such colonial agriculture and, specifically, its entanglements with slavery and Empire. Therefore, it is vital to state that the politics of land in the UK has always reached well beyond its arbitrary borders, covering vast swathes of the earth. Indeed, British colonialism (underpinned by exploitative

and exclusionary resource use and extraction) extended land ownership by the gentry and capitalists to encompass overseas territories, displaced indigenous communities and established plantation agriculture that harmed ecosystems, depleted soils and devalued traditional ecological practices. The impacts of these complex historical socio-spatial relationships manifest across space and over time, influencing contemporary patterns of urbanisation, multiscale food system relations and climate change. For example, 50 percent of the food currently consumed in the UK is imported (Defra 2018b) and, consequently, the socio-ecological impacts of its production are externalised.

To position land in relation to agri-food (in)justice it is imperative to highlight the opaqueness, pervasive secrecy and vast inequity bound up with land ownership in the UK. Although there is no *comprehensive* register of UK land ownership, it is estimated that approximately half of the land is owned by 40,000 'land millionaires', equivalent to 0.06 percent of the population (Cahill 2001). The conceptualisation of land as 'property' – as a commodity to be bought and sold – is a central facet of capitalist development and expansion (Polanyi 1944) and, in the UK context, is linked to complex colonial histories and expressions of resistance. Most notably, this was laid bare in Ireland, where the biopolitical violence of hunger experienced during the Irish Famine of 1845-52 acted as a catalyst for the Land War against the absentee landlordism of colonialist English ruling classes (Vernon 2009). In Scotland, the forceful removal and displacement of crofting communities during the Highland Clearances of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries dramatically reconfigured rural landscapes and associated socioecological relations, intensifying rural depopulation and land monopolisation (Wightman 2010; Sutherland 2019). Such historically-embedded injustices clearly contextualise the physical, political and sociocultural landscape that conditions contemporary food, land and environmental policy and practices, as well as influence present-day demands for land reform (most acutely in Scotland, which has one of the most concentrated landownership contexts in Europe).

A key point we would like to underscore in this paper is that the politics of land – its access, use, ownership and management (Borras et al. 2015) – are acutely cultural and social *justice* issues that are deeply intertwined with our environment, economy and politics, which all influence, and are influenced by, our food system. For example, during the early years of the

20th century, the fragmentation of many aristocratic rural estates in England saw the traditional Victorian tripartite rural class structure consisting of landowners, tenant farmers and landless agricultural labourers challenged by the growth of owner-occupier farms (Newby 1979), which, by 1939, constituted over half of all agricultural land (Hetherington 2019; Tichelar 2019). Indeed, between 1920 and 1960, approximately 40 percent of the cultivated area of England and Wales passed from the hands of the gentry and traditional land-owners to farmers (Grigg 1989). It is claimed that the continued growth of owner-occupation as the dominant tenure of British agriculture in the post-war period has led to the neglect of agricultural land ownership being a critical academic research topic (Whatmore 1986). Following Sutherland (2019:248), we also contend that the limited attention given to agricultural land ownership within current debates on social exclusion in rural areas works to undermine a holistic understanding of rural inequalities and a meaningful critique of the deeply engrained and unquestioned “right of landowners to manage their holding for personal gain”.

Despite its dominance however, the structure of (private) ownership and access is not ‘natural’, but rather is a matter of custom and law, historically shaped by those who would benefit the most from privatised, exclusionary arrangements, and thus *inherently political* (Blomley 2004). Land, therefore, is a historically inflected social question – it is produced relationally, permeated with power relations and is multivalent – making it an “awkward, resistant or incomplete commodity” (Li 2014:591). To be sure, land has unique qualities (scarcity, permanence, irreproducibility and immobility) that mean “it cannot simply increase or expand to meet greater demand” (Ryan-Collins et al. 2017:216). For Polanyi (1944), efforts to render land a (fictitious) commodity will continuously generate forceful forms of resistance or “counter-movements”. In this context, it is perhaps helpful to outline that there is a long (but often overlooked) tradition of *working-class agrarianism* in the UK, ranging from the insurgent communal agrarian practices of the Diggers and the Levellers<sup>3</sup> to the revolutionary thought of Thomas Spence at the height of English Radicalism, encapsulated with the rallying cry of ‘The Land is the People’s Farm’ (Hill 1972; Chase 2010).

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<sup>3</sup> Particularly, their occupation and re-appropriation of St George’s Hill, Surrey, in 1649. The collective squatted private land, started to grow vegetables and declared that the land belonged to everyone – based on the idea that the earth represents a ‘common treasury’.

We contend that historical narratives of radical agrarian praxis (connecting food governance, justice and land) are essential for inspiring and shaping progressive social change in the present (Federici 2019).

The increasing involvement of financial institutions in the agricultural land market since the 1980s has reignited a concern for how speculative or venture capital investment in agricultural land rights (or land titles) has increased land values (Whatmore 1986; Tichelar 2019). As van der Ploeg et al. (2015:148) highlight, land, business and financial ‘deal brokers’ have now emerged “in the European land rush, joining the ranks of other elites (food empires, commercial producers, banks) in partly determining the dynamics of land politics”. Thus, the current technocratic model of capitalist agriculture is now subjected to complex forms of corporate control, deregulation and the financialization of land (Clapp 2014; Fairbairn 2014), which increases land prices and volatility, and creates difficulties for smallholders and other precarious modes of small-scale farming (Fairbairn 2014). This is vividly highlighted in England, where the number of small farms (below 20 hectares) decreased by 34 percent between 2005 and 2015, whereas the number of large farms (above 200 hectares) increased by 6 percent (CPRE 2017). Moreover, capital investment in land for *non-farming* purposes – including tax reasons, development potential and privacy – are key factors that have led to the location, rather than the quality, of land to be the key driver of maintaining farmland values in the UK in the context of Brexit-related uncertainties (Yates 2019).

