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Destabilizing the food regime “from within”: tools and strategies used by urban food policy actors

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Abstract

In the context of food transition studies scant attention has been given to the role of state authorities (be they local or national) in destabilizing the dominant food regime. Specifically, little is known about how state-based regime actors use the power at their disposal to bring about change “from within”. Using a political economy approach and data from qualitative research with local government actors in 10 European cities, this paper explores the different power instruments utilized by (local) government authorities to undermine the material, organizational and discursive base of the (conventional) agri-food regime. What emerges from our research is that local authorities have used a mix of discursive, material and organizational tools to alter the dominant narrative around food and have reoriented material resources towards activities that support a new approach to food. Obstacles in this transition pathway lie in ensuring internal coordination within cities and vertical alliances with higher administrative levels.

Key words: food transitions; urban food; regime; food systems transformation; power

1. Introduction

In the context of the persistent incapacity of the current food system to deliver healthy diets, environmental benefits and equity for all its actors, calls for a “great food system transformation” have increased over recent years (IPES, 2016; Willett et al, 2019). While a number of scholars and practitioners observed the unfolding of the COVID crisis with the (not-so-hidden) hope that it would represent the opportunity to bring about such a change, many noted how in fact the crisis was leading to a further strengthening of the dominant corporate food regime (Clapp and Moseley, 2020; Van der Ploeg, 2020). The need for food system transformation is thus still firmly on the global agenda – as the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit illustrates - although what exactly is meant by “transformation” and how to get there are still matters of intense debate and contestation.

A conceptual framework widely used to make sense of systems transformation is sustainability transitions (ST). This refers to the long-term, multidimensional and fundamental transformation processes through which established socio-technical systems shift to more sustainable modes of production and consumption (Markard et al., 2012). Given its initial focus on the role of technological innovations in bringing about broad systemic shifts, the early work on ST concentrated on the energy and transport systems, and it is only in the last ten years that ST analysis has turned its attention to food systems (Hinrichs, 2014: El Bilali, 2019). This work on food systems transformation has largely followed the multi-level perspective (MLP) (El Bilali, 2019) - one of the main orientations in ST research and the “boldest in hypothesizing trajectories of change” (Patterson et al, 2017:9).

While much research on food systems transformation has focused on the role of niches – such as those issuing from Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) – or on the interplay between niche and regime in bringing about transformation (Ingram, 2015; Bui et al, 2016), less has been written on the role that specific food regime actors play in introducing novelties and in destabilizing the dominant food regime (although see important recent studies by De Herder et al., 2020; Hacker and Bintz, 2021; Runhaar et al. , 2020; Van Oers et al., 2020). At the same time, while some research has been carried out on the role of incumbents in moving towards more sustainable practices (Turnheim and Geels, 2012; Hoes et al, 2016; Mori, 2021), it has tended to focus on the industrial sector. In line with calls to provide a deeper examination of issues of power and politics in fashioning transition pathways (Meadowcroft, 2011; Geels, 2014), this paper aims to explore how local government actors (as part of the dominant (agri-food) power block) introduce innovations and unsettle the dominant regime “from within”. In doing so, the paper examines the mix of power instruments and strategies – and the limits thereof – utilized by government actors to engender change. Building on the wealth of research carried out in the past decade on urban food systems, the paper focuses on *municipal* government actors in an effort to

facilitate engagement with the emerging geography of sustainability transitions literature, which aims to "better incorporate space, place and scale into transition studies" (Truffer et al, 2015:65).

The paper is structured around the following sections. The next section provides a critical review of existing transition literature on the nature of the regime and on the role of actors therein and then develops exploratory linkages with the urban food systems literature. Section three of the paper sets out the nature of the research and its associated methodological and analytical approaches. Drawing on local level qualitative data, section four examines how local government actors in 10 European cities committed to sustainable food systems have mobilized different types of power instruments to destabilize the dominant industrial food regime. In dialogue with ongoing debates on the nature and role of the regime in advancing (or blocking) transitions, the discussion section of the paper reflects on the innovation potential of regime actors and what this implies for enhancing understanding of their role in the broader ecology of transition. It also considers the specificities of local actors and their ability to contribute to larger socio-technical regime shifts within the "boundaries" of their local remit.

2. (Food) regime actors as drivers of change

2.1. Reconceptualizing the regime as a locus of change

Drawing from different disciplinary strands, such as technological studies, institutional analysis and complex systems, the multi-level perspective (MLP) defines transition as a socio-technical regime shift that occurs as a result of the dynamic interaction between three heuristically distinguished levels: niches, regimes and the socio-technical landscape (Geels, 2011). While the niche is seen as the locus of innovation, the socio-technical regime refers to the established practices and associated rules that stabilize existing systems (Geels, 2011); it comprises the network of actors, material and technical elements, as well as the formal and informal rules, that are needed to maintain the dominant system in place. The way social and political institutions and material resources interact and co-evolve within the regime often leads to path dependencies and "lock-ins" that maintain dominant technologies and practices in place (Smith et al., 2005). The socio-technical landscape represents the broader exogenous backdrop and includes the bio-physical and environmental contexts, such as climate change, cultural and societal values, legal and regulatory frameworks, accidents and economic crises (Geels et al, 2016). The MLP posits that changes at the landscape level exert pressure on the incumbent regime, leading to its destabilization. Transitions take place when niche innovations are mature enough to generate an internal momentum that can take advantage of the regime's instability and alter the overall configuration of the system (Geels, 2011).