Although agricultural land prices in the UK initially soared in the immediate post-financial crisis period of 2007/8 due to an inflow of speculative investment from institutional stakeholders such as hedge funds and wealthy private individuals, UK farmers are experiencing a “more volatile market, higher input costs, and a depreciation of their farm household incomes” in a context of the state-corporate-market nexus that generates interconnected social, economic and environmental vulnerabilities (Marsden et al. 2019:94). Despite intensified uncertainties for rural economies, communities and the environment in the context of neoliberal capitalism, climate change, and most recently, Brexit, it is important to highlight that agricultural poverty has a long history in the UK (Newby 1979). In particular, low pay, precarious contracts and dangerous working conditions continue to



characterise the farming industry, with a quarter of current farmers in Britain estimated to be living in poverty (JRF 2018). As Sutherland (2019) states, given this precarity, the class position of contemporary farmers is difficult to establish. While commercial farmers frequently engage with demanding manual labour in the context of an increasingly complex, globalised and corporatized food system permeated with vulnerabilities, they also “frequently own and operate farm businesses worth hundreds of thousands of pounds” (Sutherland 2019:241). Consequently, the ‘resources’ of family farming (such as buildings, land, machinery and livestock) are typically transferred intergenerationally resulting in significant accumulated capital ‘assets’ which can then be leveraged and invested in diversification activities. This process can change the socio-economic status of the farm household and, in this sense, it has been argued that contemporary farming is gentrifying ‘from within’ (Sutherland 2012).

Subsidies and regulations through the state-corporate-market relationship that favours agribusiness and large farms have facilitated persistent concentration of agri-food capital, the decline of small-scale farms and the loss of socioecologically sustainable production (Ward 1993). In particular, the majority of the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) subsidy system has been based on the ‘Pillar One’ single farm payment scheme related to the *size of holding* and grounded on payment per hectare for *land ownership*<sup>4</sup>, which is claimed by some to be one of the EU’s “most economically inefficient policies, made worse by rent seeking, capture, and lobbying by landowners and producers” (Helm 2017:124). It is argued that these subsidies are structurally regressive and have “encouraged ongoing farm enlargement and rising land prices, which serve to exclude large segments of the population from the opportunity to access and produce the affordances associated with agricultural land management” (Sutherland 2019:248). Thus, we contend the opportunity of a radically new post-Brexit agricultural subsidy system to foster more equitable and fair agrarian relationships between land, labour and the environment needs to be positioned in the context of embedded land (in)justices bound up with the politics of who controls land and who benefits from its development, use and management. Indeed, given that the politics of land and food production intimately shape the ecology of food (in)security, environmental

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<sup>4</sup> Overshadowing money made available through ‘Pillar Two’ agri-environmental schemes.

crises and land management (McMichael 2014:38), land will always be central to struggles over *food justice*.

## 2.2 Food Justice: Reimagining the Politics of Food and Land

We argue that insights from food justice have particular pertinence in building a holistic agri-food (in)justice approach to examine the structural relationships that shape food systems and farming spaces in the context of Brexit. Embedded in the food justice approach is an emphasis on the structural inequalities that shape the socio-spatial organisation of food systems and create forms of privilege and disadvantage at the intersectionality of class, gender, race and other forms of difference (see Slocum et al. 2016; Sbicca 2018; Coulson and Milbourne 2021). What is clear from food justice scholarship is that confronting the historical injustices that underpin the contemporary food system requires recognition that power is *relational* and *embodied* through multiscale socionatural metabolic flows that create unjust outcomes for (particular) humans and nonhumans in complex webs of entanglement (Rodríguez 2018). For example, the UK food system has witnessed a resurgence of the ‘gangmaster’ and gang labour system of low-paid work (Strauss 2013), whereby exploitative labour relations are associated with racial, class and migrant-status injustice(s) across agri-food spaces and commodity chains (Rogaly 2008; Scott 2017; Rye and Scott 2018). Moreover, the recent *State of Nature* report (2019) painted a bleak picture of large-scale biodiversity loss in the UK. The report highlighted the abundance of UK priority species has declined by 60 percent since 1970, and, currently, 15 percent of species are threatened with extinction. Agricultural transformation (particularly *intensification* of land management and increased productivity) was identified as the most important driver of UK biodiversity change over the past 45 years, the majority of which has been negative (State of Nature Partnership 2019).

While food justice literature emerging from the United States (US) has to some extent grappled with the complex histories of land (in)justice and its impact on food systems (see, for example, Slocum et al. 2016; Kerssen and Brent 2017; Williams and Holt-Giménez 2017; Penniman 2018), it has received far less attention in the UK. Specifically, there is a notable absence of critical engagement with the historically-embedded *politics of land* – namely,

“the politics of who gets what rights and access to which land, for how long and what purposes, and of who gets to decide” (Borras et al. 2015:603) – in both scholarly and food movement contexts. We argue this reflects a broader propensity in the UK to view land issues as unproblematic or ‘fixed’ (Blomley 2004). Given that land is vital for food cultivation and provisioning (Horst et al. 2021), we assert that this oversight makes it difficult to radically reconfigure agri-food relations in more equitable and socioecologically sustainable ways. Thus, the central tenet of this paper is that the unresolved land question across many global North countries is a vital, but often ignored, dimension of food (and broader social) justice struggles (see Christophers 2018). Indeed, while land justice is frequently associated with peasant struggles and the control of land in the global South, Horst et al. (2021) consider that it also has important salience across the global North. To be sure, land injustice is a fundamental issue that is interconnected with many multiscale challenges facing current and future generations across the UK; these range from a lack of affordable housing and difficulties creating sustainable farming livelihoods, to large-scale biodiversity loss and climate change (Ryan-Collins et al. 2017).

In drawing attention to the contemporary landscape of unequal access, use, ownership and stewardship of land and the multiple socioecological inequities that result from these relations (Ryan-Collins et al. 2017), lies a complex history of widespread land grabs, insidious cronyism and systems of patronage that are seldom fully discussed in the UK; however, their impacts and legacies reverberate powerfully in the present, entangling land with power, wealth and cultural identity (Shrubsole 2019). In particular, processes of structural violence, dispossession, loss and trauma have unfolded across generations, perhaps most notably from the forceful enclosures of the commons between the 16th and 19th centuries (Federici 2004; Linebaugh 2014). As Christophers (2018:80) has emphasised, the *ongoing* intensified privatisation of public land in neoliberal Britain can be understood as a “new enclosure” – an extension of longer processes of appropriation, privatisation and commodification – that has been legitimised by pejorative framings of public or communal land as ‘surplus’ or ‘wasteful’<sup>5</sup>. The emergence of “new enclosures” (Christophers 2018) in

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<sup>5</sup> Austerity policies have aided the process of public land privatisation with local authorities selling public land to plug budget deficits rather than using it to meet social needs (Christophers 2018).

the context of planetary (neoliberal) urbanisation travels to the heart of the contested nature of land ‘ownership’ and the ways it intersects with broader social and ecological justice concerns and struggles.

In this paper, we therefore assert that land needs to be positioned at the core of the food justice question (Kerssen and Brent 2017; Williams and Holt-Giménez 2017; Penniman 2018), which means that food justice requires the implementation of not only social equity across the agri-food system to address histories of colonialism and tackle intersectional systemic inequalities (Horst et al. 2021), but also the rollout of regenerative and environmentally sustainable farming (such as agroecological practices) to nurture ‘multispecies’ environmental justice (Haraway 2018). One way to achieve this is by challenging the neoliberal notion that environmental impacts are mere ‘externalities’ of the economic system and that nonhuman agents are ‘resources’, ecosystem ‘services’ or ‘assets’ for speculation under a rationale of capitalist agriculture. As Haraway (2018:102) states, there “can be no environmental justice or ecological reworlding without multispecies environmental justice” and undoing social and ecological harm requires understanding nonhuman nature as a political agent – not an economic ‘service’<sup>6</sup>.

Indeed, the liveliness or vitality of nonhuman entities, such as soils, seeds, weather and water, interconnect with human labour to make agriculture a highly unpredictable, always more-than-human collaborative process, whereby a multitude of socionatural agencies shape, unsettle and complicate established land and property relations (Brown et al. 2019). Crucially, how we understand the *value* of land – and in what terms (social, ecological, economic, spiritual) – affects what politics and policies are devised and implemented. This raises crucial questions of how land is discussed, valued and understood in post-Brexit agri-food governance debates and policies, and the impacts of diverse discursive approaches in shaping possible agri-food futures.

### *2.3 Towards Agri-food Justice*

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<sup>6</sup> In contrast, see the recent Dasgupta Review (2021) – which is likely to influence future UK Government policy decisions – for an examination of nature as an undervalued economic ‘asset’ and the potentiality of natural capital accounting to shape sustainable economic growth.

In this paper we place the relational ‘node’ of land centre stage (Slocum et al. 2016; Leslie 2019) in order to bring land justice and food justice together within current *UK agricultural debates*. As Hochedez and Le Gall (2016:2) observe, “the problematics of the relations (or non-relations) between food, agriculture and justice is incomplete” – both conceptually and in practice – and therefore the role of agriculture in reducing or exacerbating distributive, recognitional and procedural inequalities (c.f. Fraser 2008) requires critical investigation. Furthermore, the broader urban bias of food justice scholarship has led to an overemphasis on *city-based* agriculture and food projects at the expense of rural (land) politics and agri-food concerns. As such, there has been limited attention directed to issues of agri-food inequities and land access in rural spaces of the UK. We assert that focusing on land as a complex relational process helps to (re)connect food justice with different socio-spatial environments of production and consumption. Doing this also provides new possibilities for alliance-building and collective interventions across food system agents, practices and spaces that address the interconnectedness of food *and* land injustices across the urban and rural interface (Kerssen and Brent 2017).

Specifically, we propose that agri-food justice provides a pertinent analytical lens to excavate the *(in)visibilities* and *(un)spoken* narratives that emerge at the intersection of public policy, land and agri-food systems in the context of Brexit. In the next section of the paper, we provide a critical examination of the politics of land across the UK’s agri-food system based on two interrelated research projects conducted between 2017 and 2019. The first examined connections between farming, the rural landscape and environment in the context of Brexit, drawing upon 47 semi-structured interviews with agri-food stakeholders from government, business and third sector organisations representing a wide range of farming, food and rural issues. The second project explored the (food) justice narratives and practices that frame and shape ‘alternative’ food system priorities and actions, based upon 30 semi-structured interviews with food movement activists and practitioners.

Across both projects, participants were asked to reflect upon current and (potential) future issues facing the agri-food system in light of Brexit and the possibilities for reconfiguring governance mechanisms to cultivate more just food systems. The interviews were

conducted face-to-face, over the phone or by Skype and lasted between 60 and 95 minutes, audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The corpus of data was systematically analysed through thematic sorting and coding, with particular attention given to distributive, recognitional and procedural dimensions of justice (see Fraser 2008). These themes were then triangulated with discourse analysis of key policy documents and position pieces produced by the stakeholders.

### **3. Contestations over Post-Brexit Agri-food and Land (In)Justice**

#### *3.1 Distributive (In)Justice: Land Inequity and Agri-food Governance*

Our research reveals that the numerous structural and institutional barriers that deny prospective farmers entry into the agricultural sector (van der Ploeg et al. 2015) were largely discussed by participants aligned with the ‘alternative’ food movement. A land activist and small-scale farmer, for example, highlighted the substantial cost of land and the inequity of its distribution as notable obstacles, commenting that “land is much too expensive for agricultural activities. [...] it is cheaper to rent land, unless you are loaded. [...] [but] if you want to invest in building up a farm, you need to have security and getting a secure lease is pretty difficult”. To move towards (agri-food) land justice it was claimed by a community-supported agriculture (CSA) farmer that it is imperative to “remove the barriers for people to get access to land, which is exceptionally difficult without significant capital or inheriting land”. This operates in the context of highly unequal ownership of land – it is estimated that approximately 0.25 percent of the UK population (158,000 people) own the country’s 17 million hectares of agricultural land (Devlin et al. 2014).

A lack of opportunities for young or new entrant farmers to gain access to land was also mentioned by many participants and within several agri-food policy documents (see Tenant Farmers Association 2016; Land Workers’ Alliance 2017). For example, a recent study found over one thousand potential and current farmers considered that access to land posed a significant barrier to farming in Scotland (Scottish Farm Land Trust and Nourish Scotland 2017). As a representative for National Farmers’ Union Cymru stated, “one of our issues is making sure young people have a good chance to set off [...] a lot of young people would

have voted for Brexit because they saw subsidy payments as keeping some of the older farmers... giving them... a sort of pension to stay where they were [...] and not being efficient, not being productive”. Building on this sentiment, current agricultural policy was discussed by some participants as a structural factor enabling older farmers to utilise subsidy payments linked with land ownership to finance their retirement, which made them reluctant to sell their land or to pass to the next generation. Given that the average age of UK farmers is 59, this underscores an enduring intergenerational tension in agriculture (White 2012).