While the MLP has been commended for both its novelty and breadth, it has been criticized for placing too much emphasis on the role of niches as the principal locus for regime change and for its inclination to present socio-technical regimes as homogeneous and monolithic (Berkhout et al, 2004; Smith et al, 2005; Geels and Schot, 2007; Geels, 2011). In other words, "there has been a tendency to neglect a more endogenous conceptualization of change, i.e. a change from '*within*' the regime" (Runhaar et al, 2020: 138). A number of studies have since taken a closer look at the nature of the regime and its internal dynamics (Diaz et al., 2013; Geels et al, 2016; van Welie et al, 2018; Normann, 2019). A fruitful line of research has focused on gaining a better understanding of socio-technical regimes by using institutional theory. Seminal work by Fuenfschilling and Truffer (2014) shows how a socio-technical regime may include different institutional sector "logics" - i.e., norms, beliefs, values and practices that shape actor cognition and behavior, which may be internally complementary or contradictory. This leads to a spectrum of "types" of regimes – from weak to strong – depending on the internal coherence and stability of the different "logics" (see Hacker and Binz, 2021, for a typology of regimes). It is also suggested that, in most empirical cases, socio-technical regimes appear as "semi-coherent" -- i.e., characterized by a certain level of "contradictions and cracks that can allow for some

change" (El Bilali, 2019:9). Authors have pointed out that it is precisely this "semi-coherence" (i.e., the coexistence of different - and to varying degrees conflicting - logics within a regime) that allows for a transition to take place (Runhaar et al, 2020; De Herde et al, 2020; Hacker and Binz, 2021).

Taking a more materialist and historical approach, a seminal piece of work by Geels and Turnheim (2012) examined incumbent industry's reactions to a series of external and internal pressures. Borrowing from an analysis of the coal industry regime, they describe destabilization as "the process of weakening the reproduction of core regime elements" (ibid, p.35), where the reproduction of elements is ensured by an endogenous commitment and confidence in the regime's viability, a regular flow of material resources and the cultural legitimacy of the regime in the eyes of the wider public. Destabilization is thus a multi-dimensional process that results from "a weakening flow of resources, decreasing public legitimacy and eroding endogenous commitment" (ibid., p.36). In an attempt to overturn the classical MLP assumption that the destabilization of the regime occurs "along the way" (Van Oers et al, 2021:161), recent research has focused more strongly on the role of agency and "intentional actions that may unsettle the stability of regimes" (ibid:161), with an explicit focus on the governance of destabilization. The focus here has been on public "phase out" policies, i.e. a mix of deliberate policies aimed at supporting new industries while at the same time weakening or discouraging the use of practices and technologies used by incumbent industries (Kivimaa and Kern, 2016; Davidson, 2019). While the above have all represented steps towards a better understanding of the role of the regime in encouraging change, it has been suggested that limited attention has been placed on interest, asymmetries of power and the political nature of governance strategies (Meadowcroft, 2011; Avelino et al, 2017; Stirling, 2019). In recognizing how destabilization relies upon (and is shaped by) political and economic interests (Van Oers et al, 2021), such an approach acknowledges that certain actors within a regime (typically large industrial actors and the government) have more power than others; it also allows for actors' relative power to be mapped and the strategies employed to promote or resist change to be analyzed (Normann, 2019; Van Oers, 2021).

2.2 The agri-food regime: stability and contradictions

In the food realm, such an approach has been fundamental in defining the nature and the contours of the agri-food regime. A historical analysis of the accumulation of capital in the agri-food sector shows how the global food system has been ordered by specific rules and structures founded on principles of standardization and industrialization that govern the food system on a global scale. While historically it was the large colonial powers of the 19th century that shaped the structures of the fledgling capitalist agri-food regime, the major contemporary players are the large food corporations; hence, the birth of the term "corporate food regime" (McMichael, 2009). Two important aspects of the food order dominate globally: first, the dominant productivist values – or "logic" – that underlie its dynamics; and second, the way in which this global order shapes dominant food systems at the national, regional and local levels (McMichael, 2009; Clapp, 2018). As recent food transition literature has highlighted (Feola, 2020; Korestakaya and Feola, 2020), the dominant food regime is a manifestation of capitalism, and just as "capitalism rests on state structures (nationally and *at lower administrative levels*) that participate in its reproduction" (Korestakaya and Feola, 2020: 305, our italics), state authorities are key players in the dominant agri-food regime thanks to their regulatory and political legitimation powers. There is, therefore, as neo-Gramscian and elite theories of power highlight (Levy and Newell, 2002; Newell, 2019), a powerful agri-food block, made up of corporate elites in the agri-food sector, which use a series of strategies to create close ties with key (national and local) government authorities with the aim to protect the existing power block (Clapp and Fuchs, 2009). The stability and sources of power of such a block lie in its control of the material (mostly economic and financial) bases of power, but also in the capacity of powerful actors to influence and modify the underlying values and narratives around what constitutes "good food".

Studies on food transition have suffered from the same compartmentalized and static view of both regimes and niches as general transition studies. Niches – most commonly discussed in relation to alternative food networks (AFNs) - are viewed as the locus where innovative, sustainable practices are established, whether at the level of the farm (with the use of organic or agro-ecological methods) or in terms of rural-urban linkages, with the construction of new "quality conventions" – or institutional "logics" - between consumers and producers built on trust and place (Murdoch et al, 2000; Runhaar et al, 2020). The dominant industrial food regime, by contrast, is depicted as hindering the development of niche alternatives (El Bilali, 2019). The rigid dichotomy between AFNs and the industrial agri-food regime has been criticized (Brunori et al, 2020), and research on the dominant agri-food regime has depicted it as a heterogeneous entity, with its different (social and technical) components operating in different interdependent sub-regimes (Smith et al., 2005). Furthermore, it has been shown how organizations and individuals who do not necessarily adhere to the tenets of industrial agriculture may form sub-groups that champion different visions of the food system (Ingram, 2015).