The relationship between the ownership of land and the receipt of public farm subsidies creates one of the clearest inequities perpetuated by current (EU) agri-food governance mechanisms<sup>7</sup>. The opportunity for a radical reconfiguration of EU farm subsidies was initially bolstered when Michael Gove, the (then) Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, explicitly recognised “the Common Agricultural Policy rewards size of land-holding ahead of good environmental practice, and all too often puts resources in the hands of the already wealthy rather than into the common good of our shared natural environment” (2017:no page). The most potent criticism of the EU CAP subsidy scheme is related to the administration of area-based payments, which for several participants was perceived to be “essentially a subsidy for owning land” (LWA farmer) and to have therefore “inflated the speculative value of rural land” (land activist). Given that farmland is exempt from inheritance tax if it is productively cultivated for two years before its transfer<sup>8</sup> further reinforces land price capitalisation, whereby subsidies have augmented the value of landowners’ property “making it much more attractive for struggling farmers to sell their farm [...] and large farms have been able to expand and invest” (food activist). As a small-scale farmer commented, farmland continues to be understood as an “attractive *asset*” shrouded behind opaque layers of secrecy:

“there’s a lot of secretiveness around things like land ownership. [...] obviously a lot of people have done a lot of work sort of publicising who are the beneficiaries of CAP

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<sup>7</sup> Since 1973, UK agricultural policy has been aligned with the EU CAP (which has undergone several iterations since its establishment in the early 1960s).

<sup>8</sup> If occupied by the owner, a company controlled by them, or their spouse or civil partner.

and so on, but [...] it's quite an uphill struggle in this country to sort of know who's doing what? Who owns what? Who's receiving what?".

In particular, large sums of money from the EU subsidy system have been directed to (privileged) private interests and corporate companies<sup>9</sup>, and many participants shared the viewpoint of a Land Workers' Alliance (LWA) member that "we really need a system that's more targeted on the person who's actually doing the farming" rather than necessarily owning the land (also see, New Economics Foundation 2017; Sustain 2017; Monbiot et al. 2019:69). Moreover, as the UK government had decided that landholdings under five hectares were ineligible for CAP subsidies, which tended to marginalise and "exclude small-scale, more progressive, agroecological farming initiatives" (local food campaigner), it was argued by several participants that any new subsidy system should be available to small-scale enterprises.

Some participants critically reflected upon the socioeconomic vulnerabilities that emerge at the state-corporate-market agri-food and land nexus (Marsden et al. 2019). One of these, a director of a permaculture organisation, commented: "I recognise that lots of landowners are not all huge aristocratic barons, but farmers in Northumberland who are averaging things like eight grand a year or something, they themselves are desperately victims of this [corporate food] system". A key point continuously made in this respect was that many farms would not survive without subsidies, with farmers working long hours, for low economic return. As explained by a representative of a Welsh Government sponsored body, "large numbers of farmers in Wales would not be profitable without subsidy and a large number of them may actually go out of business in the future if they don't receive that subsidy, that may lead to a fall in land prices, it may not, it depends how much you think land prices are driven by the residential market". What is apparent here is how government intervention, in the form of subsidies to protect farmers' livelihoods, operate in constant tension with neoliberal aspirations to release the economy from the constraints of regulation, reflecting a Polanyian (1944) double movement of agricultural capitalism.

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<sup>9</sup> See <https://farmssubsidy.org/EU/>.



Moving beyond ‘rural’ landscapes of agri-food systems, the use of interstitial urban spaces by activists and community groups to expand and pluralise food cultivation seeks to challenge the perception and practice of agricultural land use as a specifically rural activity. As a permaculturist described, while land prices in urbanised areas are high and insecure land tenure remains a key barrier to the expansion of urban agriculture projects, “we’ve got [urban] land which is often standing unused, and it is actually much easier to get [land] in urban as in rural areas, because a lot of it is owned by local authorities or people’s gardens”. In this context, civil society organisations focusing on collective agrarian relationships (for example, community gardens) tended to stress land’s *use value* (as opposed to its exchange value), whereby land was imbued with meaning through communal cultivation and care (regardless of who owns it). As a result, it was argued that “there might be some significant land-based opportunities if farming [policy] changes [...] [for the] thousands of acres of land that are under communal cultivation” (manager of a community gardening organisation). These opportunities were discussed in relation to greater recognition, policy support and funding to facilitate inclusive access to (‘urban’ and ‘rural’) land and other resources for regenerative models of community-focused and diversified agricultural practices that are absent from, or ignored by, traditionally formulated ‘agricultural policy’.

Despite such hopeful narratives of agri-food land possibilities, the majority of participants considered that Brexit would not alter unequal structural power relations bound up with concentrated land ownership or facilitate democratised land access. It was also highlighted that those with access to land may not engage with (overt) activism or campaigning because it could potentially compromise their (often precarious) tenure (small-scale farmer). Rather, several participants emphasised the ambiguous neoliberal populist ideology they associated with ‘Brexit’ (see Freeden 2017). Even those that campaigned for democratised food systems were sceptical about the prospect of any radical change or new land governance regimes resulting from Brexit, as can be seen in the following interview extract:

In England, so few people have any link to the land, so much of the population is urban that pressure to actually get a bit of land reform going is pretty weak, and

pretty niche unfortunately [...] it doesn't carry much traction [in England], whereas in Scotland it does, because it is so blatant and you have community buy-outs there. (sustainable food systems campaigner)

In relation to recent land reform in Scotland, several participants discussed that this had been driven by a distinct post-devolution social justice agenda in which the land question has been a central aspect of the Scottish National Party's political programme, rather than as a consequence of Brexit and opportunities for greater 'democratic control'<sup>10</sup> (see LRRG 2014; *Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act* 2015; *Land Reform (Scotland) Act* 2016). Indeed, there are very few examples of Brexit-related documents on food and farming that deal systematically with the complex issue of land ownership and tenure or outline opportunities for land reform (however, see Fairlie 2017 for a notable exception). This, we argue, reflects the deeply engrained social 'taboo' status that typically shrouds issues of landownership in everyday life and in political discussions (Blomley 2016) – and influences what forms of resistance (fail to) emerge to counter unjust and inequitable agricultural land relations.