The above critiques bring to the fore, once again, the role of actors, and specifically those who wield a certain power within regimes, as agents of change. A specific strand of work on the role of transition intermediaries as actors who catalyze change towards more sustainable systems potentially offers a fruitful research arena within which to explore the role of regime actors, and specifically government actors, in contributing to change within a broader "ecology of intermediaries". In a recent systematic review of transition intermediaries, Kivimaa et al. (2019:1070) propose a typology of "regime-based transition intermediaries", which they describe as "being part of the established institutions in the prevailing socio-technical regime yet inclined or mandated to work towards transformative change".

Within this line of research, and following on from calls to better understand the role that governments can play in avoiding forms of cooptation and in supporting spaces of alterity (Newell, 2019; Feola, 2020; Van Oers et al, 2021), this paper focuses on the role of government actors in doing so, and on the tools and strategies employed beyond formal policy development. In other words, while attention has been paid to the power instruments incumbent industry actors have used to *maintain* the status quo (see for eg. Geels 2014), this paper analyzes the power instruments that an equally powerful actor - (local) government – can and does utilize in an effort to destabilize the dominant regime.

2.3 The relevance of urban food systems

Faced with national governments that have largely failed to introduce the necessary changes to transition towards more sustainable food systems (Lang et al., 2009), since the mid-2000s a growing number of municipal governments have reinvented themselves as food system innovators (Sonnino, 2016; see also Candel, 2014; Cohen and Ilieva, 2015). Several recent studies have taken stock of the contribution of urban municipalities to the delivery of more secure, healthier and sustainable local food systems (Sonnino et al., 2019; Filippini et al, 2019; Doernberg et al., 2019). While all underscore the difficulties that cities face in adopting a systemic approach to food, there is a recognition of their key role in fostering participatory food governance structures, whether formal or informal, that aim to enhance multi-stakeholder involvement. In introducing ideas of "localism" to food system transformation cities have been anything other than regressive or inward-looking, as they have looked to develop innovative spatial food plans that connect cities with their regions. More than that perhaps, "cities see themselves as pioneers of a wider food system change […] a model of how targeted local action can support large scale improvements" (Sonnino, 2016: 194).

Within the wider context of research on urban food strategies, special – albeit limited - attention has been given to the policy instruments used by local governments to enable the delivery and development of innovative urban food policies. A number of studies have analyzed specific policy instruments, such as public procurement, spatial planning for urban agriculture and informational campaigns (Morgan and Sonnino, 2013; IPES, 2017), while others have taken a more holistic approach and analyzed the full set of urban policy

instruments required to advance sustainable food systems (Doernberg et al., 2019). In examining policy processes, however, none has focused on the specific role of power in contributing to drive food policy forward (IPES, 2017).

Taking a political economy approach to destabilization and urban food research, this paper aims to provide a detailed exploration of how local government actors use the power instruments at their disposal to introduce changes "from within" and thus contribute to the destabilization of the dominant food regime. In defining regime stability we borrow from neo-Gramscian theories of power, whereby the stability of historical power blocks comes from the "alignment of material, organizational and discursive formations which stabilize and reproduce relations of production and meaning" (Levy and Newell, 2002: 87), and we consider the power instruments (local) government authorities use to undermine the stability -- i.e., the material, organizational and discursive base of the (conventional, industrial) agri-food regime. Drawing from institutional theory we explore which new "logics" that rest on values of sustainability are introduced to disrupt the dominant narrative, whether they are accompanied by new material and organizational formations, and, if so, which instruments are used to introduce and stabilize them.

For the purposes of this paper, the types of power instruments utilized by local authorities - as entities holding sovereign power and legitimacy within the formal structures of state authority – have been subdivided into their material, organizational, and discursive (or ideational) components (Levy and Newell, 2002; Scott, 2013; Newell, 2019). Material power refers to the resources that formal authorities can use to constrain or, in this case, encourage behavioral change – such as funding, personnel and municipally-owned infrastructure. Organizational power refers to the capacity of those in formal structures of authority, such as local policy makers, to open up the decision-making process to entities that lie outside such formal structures, whether more "radical" such as social movements, or more institutionalized, such as farmers' unions (Scott, 2001; Levy and Newell, 2002). Discursive power refers to the capacity to shape shared cognitive meanings and value commitments through norms – such as planning regulations and procurement rules - and bodies of knowledge (Scott, 2001). In terms of the latter, the high levels of legitimacy of local state authorities means that they are awarded considerable trust by a wide range of groups. Discursive power also includes the power to shape what is being discussed - i.e., to set agendas and to frame problems (diagnostic framing) as well as solutions (prognostic framing) (Geels, 2014). Actors' values and ideas underlie the way that issues are framed and, in turn, shape possible solutions and the range of alternatives (Kern and Rogge, 2018).

3. Methodology

The evidence for this paper was collected as part of an EU-funded project that is working with 10 European cities (Bergamo, Birmingham, Bordeaux, Copenhagen, Funchal, Grenoble, Groningen, Milan, Thessaloniki and Warsaw) that have expressed a strong commitment to developing more sustainable local food systems. These cities are also signatories of the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFPP), an international voluntary agreement established in 2015 that involves urban mayors and their local administrations committing to "work to develop sustainable food systems that are inclusive, resilient, safe and diverse". What follows from these points is that the local authorities in these 10 cities are keen to initiate actions that will destabilize the dominant conventional food regime.