### *3.2 Recognitional and Procedural (In)Justice: Knowledge, Power and Politics Shaping (Post-Brexit) Agri-food Policy*

One of the key areas of contestation related to post-Brexit agri-food policy concerned issues of *recognition* – both in terms of who is recognised as a legitimate actor or 'stakeholder' and what knowledge is drawn upon to shape or change policy. Several organisations were identified as particularly important in influencing government decision-making in relation to UK agricultural policy, most notably the National Farmers' Union (NFU) and the Country Land and Business Association<sup>11</sup> (CLA). The NFU is the UK's largest farming union which has over 55,000 members in England and Wales. Historically, the NFU played a key role shaping the 1947 *Agriculture Act* (which guaranteed prices for farmers) and positioned itself as a powerful lobbying organisation representing mainstream agricultural interests (Tichelar

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<sup>10</sup> The people of Scotland voted decisively (62 percent) to remain in the EU.

<sup>11</sup> A membership organisation for owners of land, property and businesses in rural England and Wales, which currently has over 33,000 members.

2019). This has continued and even intensified during Brexit, with some actors' part of the 'alternative' food movement criticising the NFU's dominant position as "an unrivalled voice on the political stage" (NFU 2021) for adversely impacting on how and what (food system) change could be pursued and by whom. For those involved in the 'conventional' agri-food system, the work of the NFU, and other dominant food and farming organisations, was discussed as vital for promoting their sectoral interests and ensuring their collective voice was heard within a complex governance landscape. This work drew upon well-established pathways of communication and a wealth of accumulated, detailed knowledge of the agri-food landscape, with a NFU trade advisor commenting that: "obviously, we've been lobbying the government, meeting with MPs and conducting various campaigns".

The differential capacities, resources and unequal power relations that permeate the agri-food system and the various vested interests that work to reinforce the current market-based, corporate food regime were key issues discussed by small-scale farmers and alternative food organisations adopting a food sovereignty framework. The LWA<sup>12</sup>, for example, was identified by several participants as an important collective advocating for low-impact, agroecological practices. As one described, "the reason I got involved in the LWA is that I think we don't really have a strong voice for small-scale [...] more local farming in the UK" (small-scale farmer). Similarly, a CSA farmer argued, "the NFU on the whole does not represent the interests of small-scale farmers. [...] In a single sentence, why would the LWA come into being? The answer is because the NFU were not representing them. [...] if we rely on the NFU alone, I think that our voice would not be heard". This perceived lack of representation and recognition experienced by small-scale farmers within UK agriculture and the absence (or silencing) of their political voice in the context of powerful lobbying organisations, reflects the 'ordinary political injustices' that impede social participation (Fraser 2008).

The inequity of recognition and participation in relation to agri-food policy raises the critical question of (dis)empowerment; specifically, who can or is allowed to shape agri-food governance processes. For example, reflecting on their involvement in a national

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<sup>12</sup> A union of small-scale agroecological producers and traditional family farmers.

government consultation process, a Welsh upland farmer commented on the sectoral and spatial disparities that were evident in an agri-food stakeholder forum they attended:

I went to a Defra<sup>13</sup> event three years ago about the future of farming. There were about 60 people there. There was one livestock farmer and one vegetable grower and I was really shocked by that. [...] Defra thinks the future of farming is all about grain production in the south-east of England and they were the people who were represented.

This highlights how power over decision-making processes and narratives by those in privileged policy positions shape what knowledge is legitimised, which regional issues are validated and how farming is perceived within governance deliberations. Tenant farmers discussed their position as particularly vulnerable and articulated feelings of insecurity in relation to post-Brexit agricultural policy. It was expressed that existing restrictions on (frequently short-term) tenancy agreements could impede the adoption of new ‘public funds for public goods’ farm diversification schemes. As a Welsh hill farmer, who is part of the Tenant Farmers’ Association, mentioned:

most tenancy agreements say that the primary purpose of the land is agriculture. But if you do anything else, that’s diversification, that’s a change of use and you’d be breaking your tenancy agreement. [...] they [landowners] do usually give permission, but very often they want an increase in the rent to cover that money you’re getting, completely forgetting that it is income forgone; it’s not actual money at all. It’s a disincentive for tenants to even try and do it.

While tenant farmers are a heterogeneous group – with their experiences shaped by different types of tenancy agreements, landlord-tenant relationships and socio-spatial locations – as highlighted above, it is difficult to engender change and reconfigure socio-ecological relations *in practice* when significant power lies in the hands of landowners,

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<sup>13</sup> Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

rather than those who actually work on the land. Thus, improving the rights and security of tenant farmers was viewed as an important step in any post-Brexit agri-food policy.

A key theme that united diverse ‘conventional’ and ‘alternative’ agricultural interests was their concern over the perceived marginal position farming occupies in mainstream politics and broader policy processes, which some participants explained in capital-centric terms – that is, in relation to the relatively small contribution agriculture makes to national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (0.6%). Similarly, it was highlighted that the ostensible preoccupation of public policy on *economic* outcomes (including GDP growth) ultimately squeezes out space for ‘alternative’ understandings of a ‘successful’ food and farming system. Current and future trade negotiations and deals will likely complicate the post-Brexit governance landscape<sup>14</sup>, and it was feared by some participants that food and farming would be “traded off” (land activist) as part of other deals. As a sustainable food campaigner remarked:

whose got what interest in happening after Brexit? [...] Trade deals are about power. They are not anything else except naked power used to promote national economic interest. [...] The huge danger is that food and farming will be one of the things that gets sold off in these deals.