The lead actors of the project are the local authorities, and specifically those departments/offices within the municipality responsible for the implementation of the project (see column 2 of Table 1 below). A questionnaire survey and a series of focus group discussions were organized with these actors to examine the underlying "logic" that governs their practices in designing the contours of a new food regime, the instruments of power used to do so and the opportunities and limits faced by local authorities in using them. In March 2021, a questionnaire designed to collect information on the best sustainable food practices undertaken by the

cities in the last 3-5 years was completed by all cities. In defining sustainable food practices, cities were asked to reflect on the pillars of sustainability their practices were contributing to (or which environmental, social and/or economic benefits they were producing or intending to produce). In the context of a conventional food regime that, on the grounds of global comparative advantage, has discouraged the construction of local and territorial approaches, they were also asked whether any emphasis was being placed on strengthening local rural-urban linkages. In line with calls for social sustainability, questions were also inserted designed to gauge the extent to which authorities were trying to improve stakeholder inclusion. The responses to the open-ended questions included in the questionnaire were coded based on the type of power instruments used, so as to understand which strategies had been used by cities to shift the urban food system towards a more sustainable pathway, and which instruments (or group of instruments) had been used for which end.

To complement this data with an indication of the challenges that the policy makers had faced in devising such tools, and the opportunities that their specific contextual situation had presented them with, nine focus group discussions were organized between March and May 2021 with these same actors. The guiding questions were also made up of a series of open-ended questions and were coded using the same matrix as the survey. In order to guarantee the anonymity of individual officers within the case-study local authorities, reference will only be made to the name of the city when referring to research materials in the next section.

4. The contribution of (local) government authorities to the destabilization of urban food regimes

4.1 Overview and commitment to sustainable food

Reflecting insights from the literature on urban food systems, the cities in our sample show a strong commitment towards reconfiguring their food systems around the principles of sustainability. Table 1 below displays those practices chosen by the cities that best illustrate their efforts to steer the cities' food regime towards a more sustainable pathway in the last 3-5 years. Thematically speaking, the practices range from food aid/emergency, urban gardens, food governance, short supply chain logistics and school food procurement. The strategy most frequently employed has been that of using a combination of material and discursive power tools; as we shall see below in more detail, the different forms of power are not rigidly separate and some forms of power support one another, as in the case of buttressing norms with key resources. Organizational power has been used more sparsely, probably because cities are only beginning to invest in inclusive strategies and because, politically speaking, such an approach is more difficult to introduce.

As mentioned above, all the cities are signatories of the MUFPP and several have tried to develop holistic and integrated food strategies and governance mechanisms: Bergamo and Bordeaux, for example, have set up Food Policy Councils[1], while Milan and Copenhagen have developed an urban food policy/strategy and Birmingham is in the process of doing so. During the focus group discussions, local authorities displayed a strong sense of political will to bring about a "fundamental change" and to "think in a completely different way rather than tinkering around the edges" (Birmingham). Some public actors, like those in Birmingham and Groningen, see themselves as promoters of deep changes and are ambitious in their desire to fundamentally change the food system:

> *Brexit is for us a threat but also an amazing opportunity in that food imports have been disrupted at the moment, so it opens up a window for a completely different conversation. But obviously it's about being*

[1] In the context of a growing demand for transparency and inclusiveness in food systems governance, a large number of cities and regions, especially in North America and Europe, have formed Food Policy Councils (FPCs) or similar governance structures, such as multi-stakeholder food forums/platforms, food policy networks, food boards and food coalitions, which are designed to actively involve civil society representatives in the food policy arena.

quick and being part of this space, and bringing in the carbon reduction targets onto the table (Birmingham).

It is hard to get people to eat more plant-based food. We are teaming up with our education institutes to find a way to convince people to eat more of these. […] It's a politically fiercely discussed issue as some say we should let people decide what to eat. But we decided to do that (Groningen).

Other cities discussed themselves more as catalysts of a process and as "facilitators of knowledge exchange among different sectors […] to help these different people work together" (Milan). In both cases, however, there is a sense of direction and a will to move – directly or in more incremental ways – from a conventional food system to one grounded in the principles of sustainability.

Table 1: Cities' best sustainable food practices and instruments of power used to develop the practices.

Cities	*Locus of Urban Food System presence*	*Best sustainable food practices*	*Main instrument of power used*		
			Material	*Discursive*	*Organizational*
Bergamo (Italy)	Mayor's office	Biodiversity Valley: part of a recovery project of a peri urban valley. Transformed into a section of the botanical gardens dedicated to conservation and education on biodiversity.	x (funds)	x (knowledge)	
		Agriculture and Right to Food Festival: an annual international event that brings together practitioners and academics working on urban food issues.	x (funds)	x (knowledge, expertise)	
Birmingham (UK)	Public Health Department	Emergency Food Response (in response to the pandemic) and ensuing new Emergency Food Plan	x (funds)	x (norms)	
		Food Conversation: activities aimed at listening to "Seldom Heard Voices". To be included in its "Healthier Food City Forum", which will shape the city's food strategy.		x (framing)	x
Bordeaux (Metropole) (FR)	Food Governance Officer in the Energy, Ecology and Sustainable Development Department	Food Policy Council - Consultative Council on Sustainable Food Governance (civil society, elected representatives, citizens).		x (framing)	x
		Sustainable public procurement: change in tenders to increase proportion of organic in school meals. Training of cooks.	x (funds, infrastructure)	x (norms, knowledge)	
Copenhagen (DK)	Public Procurement Department	Organic Conversion Project: 90% of school food is organic. Training of cooks in public kitchens.	x (funds, infrastructure)	x (norms, knowledge)	
		Copenhagen Food Strategy		x (norms)	
Funchal (PR)	Social Development Department	Municipal Allotments, Social Housing Neighbourhood Gardens and School Gardens	x (land)		
		COVID-19 Vital Baskets: weekly boxes of local fresh food for low-income families with recipes and healthy eating information.	x (funds)	x (knowledge)	
Grenoble (Metropole) (FR)	Environmental Services Department	Support to wholesale market (to encourage short supply chains).	x (infrastructure)		
		Creation of city farms and producer shops: change in planning rules and training on agro-ecology for new urban farmers.	x (funds)	x (norms, knowledge)	
Groningen (NL)	Social Development/Quality of Life Department	Urban farm: grows fresh food for the local food bank, employs vulnerable citizens	x (funds, land)		
		"Community Network": platform that provides information and a venue for dialogue and discussion between actors from across the food chain	x (funds)		x