While all participants agreed that farming should be given greater attention by political actors and institutions, their vision of what agriculture should look like and the agenda utilised to achieve it differed dramatically. Dominant mainstream organisations stressed the importance of advocating for the “best deal for agriculture” (farming union representative) which for them would be achieved through a corporatized agribusiness model based on

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<sup>14</sup> The Government announced on 15 June 2021 that a UK-Australia free trade agreement had been reached – the first ‘new’ UK trade deal since Brexit and is likely to set the precedent for future trade deals. In response, food, farming and animal welfare groups have expressed concern that the agreement will adversely affect UK agriculture in which tariffs and quotas for Australian agri-food imports will be phased out over 15 years. For example, the NFU stated that it feared large-scale trade liberalisation and a significant increase in imports from Australia, which can be produced on a larger scale and can use products banned in the UK, could undercut UK farmers (particularly in sectors such as beef, lamb and sugar) and undermine high animal welfare standards (see Webb 2021 for an overview).

continued subsidy support to protect against economic turbulence and increased opportunities for expanding the market (both domestically and internationally) for British produce. Significant resources were viewed as being directed to harnessing public support for the agricultural sector with one participant suggesting that “we’re also doing a lot of public-facing campaigns to get people to recognise what we’re doing [farming] is important [...] why people should get behind us” (NFU Cymru representative). In contrast, several members of civil society organisations involved with social movements and grassroots community groups felt excluded from mainstream post-Brexit agri-food decision-making processes, although their work was widely recognised in shaping alternative agri-food public discourses. As an anti-GMO campaigner stated:

The ones who are really driving that [post-Brexit food policy] debate are NGOs, campaigners, activists and educators. [...] More than ever it’s a necessity that we all contribute where we can because all around us there are these examples of inadequacy in Government and the market place. Civil society organisations, both big and small, and individual campaigners help address these inadequacies.

As a consequence, many participants pointed towards the necessity to expand and deepen deliberation, dialogue and debate on food and agricultural governance beyond the ‘usual suspects’ to meaningfully include diverse groups and actors and incorporate varied embodied knowledge to shape food, land and agricultural policy. Pertinently, however, participants rarely articulated the inclusion of agri-food workers or labour rights in these debates. We argue that the invisibility and lack of political representation of *migrant* workers, in particular, reflects the continuing depiction of the bucolic ‘rural idyll’ (Newby 1979) – the enduring green and pleasant land imaginary entangling assumptions over whiteness, belonging and Britishness across ruralised landscapes. This imaginary effaces rural racism and exploitative agricultural labour geographies and actively works against creating space for contestation within formalised agri-food governance spaces.

### *3.3 The Interplay Between Distributive, Recognitional and Procedural (In)Justice in Post-Brexit “Public Goods” Agricultural Policy*

Competing visions of how farming *should be* supported post-Brexit emerged in relation to the policy idea of ‘public money for public goods’, and how this could be operationalised in practice to replace the EU CAP system of direct payments<sup>15</sup>. Given that agricultural policy is a devolved competency in the UK, the Agriculture Bill refers primarily to England (Defra 2020), although ‘public money for public goods’ schemes are being advanced by the devolved administrations (see, for example, Welsh Government 2018). The term ‘public goods’ tends to refer to goods that are both non-excludable and non-rivalrous. However, this narrow economic meaning was questioned by a number of participants. A practitioner from one environmental organisation made the following comment:

while there is a broader acceptance of the wording, the mantra; ‘public money for public goods’, the difficulty is, of course, that you then argue about what’s a public good? [...] in fact, we have been arguing about this for years [...] we are still at the level of trying to decide what the overarching principles are.

Other stakeholders argued that this uncertainty was primarily a consequence of people holding diverse perceptions of what constitutes a valid ‘public good’, which is further complicated when brought into the highly contested realm of agri-food systems<sup>16</sup>. Indeed, this speaks to the justice dimensions of voice and access – who has a say in defining what public goods are, how are they operationalised and who benefits? Discursive contestations were evident across the interviewee narratives where participants tended to discuss ‘public goods’ in a broad, ambiguous manner, and mainly in relation to the sustainable *management* of natural resources, particularly “carbon sequestration, clean air and water quality” (environmental campaigning organisation), somewhat reflecting the vague manner in which public goods are discussed in the Agriculture Bill.

Our research reveals that the term ‘public goods’ currently acts as a (de-politicising) ‘consensus frame’ whereby different agri-food stakeholders utilise the concept in divergent ways to support their particular agendas. For example, the centre-right think-tank, Policy

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<sup>15</sup> To be phased out from 2021 over a seven-year transition period.

<sup>16</sup> The first agricultural ‘public goods’ policy to be enacted in the UK was via the 1991 Stewardship Scheme.

Exchange (2017), focus on ecosystem services as ‘public goods’ as a route to economic competitiveness whereas the National Trust (2016) – a conservation charity and large landowner – highlights the intrinsic value of nature as a ‘public good’. It was claimed by some participants that understanding ‘land’ itself as a public good would be a radical departure from the dominant neoliberal conceptualisation of it “being a private commodity” (food and farming campaigning charity). Others stated that private interests and siloed ways of working could, in turn, impede post-Brexit collaborative governance and landscape-wide interventions and, therefore, “fail to foster public goods such as healthy ecosystems” (environmental activist). Consequently, the nebulous meaning of ‘public goods’ arguably acts to obfuscate important disagreement and different visions of (future) agri-food policy across diverse stakeholders.

One of the major disagreements that emerged from our interviews relates to the notion of *food* as a ‘public good’. Some participants considered that food was different from other commodities given its centrality to human existence and therefore articulated *food as a right* and discussed their vision for democratising access to healthy and sustainable food as “a common public good” (Scottish food justice organisation). A further issue in relation to the contested notion of food as a ‘public good’ emerged in relation to ethical and moral framings. While animal welfare is considered in post-Brexit agri-food policy (see Defra 2018a:43) – which aligns with the commitment outlined in the 25 Year Environment Plan (HM Government 2018) of reducing endemic disease – complex moral and more-than-human justice considerations remain notably underdeveloped. For example, a practitioner from a vegan NGO observed the lack of visibility of meaningful discussion of more-than-human co-agency – or in Haraway’s (2018) terms, multispecies justice – and stated: “our question is, whether you can ever say that animal farming is a public good, given its environmental impact”.

From the perspectives of other participants, food cannot be defined as a public good in technical terms because it is based on privatised consumption, as was illustrated by a representative from an environmental coalition organisation who commented that: “public goods are not food, which is a commercial product which can be sold, but good soil quality, water quality, decent habitats for biodiversity, those sorts of ecosystem services that you



can't pay for in a commercial market [are]". The market-based narrative of 'nature' as a public good in the form of an 'ecosystem service' (with *economic* value) being mobilised by the government and some stakeholders acts to instrumentalise nature as a tool at our disposal, and represents a capitalist socioecological 'fix' that attempts to solve the agri-food and climate crisis through a neoliberal natural capital-based process of ecosystem value accounting and assessment (see the Dasgupta Review 2021 for a discussion of the economics of biodiversity).