Milan (IT)	Food Policy Office	Food assessment: built the grounds for the development of the urban food policy. COVID 19 response: distribution of food boxes to vulnerable groups with locally procured food.		x (framing) x (norms)	
Thessaloniki (GR)	Department of Operations Planning and Development Monitoring	Thessaloniki Food Festival: a yearly event to promote local cuisine, local markets and food literacy. Urban vineyard: established on municipal land, open to schools and citizens.	x (land, funds)	x (knowledge)	
Warsaw (PL)	Economic Development Department	Warsaw Booster: urban incubator specifically earmarked for food retail start-ups committed to sustainable food.	x (funds)		

4.2 Leveraging material power

To reach their aims, local authorities have used a mix of material, discursive and organizational powers, although – as we shall see below - there have been barriers related to internal coordination and remit. Material forms of power – such as funding, infrastructure and land – have been deployed to open spaces for new ways of "doing" food. In Funchal and Thessaloniki, for example, urban gardens and vineyards have been developed on municipal land, while in the case of Groningen, the local authority has allowed local residents to use an urban farm to grow fresh food for the local food bank. In addition, Grenoble has provided substantial support to the wholesale market, which is considered a key public retail infrastructure to promote "local fruit and vegetable production and short supply chains".

Funding has been used extensively by public authorities to initiate a novel course of action or to strengthen newly adopted norms. Faced with the growing food insecurity arising from the COVID-19 crisis and with a view to tackle the problem through food distribution measures, for example, the municipality of Birmingham decided to fund FareShare, a food surplus charity, to purchase and redistribute food to vulnerable communities:

> *Funding FareShare (rather than a major food distributor) provides additional benefits to the network of community groups/charities that rely on this food. Some of these groups/charities turn this food into nourishing meals or sell it at very low cost through community pantries (Birmingham).*

The intent of Birmingham City Council (BCC) in doing so was that of challenging the dominant food narrative based on efficiency through the development of one based on equity and justice. Together with FareShare, BCC also commissioned TAWS (the Active Well Being Society) as the coordinator of the Food Justice Network. For BCC, the added value of working with FareShare and TAWS is that of ensuring an efficient, and above all, just redistribution of surplus food. In drafting its new Emergency Food Plan, BCC went one step further and gave further strength and "depth" to these underlying values by ensuring that, under the Plan, "food is purchased from local producers rather than the big chains", as is currently the practice for some food charities. A similar action – albeit in another thematic area - was carried out in Warsaw, where local level funds were used to modify the rules of an existing program so as to introduce an element of sustainability. "Warsaw booster" is the name of an urban food incubator that was created within the existing City Accelerator Program for start-ups, housed in the Economic Development Department. While the accelerator program had not initially intended to focus part of its actions on sustainable food, it is through the availability of funds specifically earmarked for encouraging the creation of urban food retail start-ups committed to sustainable food that this topic was introduced in the urban programme.

4.3 Discursive power: changing urban narratives around food

As democratically elected representatives in formal structures of state authority, local authorities have the power of establishing norms and regulations that rest on and, at the same time, strengthen specific assumptions and values. Examples are school food procurement regulations as modified in Copenhagen. Evocatively called the "organic conversion project", at the beginning of the 2000s the city changed its food procurement guidelines to ensure that 90 per cent of what is purchased with public funds is spent on organically grown food. To avoid an increase in the overall school food budget and to ensure alignment with the EAT-Lancet food guidelines[2], emphasis was placed on reducing quantities of meat and increasing those of vegetables.

[2] The EAT-Lancet reference diet was developed by the Lancet Commission (with funds from the EAT Foundation) in 2019 after years of research by a group of 37 world-leading scientists with an aim to develop global dietary guidelines that consider both health and environmental sustainability. It recommends a diet rich in fruits and vegetables, with protein and fats sourced mainly from plant-based foods and unsaturated oils from fish, and carbohydrates from whole grains (see Willett et al, 2019 for more details).

Importantly, the city confronted powerful actors in the dominant regime by initiating a "Market Dialogue" with key food supply chain actors, with a view to "forcing the wholesalers to acquire the products we needed as, when we started, there were few organic products on the market", thus influencing private actors to modify their production and distribution practices to satisfy the growing demand for organic products. After years of a different way of "doing" food, this has led to a further shift in values and heightened legitimacy, as evidenced by the growing demand for organic products registered since 2015 in the overall food service market, as well as the city's development of a new climate-based food strategy in 2019.

Another important set of regulations used by cities relates to urban planning. Grenoble authorities have used the city's master plan to protect peri-urban agricultural land threatened by growing rates of peri-urban construction and to support local food commercialization. Legal tools that have been utilised to this end include regulations that forbid construction on peri-urban agricultural land and allocate its use to new farmers as well as the signing of "environmental contracts" with them to incentivize the adoption of organic production methods. Beyond the farm gate, local authorities in Grenoble have taken advantage of the redesign of central neighbourhoods and used their planning powers to create producer shops where farmers can sell directly to urban consumers. Once again, the values underlying such measures run counter to the dominant food regime narrative of "food from nowhere" in the name of comparative advantage and economies of scale, proposing a "re-territorialization of the food system" that the municipality has been encouraging since 2010. These discursive strategies have been complemented and strengthened by material instruments, such as the refurbishment (or ex-novo construction) of buildings on the newly allocated lands to be used by the farmers, or the purchasing of agricultural processing equipment for farmers to add value to their products and help them to become more competitive vis-à-vis larger players.

Norms and regulations that govern crisis responses at the local level have been another area of regime destabilization. For example, both Milan and Funchal used the COVID-19 emergency response to refashion their urban foodscape around principles of solidarity and support to the local economy by favouring local producers. Specifically, using national funds earmarked for food distribution to vulnerable groups, city authorities in Milan modified the procedural rules governing the distribution of the food boxes to ensure that part of the food is procured from peri-urban farmers. In Funchal, the Vital Basket was re-designed in a such a way as to favour local farmers. Indeed, while the boxes were initially intended to be filled by products supplied at the wholesale market, local authorities decided to procure food from local farmers, thus "becoming a way for the municipality to support traders and producers and promote the consumption of local and seasonal products".

Explicit knowledge-related tools, such as cultural events and educational materials, were some of the discursive strategies used by the municipalities to propose a notion of food built upon sustainability values. Some of these were stand-alone and targeted all citizens, such as the yearly Thessaloniki Food Festival and the Biodiversity Valley in Bergamo -- a permanent section of the botanical gardens within the city dedicated to biodiversity and set up as a "demonstration that nature and the city can coexist". Other knowledge-related activities were aimed at strengthening normative actions, such as the training that often accompanies the introduction of new school menus (Copenhagen), the information about local farmers and suggested recipes that are distributed in food boxes (Funchal) or training on agro-ecology for new urban farmers (Grenoble). Copenhagen's organic conversion project included the comprehensive training of cooks in the 1000 public kitchens for over 10 years with a view to create a "new, sustainable meal culture that influences attitudes in both employees and citizens". Culture change is, in some cases, an explicit aim of the authorities:

> *The biggest challenge is to join everything into one big coherent whole that will lead to that tipping point to make a dent in the culture. We have a big task in terms of culture change (Birmingham)*

Lastly, in relation to discursive strategies, Milan carried out a food systems assessment to form the basis for its new food policy. This diagnostic exercise introduced sustainability criteria to evaluate the "success" of the food system, rather than simply using criteria related to food chain logistics and economic efficiency. Greenhouse gas emissions, waste, biodiversity loss and changing landscapes were framed as outputs of the food system rather than simply as externalities, thus influencing the ensuing prognosis and policy objectives for 2015-2020, which include priorities such as the promotion of a sustainable food system, access of all citizens to healthy food, the fight to reduce food waste and food education.

4.4 Organizational power: making space for whom?

While elected representatives may be ultimate decision-makers, they are but one player in what are often complex and long policy formulation and deliberation processes, where a diverse array of actors is invited by government agencies to participate in "policy communities" (Scott, 2001). Confronted with a dominant "corporate" food regime characterized by a relatively small number of powerful corporate actors whose actions permeate down to the local level, local authorities have used their organizational power to open up discussions and decision-making processes to a wider array of stakeholders. It is in this spirit that Birmingham launched its "Birmingham Food Conversation" that included a series of activities aimed at listening to "Seldom Heard Voices", and to include these, as well as a series of civil society organizations, in its "Healthier Food City Forum", which will shape the city's food strategy. This inclusive approach explicitly aims to "develop social, health, economic and environmental sustainability aspects of the strategy" and to further "motivate policy makers to take sustained action on urban food systems, [rather than simply seeing] food initiatives as 'one-off' or 'pet' projects".

Some cities in our sample have set up semi-formal or fully formal policy communities such as Food Policy Councils. In 2017, for example, Bordeaux set up a Consultative Council on Sustainable Food Governance made up of 130 participants representing different sub-sectors and actors active in the food system as well as four elected representatives. A series of workshops and joint discussions led, in 2018, to the "co-construction of a charter defining the values and positioning of the Council" and, importantly, "affirmed the guiding role of public policies". Local authorities in Bordeaux have also used their organizational power to make space for actors who would not normally be influential enough to have access to information or key decision-making venues. The municipality, for example, organized meetings between local suppliers and public procurement officers to discuss the potential for the development of minimally processed and frozen vegetables to facilitate the consumption of regional and organic vegetables. Opening up decision-making and implementation to local actors also led to the training of cooks and public procurement officers on sustainable and healthy food practices so as to "build a shared language between the public administration, cooks and producers".