As an environmental campaigner reasoned, it is understandable that environmental organisations and conservation charities have embraced the 'public goods' thesis as a way to "harness support and funding for conservation and preservation activities" that are devalued in neoproductivist agricultural regimes. Yet, a distinct environmental discourse based on a nature-culture dualism implicitly underpinned many of the interview narratives of environmental organisations, whereby nature was viewed as being damaged, threatened by, or lost to, human (agricultural) actions. While we do not want to question the devastating ecological impacts of intensive agricultural practices, we do want to suggest that this narrative frequently translated into a desire to limit public spending to only support practices considered capable of "restoring nature" and the services it provides (that is, 'pure' public goods such as carbon sequestration) through natural capital accounting – in order to "value the undervalued" (Welsh environmental organisation). These narratives fail to focus on developing holistic, systemically interconnected sustainable 'public goods' through reconfigured human-environmental relations (for example, via a commitment towards socioecological justice and sustainability to create equitable agrarian livelihoods and healthy ecosystems in which they are embedded).

Referring to the Agriculture Bill, several participants argued that there was inadequate focus on sustainable agroecological food production and no coverage of public health, culturally-appropriate sustainable diets or food sovereignty. Thus, some claimed that the dominant focus on environmental 'public goods' within agricultural policy ultimately detracted emphasis away from domestic sustainable food production, as can be seen in the following comment from a farmer and land rights campaigner:

what seems to be happening is that the funding is almost completely for public goods, so environmental benefits and so forth, and very little attention is paid to maintaining food production, which in turn implies or suggests that food production is increasingly outsourced and we end up importing more food. [...] what it basically means is that we are outsourcing our environmental impacts to somewhere else.

This, we argue, reflects a longer process that can be traced back to the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 that put in motion the pervasive and enduring belief that the UK can be ‘food secure’ simply by importing food, based on the (ab)use of the land and labour of distant others. While acknowledging the positive focus on environmental land management within the UK Government’s post-Brexit agri-food discourse, the main criticism asserted by many interviewees (from across the ‘conventional’ and ‘alternative’ food sectors) related to the failure to place the *entire food system* at the centre of policy. In short, and rather ironically, it was continuously pointed out that ‘food’ was absent from the Agriculture Bill, reanimating old concerns over the lack of an integrated, holistic food policy for the UK. As a grassroots food policy campaigner stated, “the plans for England are all about paying farmers for ecological services and I don’t think there’s anything there about paying them for producing healthy food, because the idea is that the market takes care of that, but I would argue that the market doesn’t”. In this regard, apprehension was expressed that the ‘public goods’ focus of agricultural policy would lead to paying farmers to produce (specific) environmental goods, but not “good food”, and therefore “reduce food security and the self-sufficiency of the UK” (food industry organisation) with negative impacts on community resilience, employment, the environment and climate change mitigation.

Observed through an agri-food justice lens, it is clear that the dominant market-based, ecosystem services ‘public goods’ approach does not provide any meaningfully transformative avenues to foster sustainable and equitable food systems, given that unsustainable, intensive, environmentally-damaging agriculture can be subsidised through the (proposed) new funding system. This is evidenced clearly in the Agriculture Bill (2020) which states that financial assistance may be given by the Secretary of State for “starting, or improving the *productivity* of, an agricultural, horticultural or forestry activity” (Section 2(a); emphasis added). In this context, the corporate-legal-financial nexus of the agri-food system

continues to promote intensified, environmentally harmful agricultural activities for private profit, rather than supporting sustainable, climate-resilient land use and management.

#### **4. Conclusion: Agriculture, Food, Land and (In)Justice in Complex Socioecological Worlds**

In this paper we have argued that opening up the ‘black box’ of the politics of land in the UK is crucial to reconfiguring food systems governance in more just, equitable and socioecologically sustainable ways. While there is only limited engagement with food (in)justice in the UK context, there is even less consideration of land (in)justice, and how the two concepts inform each other in various socio-political contexts to determine the material and symbolic qualities of UK agri-food systems. We have proposed that a critical agri-food (in)justice lens is helpful in connecting issues of access, ownership, management and use of land and revealing the diverse contestations and struggles associated with the transformation of the physical *and* political post-Brexit agrarian landscape. Utilising this agri-food (in)justice lens also enables important questions to be raised about who has the right to define, participate, change and shape agri-food spaces and policy. More specifically, it reignites longstanding questions of what is land for, who decides and what is its relationship to food systems. This requires land to be explicitly understood as what it always has been – a relational site for political contestation and alternative (food) futures (Hill 1972; Chase 2010). Our research demonstrates, however, that heterogenous land histories are often overlooked, forgotten or ignored within Brexit-related discussions and food movement praxis, which signals the need to politicise alternative food and land futures, and nurture agri-food justice that addresses underlying systems of oppression.

Building on the foundational work of Kerssen and Brent (2017), we are clear that land justice alone is insufficient for addressing social and environmental concerns related to the agri-food system. That said, without land justice it is doubtful that food justice – or broader food system transformation – can be achieved (Borras et al. 2015). In this context, land justice is not a narrow, technical or singular call for equity in relation to (human) land access through land reform, but rather a deeper, holistic demand for distributive, participative and recognitional justice across a multitude of intersecting arenas of land, labour, capital and knowledge (Leslie 2019). Crucially, land justice demands ‘land’ to be understood and

approached *systemically*. It also requires innovative institutional arrangements that foster collective action by creating spaces for meaningful participation and co-learning at the *translocal landscape scale* (across the city and countryside) to deliver a broad range of social and environmental ‘public goods’ (beyond narrow neo-classical economic understandings of the term).

The dominant narrative emerging from post-Brexit agri-food policy (in England) is the proposed retrenchment of agricultural subsidies and the utilisation of a quasi-market-based environmental approach via the ‘public goods’ thesis (Defra 2018a) to promote multifunctional landscapes based on the idea of ecosystem services. Yet, ultimately, this approach neglects a range of important issues, such as sustainable food production, healthy diets, labour rights and the interests of smallholders and, notably, the underlying property relations that shape agricultural land use outcomes. Furthermore, the Agriculture Bill (2020) implicitly fragments and exports agri-environmental degradation, reflecting a longer historical trajectory of displacing responsibility for food production (and food security) to colonial spaces of Empire. Overall, bringing the problematic understanding of ‘the public’ together with the equally morally contested and contingent notion of ‘the good’ (and the deeply political ways it is deployed to support vested interests) demonstrates the contested terrain of agri-food land management governance. Indeed, the move towards a ‘public money for public goods’ framework poses the question of public goods for whom, defined by whom, and for what end?