In spite of the above, given the power of large private sector actors in the current food regime, the "place" of the latter in food platforms is seen as sensitive and contentious. There is a high level of awareness and commitment to "protecting" niches that would otherwise not be able to produce the sustainability benefits that they nurture:

> *I think it is very important that people meet, see each other. Because after the meetings they make appointments outside of the [Community] Network. So, the Municipality decided to subsidize it because of its aim. If it were to be subsidized by a supermarket it can't really work… everyone should be able to be part of this Network with their own ideas and issues (Groningen).*

Tensions around whether and how to engage with the private sector however remain, and several respondents shared the concern that "that's something we struggle with": there is an awareness of the importance of engaging with large private sector actors for fear that sustainable food actions may end up remaining marginal, but there is equally a concern that engaging the private sector may result in "drowning"

smaller voices. Some actors have devised strategies to help them engage with the private sector in what are perceived as "win-win" ways:

> *It is a matter of working on a specific topic, because if we think of solutions in an abstract way everything is difficult […] for example in Milan we developed the local hub against food waste and the collaboration with the retailers was crucial. Always keep in mind their perspective. They are interested in their main business […] it's always a matter of visibility and positive communications for their needs. Keeping this in mind has always paid in the collaboration with them" (Milan).*

4.5 Enough power to reach out and up?

Organizational power is not just used to ensure inclusiveness and voice, but also to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of local action, as is the case in Bordeaux, where bringing in actors from different areas and sectors was viewed as a way to "help [with] finding links between all the activities and […] discover what was missing" in certain actions. While organizational power allows external actors to be included in the decision-making process, what is clear from our data is that municipalities often face internal barriers; indeed, there are difficulties in ensuring coordination among the different sectoral offices of the municipal "machine", and at times there is active resistance to cooperate, with officers from other departments "hiding behind policy procedures saying 'we can't do this because it's national', or 'we can't do this because it's regional'". Yet it is precisely the organizational power that municipalities have, and in this case specific departments of the local government, that allows them to build a network that further strengthens the overall action of the local government. This is the case with Groningen's "Community Network", which connects actors from across the food chain. Functioning as a platform that provides information and a venue for dialogue and discussion, this community also "helps policy makers define the challenges in the region whilst transforming the food system":

> *Now the Food Agenda is inter-sectoral. It is working quite well. We chose aspects that would take all these policy aspects into account. So we have picked food-related projects that bring together more than one department. We believe you can connect policies and people through food (Groningen).*

This last example brings to the fore the importance of better understanding how local authorities relate to the wider regime boundaries, and specifically their "vertical" connections to national-level authorities. Evidence from our study shows that, in some cases, cities have benefitted from national-level regulations or processes that have supported their goals. This is the case, for example, in Bordeaux:

> *In France there is an "Egalim" law, which encourages sustainable public procurement. There is a target of […] 20% for organic products, which in Bordeaux corresponds to a budget of 4 million Euros. Bordeaux used this as a leverage to encourage more sustainable and organic production in the region, and are continuing to develop procurement tenders that reflect these national targets at a regional scale (Bordeaux).*

In many cases, however, the limited remits of municipalities was perceived as hampering the possibilities of systemic change. Cities have used different strategies to overcome this barrier. Bordeaux and Thessaloniki, for example, have opted for advocacy measures; in the first case to change national land tenure regulations to make it easier for the municipality to buy peri-urban agricultural land and rent it to young farmers, and in the second to allow local farmers to sell their products in the municipal open markets. Other cities, such as Milan, have increased their "network of actors and skills on food-related issues" in an effort "to be seen in the eyes and mind of the (EU) Commission as actors in the field of food", and thus gain access to resources. Others still have sought to create alliances with nearby municipalities as a way to gather more power vis-a-vis the national level, while Funchal, given its limited remit on issues related to food, has decided to work "bottom up" -- i.e., by changing the demand for sustainable food from its citizens, thus stimulating a response from the market or from national authorities.

5. Discussion: local strategies for regime destabilization

Using a mix of power tools to destabilize the regime

While the heterogeneity of the regime is acknowledged within the literature, transformative changes, novelties and the capacity to "shake up the conventional regime" (Bui et al., 2016:93) are often seen as emerging from outside the regime. Key findings from our study confirm those from previous research on this topic (see for example Runhaar et al, 2020; De Herde et al, 2020; Hacker and Binz, 2021) in highlighting how changes and innovations that question the regime's stability can come squarely and deliberately from *within* the regime. In this paper we have explored the different power instruments utilized by (local) government authorities to undermine the material, organizational and discursive base of the (conventional/industrial) agri-food regime. From the evidence provided, it is clear that altering the internal discourse around food has constituted the bulk of the case-study cities' efforts and that municipalities have used the full set of power at their disposal to bring about change. Taking the cue from decades of efforts spurred by alternative food networks, these cities have developed new institutional "logics" - involving new ways of doing and conceiving food - by introducing a series of rules and practices founded on the values of care, trust and solidarity.

The intent of several city governments was to challenge the dominant food regime discourse based on industrial food conventions of efficiency and safety (Raikes, 2000) and build on existing alterity narratives founded on civic and "green" orders of worth (Evans, 2011). In order to do this, cities have not only used "conventional" discursive tools, such as norms or educational strategies, but have employed a mix of other instruments. For example, to the extent that "policy decisions are a function of discursive contests over the framing of policies and the assignment of problems into categories by linking them to specific fundamental norms and values" (Clapp and Fuchs, 2009:10), cities have used their organizational power to frame food system diagnosis and prognosis. They have done so by problematizing the current dominant food system and internalizing its environmental and social negative outcomes through the development of local food strategies. Their wider discursive strategy has worked on two fronts: firstly, on knowledge tools that have explicitly introduced new notions of food founded on sustainability values; and, secondly, on those that, in line with a Lefebvrian notion of the "socially produced space", have done so implicitly through the material development of urban gardens, new menus in schools or new food retailing methods. Although remaining largely "silent", such spaces and places have served to modify daily social food practices and their underlying meanings (Warde, 2016; Mattioni et al., 2020).

The use of a mix of instruments, coupled with the cities' strong political will to bring about change, supports Turnheim and Geels' (2012) understanding of destabilization as a multi-dimensional process that results from "a weakening flow of *resources*, decreasing public *legitimacy* and eroding endogenous *commitment*" (ibid., p.36, our italics). The local authorities included in our study are committed to supporting a shift towards sustainable food systems; insofar as they are members of the dominant agri-food power block, their commitment to a way of "doing" food that departs from the conventional model is evidence of an internal erosion of commitment towards the latter. As the elements of the multi-dimensional destabilization process co-evolve, it is this shift in commitment that has led local authorities to reorient material resources – such as municipal land, retail infrastructure and funds – towards activities that support a new approach to food and have then gone on to use these resources to buttress their discursive strategies. The latter have been fundamental to the development of "attractive visions of alternative futures" (Turnheim and Geels, 2012:48), thereby building the cultural legitimacy of the new system. In other words, while making clear that new ways of doing food are possible, municipal authorities have at the same time prepared the ground for the erosion of legitimacy of the conventional food system by framing public debates around the benefits of sustainable food systems. This does not imply an oppositional stance towards other agri-food regime players, such as large private sector actors. Indeed, while local authorities view public policies as those that should "guide" urban food strategies, a number of them have tried to engage with larger private sector actors in an attempt to find

win-win solutions or areas of compromise. What this suggests is that destabilization should be viewed less as a linear and regular process and more as characterized by complexity, irregularity and dynamism.

In line with recent urban food systems literature that has stressed the importance of recognizing the cultural dynamics that both underpin and emerge from urban food governance, it is possible to see "new collective visions being formed at the urban level" (Sonnino, 2019). In the context of an urban food systems research field that has somewhat neglected to "uncover the concrete capacity of political actors […] to enact new kinds of urban agency and pluralise [...] food system discourses" (Sonnino and Coulson, 2021), our study shows how local actors have used a variety of policy tools to encourage a shift towards more sustainable urban food systems. Local authorities have been skilful in identifying, for example, entry points where they could more easily use the power at their disposal to first introduce an initial change, build agreement and test its efficiency, and then ultimately "upscale" it to provide more significant change. The use of COVID-19 emergency funds as an initial step to build a mid/long-term emergency plan, for example, has allowed city governments to expand fledgling narratives constructed around specific areas of work. Other strategies have included using material power to influence the work of other departments and to bring in new or strengthen existing regulations.

Building vertical and horizontal alliances

As Prag and Henriksen (2020: 16) argue, "political action and cross-sector collaboration at the national, supra-national, and global level are required in order to incentivize the necessary transformative changes in production and consumption" (see also Abdullah et al., 2021; Jones and Hills, 2021) . Some cities have used their organizational power to spark off a virtuous "spiral" of further commitment, as the example of the Network Community platform experience of Groningen shows, where the city's "seed investment" in the platform has strengthened local authorities' cultural capacities and commitment to act both at municipal and at a regional scale. The latter, as well as the experiences shared by local authorities in their attempt to create linkages and coordination with national level actors and processes, brings to the fore the issue of "boundaries", or the relationship with the wider food regime (Hodson and Marvin, 2010; Kohler et al, 2021). A number of authors have highlighted the difficulty that cities (continue to) face in creating vertical links with national and EU-level policy makers and the obstacles this creates in terms of policy coherence (IPES, 2017; De Schutter et al, 2020). The data presented here demonstrates different strategies that local authorities have used to gain more influence vis-à-vis national government, such as pressure/advocacy, building reputational capital through the construction of a network of alliances and strengthening their horizontal links with nearby municipalities to obtain more voice. What is also clear is that further research is required to provide a deeper and more specific analysis of the power instruments that local governments utilize to negotiate space for manoeuvre with national government, the EU and other supranational actors and networks.

It is also important to acknowledge that our research has largely involved specific departments within the case-study local authorities. In particular, we have worked with those departments that are seeking to transform elements of their food system. It should not be assumed, though, that these goals are necessarily shared by other departments within these municipalities. Indeed, it was evident that some had encountered various difficulties in developing an homogenized approach to food system change across different departments. In other words, the departments included in our study can be constructed as niche or "hybrid" actors within both the local authorities and their particular regimes (Elzen et al, 2012). While our research did not allow us to examine these issues in great depth, given the focus placed on the operations of particular departments, we consider it is important for further work to be undertaken on internal divisions within local authorities and the extent to which authorities are able to develop stronger forms of coordination between different departmental actors.

6. Conclusion

Our study highlights how, within a broad focus on the ecology of intermediaries mobilized to foster sustainability transitions (Kivimaa et al., 2019), there is a need to give greater attention to the role that city governments play not just in enabling transformative changes but also in actively introducing them. As our evidence shows, while local authorities, in line with a "classical" reading of the MLP on transition, have supported niche-level activities as a destabilization strategy, they have also actively sought to effect changes within the regime itself. Future research on regime-based transition intermediaries should position more centrally the role of local authorities as full-blown members of this ecology of transition intermediaries. In doing so, it would also be useful to explore how city governments interact with other actors and processes at niche, regime and "hybrid" levels as well as on the nature of the mutual lines of influence. The development of such work will enable others to build on key findings from our study and provide additional evidence from different places on the role of regime-based actors in engendering sustainability transitions within and beyond urban food systems.

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