If we understand ‘the public’ to be a heterogenous collective of people with intersectional difference(s), diverse needs and multiple entanglements with socionatures and multispecies worlds, then the agri-food justice lens adopted here makes clear that an understanding of the ‘public good’ should be orientated towards improving the well-being of unrecognised, overlooked and marginalised human and nonhuman agents. In short, under this normative approach, the goal of state interventions should be to address “remediable injustices” (Sen 2009:ix) and engender more sustainable human-environment relations and equitable agri-food systems. An agri-food justice approach highlights that this can be facilitated by, for example, progressing democratised land access, use and management for undervalued and excluded communities (such as low-income producers), and creating inclusive decision-

making processes that are sensitive to intersectional difference and experience to address interrelated land, climate and social injustice. Translating this into practice requires the far-reaching transformation of (currently siloed) institutional structures and regulatory frameworks, the rebalancing of power relations between actors and organisations, and embedding an intersectional approach into social, environmental and agri-food policy.

The way in which ‘public goods’ are framed in the Agriculture Bill, however, reinforces a narrow anthropocentric understanding of what constitutes both the ‘public’ and the ‘good’ that neglects our broader responsibilities to human and nonhuman flourishing in our entangled webs of co-existence. Moreover, the notion of ‘public goods’ as a policy instrument acts as a consensus frame which both depoliticises and dehistoricises manifold socioecological injustices embedded in the corporate-state-food system nexus and discursively crowds out space for consideration of alternative (land) futures and more ambitious change. Thus, we suggest that the notion of *socioecological justice* should replace the idea of (narrowly-defined) ‘public goods’ within agri-food policy in order to address (historically-embedded) distributive, recognitional and procedural forms of injustice. In particular, a socioecological justice approach would support sustainable livelihoods, culturally-appropriate healthy diets and ecological restoration across agri-food systems by tackling the root cause of inequality and oppression. In this context, we argue future research is required to critically examine the utilisation and implementation of the ‘public goods’ approach within post-Brexit UK agriculture in order to critically comprehend how this policy framework evolves, influences everyday socio-environmental relations and broader landscape processes, and, importantly, the ways in which it reinforces and/or addresses socioecological landscapes of injustice.

Across the interview narratives, there was little mention of the types of interventions required to facilitate more just agri-food outcomes *in practice*, particularly in relation to land justice. This is problematic given that pluralised democratic ownership, including cooperative, communal and localised systems of tenure and organisation are vital for creating social and physical infrastructures for just agri-food spaces, policies and practices (Kerssen and Brent 2017). This also has important practical implications for food movement praxis in the UK, which continues to give limited attention to tackling the *structural inequity*

*of land* for wider socioecological transformation<sup>17</sup>. We consider that recent policy developments and actions in Scotland on land reform and collective land ownership (along with the establishment of the Scottish Land Commission and the Scottish Land Fund) offer some hopeful possibilities for fairer land-based opportunities (and should be extended throughout the UK). Crucially, integrating the burgeoning Scottish land reform agenda more deeply with the food policy landscape (along with other interlinked issues such as climate change) would strengthen openings for (Scottish) agri-food justice. Here, we would also like to stress that, historically, political interest in land reform across the UK has fluctuated but it has proven very difficult to *materialise* (fiscal) policy changes to address systemic inequity in the structure of land ownership itself. In this sense, policy ‘solutions’ to deal with the volatility of agricultural and speculative investment in land more generally, such as a land value tax (see Monbiot et al. 2019), seem unlikely to emerge within the current political-economic context, particularly in England, where the idea of a ‘property-owning democracy’ remains dominant (Tichelar 2019). In this context, we suggest that land ownership must be recognised as a legitimate political issue and policy question related to multiple social and environmental issues.

As others have highlighted, given that the ownership of *agricultural* land is not currently a key political concern or area of scholarly investigation across the UK (and the global North more broadly), we argue that the intersection of, and contradictions between, socio-legal property relations and food system transformation efforts need to be placed much more prominently on the research agenda. Going forward, we consider that co-produced research between academics, activists, farmers, land managers, landowners and communities should engage with the politics of land to examine the drivers and consequences of agri-food injustice and also co-create new models of collective and democratic land use and governance (for example, drawing upon promising grassroots initiatives such as community land trusts – or CLTs<sup>18</sup>) in order to both better understand *and* address complex land and food justice questions.

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<sup>17</sup> However, see Land in Our Names (<https://landinournames.community/>) – an organisation working to explicitly address land injustice and “transform the narrative around land in Britain in how it relates to intersections of race, gender and class for systemic change”.

<sup>18</sup> CLTs are “democratic, non-profit organisations that own and develop land for the benefit of the community” (see <https://www.communitylandtrusts.org.uk/about-clts/what-is-a-community-land->

Finally, returning to the quotation that opened this paper, if land justice is to become the ‘unifying’ strategic force that Holt-Giménez and Williams (2017) emphasise as being vital for engendering inclusive and transformative social and ecological change, then we affirm that (food) movements, practitioners and policy actors must develop opportunities for collective learning, progressive alliance building and translocal strategies that challenge spatio-temporal injustices and unequal power relations at the land-food system nexus. In this sense, we can learn a great deal from (overlooked) *historical* expressions of working-class agrarianism (Hill 1972; Chase 2010) and the array of *contemporary* land-based struggles for change unfolding internationally which are advocating for equity across the axes of difference and working towards sustainable land relations under the auspices of food sovereignty (such as La Via Campesina). This will require the development of participative, reflexive and intersectional agri-food praxis in the UK, based on international solidarity and translocal dialogue that engages with land justice across academic, policy and social movement contexts. We suggest that this needs to be underpinned by a *collective responsibility* to develop sustainable agri-food systems that support planetary health and address the complex, embedded injustices within the relations between agriculture, food and land.

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[trust-clt/](#)). While CLTs have primarily focused on creating new affordable housing, there is significant potential for developing community-owned farms and food enterprises as collective assets for long-term social and environmental benefit (Ryan-Collins et al. 2017; Christophers 2018).

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